

BACK TO COLLEGE

Dorms feed school spirit, distractions

Residents enjoy their campus homes

Editor's note: This is the first in a two-part look at the back-to-college scene, comparing dorm residents with commuter students. Sunday, read about those who live at home during college.

BY CAIRA PLOWMAN
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When Becky Culvert and her best friend since second grade, Andrea Cray, decided to move into a dorm at Michigan State University, they knew little about what was in store.

Culvert, who lives in Farmington Hills, starts her junior year in the education program at MSU this month. Cray, also a junior, is studying criminal justice. Even though the two Farmington High School graduates won't be living in the dorms this year, Culvert looks back on the past two years of college fondly.

Cramped quarters

Dorm life can make or break a college student. On one hand, it's a ready-made mix of potential friends. On the other hand, the distractions and opportunities to party can make studying impossible.

"My freshman year I spent most of my time in the dorms, because (all my friends) lived in the dorms," Culvert, 20, said.

"I really don't know how I did well in school my freshman year because all I did was hang out."

As best friends and roommates, Culvert and Cray, 20, chose to live in a dorm away from school friends, to force themselves to meet new people.

The large group of friends she made during the first weeks of school were in Shaw Hall, a coed dorm in the middle of campus. That's also where she met her boyfriend, Dave Meyn, a senior majoring in supply chain management and Spanish.

Looking through a large book of photos that record memories the group has shared, Culvert smiles ear to ear and laughs at each new page, eager to explain why her friends act so goofy.

Living in the dorms wasn't always fun. "We lived in a closet. It should have been a one-person room. I don't know why they put two of us in there," Culvert said.

Even after a cramped freshman year, the roommates wanted to try their luck again and moved back in the next year.

"Andrea and I chose to live in the dorms for two years so we could meet more people. By the end of the two years, though, I was like, 'Get me out of here now.'"

On move out day, my roommate and I were packed and ready to go at 8 a.m.," she said.

The noise levels made dorm life tough, according to Meyn, who is from Canton. "It's too loud, and it's tough to study. If you want to get anything done, you can't stay in your room."

Meyn misses school when he's away. "I just like the whole atmosphere of the town. (I miss) the friends and

Becky Culvert
MSU junior

the friends and



the educational experience," he said, adding that he also misses the cafeteria because he doesn't like to cook.

Going for broke

Cray and Culvert decided to rent an off-campus house with friends this year. The rent per person is almost \$400 a month, much more expensive than the dorms. Sharing off-campus houses is common at MSU because of the extra freedom. Meyn will live in a house near Culvert this year.

"I'm so excited to live in a house and have my own room," said Culvert, as she shows off the African art she purchased for the jungle-theme of her new bedroom at school.

Like many students, Culvert spends her summers back home, working to save money. Culvert's room at her parents' house is more like a storage unit than a living space. Boxes filled with "school stuff" are stacked here and there. Since she isn't home much, there's no need to unpack.

"Cost is definitely a disadvantage. There's a substantial amount of expense living on campus. But, I think that's offset by the experience," said Cathy Culvert, Becky's mother.

Lack of money is a prominent concern for college students, so Culvert works at school. She makes some spending cash working 10 hours a week for the education department.

"Money is hard, especially second semester. First semester's always fine because you have all your summer money. Second semester, I'm living pay check to pay check," she said.

B.L.T. soup?

Fatty cafeteria food, late night snacks and little exercise is the recipe for gaining the dreaded "freshman 15."

"The cafeteria is very unhealthy. I easily gained the freshman 15 just by eating college food. I lost it this summer. This summer I was like, 'OK, that's it, gotta start exercising.' I don't do anything up at school. I just sit around," Culvert said.

For those who can't stomach fried seafood day or the mysterious B.L.T. soup featured in the cafeteria, Culvert suggests a breakfast staple. "If there's nothing, I have cereal. Cereal always sounds good."

