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## The Dorm Project: A Year-Round Home

**It's a great opportunity, but a lot of drama**



*Names have been changed.*

Foster youth all need a decent place to live. For those who go to college, dorms can provide that place. But what happens over Thanksgiving, Christmas, or summer vacation when the residence halls close? Foster youth are often scrambling for a place to stay over the holidays. Even if they do get a temporary respite home, they must adapt to being around yet another stranger in what is already an intense time of change for all young people. And for some older youth, a foster home is not available at all.

The Dorm Project, part of New York City's Fostering College Success Initiative (FCSI), aims to provide a stable, year-round home for foster youth who attend the City University of New York (CUNY). New York City's Administration for Children's Services partnered with CUNY and the foster care agency New York Foundling on the Dorm Project, which lets foster youth stay in the dorms 365 days a year. At John Jay College, Dorm Project students live on the same floor of the residence hall. At Queens College and City College, they are interspersed throughout.



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The program also offers a meal plan worth \$2,500 a year and \$200 a week for other expenses. Students are assigned College Success Coaches (CSCs) to support them academically and emotionally. CSCs live in the dorms and meet with students once a week.

The program launched in August 2016. Last year, 124 youth were admitted. Dorm Project students earned an average 2.27 GPA last year, and at Queens College, their grades have risen since the program's founding in 2016.

However, though the Dorm Project intends to provide students with a supportive home, some Represent writers living there report that the dorms can feel unsafe and chaotic. They say inappropriate and even violent behavior by some students in the dorms has gone unchecked, and that the staff does not effectively mediate conflicts. In the interest of strengthening the Dorm Project, they shared their experiences living in the dorm at Queens College.

All college dormitories have some degree of drama, whether youth in care are living there or not. Students are navigating a period of transition and living in close quarters with new people

they may or may not get along with. Residence hall staff at any college are there to help build community, mediate conflict, and ensure that the dorms are safe places to live and study.

## Dealing With Trauma

However, the Dorm Project has additional hurdles to overcome in helping foster youth adjust to dorm living. As one of our writers, Patricia, put it, "the Dorm Project has the dynamic of a group home, the expectations of independent living, and the restrictions of a college campus." She attended and lived at Queens College from 2016 to 2018 and now goes to City College, which is not part of the Dorm Project.

Dorm Project residents have unique needs that are different than those of the average college student. "Although living with anyone can have challenges, the types of trauma that foster youth face, [which] often go undealt with, are unlike the challenges of someone who may come from a traditional home," Patricia said.

"My first roommate had unresolved anger issues," she explained. "Sharing a room with someone who could snap at the slightest thing is not ideal for a student who is trying to focus."

At first, Brianna, another writer at Queens College, looked forward to being in an environment designed for youth in care. "I thought it would be therapeutic and enjoyable to share a dorm with other foster youth," she said. "I was excited to get out of my foster home and have freedom. It was easier to talk about my past with other foster kids, and at first it was nice to share my painful experiences. It made me feel accepted and understood. I made friends with other girls who'd lost their moms."

## Like a Group Home

However, Brianna says, a few girls in the dorm later betrayed her trust. "People share vulnerability and get close, but then they feel threatened and that info gets weaponized as gossip," she said. That can lead to more conflict: "I know of 5 to 10 physical fights and at least 20 big arguments with drama in my two semesters in the dorm [last year]."

Brianna wishes the Dorm Project had taken bullying more seriously. She thinks staff should better control students whose behavior is problematic, and get them the help they need. An accessible therapist for residents would help, Brianna believes. "Trauma can't be a permanent excuse," she said. "Anyone who physically comes after someone should be automatically kicked out."

Brianna asked to be moved to a different room after a conflict with her roommate, and felt that Dorm Project staff brushed her off. Her CSC told her "that part of life was dealing with people who I don't like." Brianna's opinion is that "if we don't like each other, we should not be forced to coexist."



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Brianna moved to a single room her second year in the dorm, but is hoping to move into a NYCHA apartment when one becomes available. "I try to stay away from functions where I meet other students, so that no drama can come into play," she said.

Ebony Smalls, the assistant vice president of the Dorm Project, doesn't deny that there have been physical altercations and heated verbal arguments in the dorms. She says that there are protocols in place: If a student gets into a physical fight, they'll be separated from the person they fought with, and connected with support to address the behavior. The Dorm Project will refer them for a behavioral assessment with an outside practitioner and work with their agency to get them help. That could include therapy, substance abuse treatment, being referred to a life coach, or transitioning out of the dorm and returning to a foster home.

The Dorm Project looks at these incidents on a case-by-case basis, and may refer one or both students involved for services depending on the situation. If there's a second physical incident after that, the student who started the fight will be asked to leave the dorm.

Smalls said the