MSU is sometimes labeled a "party school," Culvert asked, "What college isn't a party school? I see it, but it's not like we don't study. It's not like we don't act like any other college student. We don't party every night."

Becky said her friends don't like going to clubs or bars much. They're content playing volleyball or golf, hanging out at a house or tailgating at a basketball or football game.

"Football games are [my favorite]," said Culvert, especially at a Big 10 school. During football season, Spartan spirit is alive everywhere you look, she said.

New friends in a new environment created a new life.

College soon became a place for this, who didn't like who they were in high school to reinvent themselves.

My freshman year, I lived with three roommates in an all-girl dorm. We all had different personalities and schedules. Like any living situation, we had our moments and would get on each other's nerves. It was new for us to be sharing so little space with so many people. After a year, we learned to get along with each other and decided to live together for another year.

However, we decided to opt for coed



Heather Sonntag

dorms. Sophomore year, on my coed floor, I made friends more quickly than in the all-girl dorm. We hung out, took classes together and could always find someone to eat with in the cafeteria.

For me, procrastination became worse during dorm life. Last year I put off writing a paper for two weeks. The night before it was due, my friends all wanted to go out. I was so mad because I couldn't. College distractions make it hard to focus on studying, because, unlike high school, no one is there to keep you in line.

Unless you work hard to juggle academics with socializing, your first semester of college will be your worst, trust me. But that's something for which freshmen have to prepare. Be sure to allow room to make mistakes. Don't expect to get a 4.0 your first semester.

Be careful not to overload yourself with too many classes or ones that are really difficult. This can help save a lot of time and money in the long run, and

parents appreciate that.

Residential students without cars should make friends with someone who is willing to lend a ride once in a while. They are irreplaceable when class starts in five minutes and it takes 20 minutes to walk.

Sometimes a car becomes more of a transportation device for everything you own, whether you're moving in and out or just taking laundry home to get cleaned during the weekend. Yes, you have to do your own laundry. That \$1.25 per load adds up (and that's just the washer).

To college students, food is key. The cafeteria is such sweet sorrow. On one hand, nothing is ever good, but at least you never have to make it or clean it up.

Ramen Noodles at 3 a.m., midnight macaroni & cheese (my favorite) when friends come to visit, granola bars for the walk to class and bottled water (the tap water is brown and rusty) all

become necessities.

No one wants to gain extra weight, also known as the "freshman 15." Exercising at the student activity center every once in a while and walking to classes can be beneficial.

It is also fun to get involved at school. Football season is when school spirit overwhelms the campus. The biggest party weekends at CMU are homecoming weekend and whenever rival teams come to town.

There are a variety of other things to do such as intramural sports, organizations, special events, concerts, and dorm sponsored activities.

My dorm floor put a coed hockey team together, and we all had a blast. Not only does it give you something to do, but it's fun exercise too.

Remember that the best lessons learned in college aren't in the lectures or the books, they're in the relationships and experiences that you have outside of class.



Daily dose: Becky Culvert says the campus paper is a big part of her day - though it's not always so funny.



Home and away: Above, Becky and boyfriend David Meyn pose at an MSU game. At right, she hugs her cat, Checkers, whom she misses while at school.



Jungle room: A garage sale-lover, Becky shows off the leopard-print and other African-style items that she'll use to decorate her apartment room.

Dorm lessons: Reinventing yourself, 'freshman 15,' study time

Editor's note: Heather Sonntag of Canton was a staff photographer with the Observer this summer during a college internship.

Living on campus is an experience that residential students never forget. After attending Central Michigan University for two years, I've had a few "dorm life" experiences of my own.

I was lucky that CMU has some of the biggest dorm rooms in the state of Michigan, which was the deciding factor when I chose where to go to school. Personal space is important. If you live in a shoebox, you're more likely to feel claustrophobic and cranky.

Living away from home turned out to be a good thing for me my freshman year. CMU was about two hours away, and very few of my friends from high school took the same path as I.

The dorm life can be the perfect opportunity to make friends. Everyone starts out in the same boat freshman year.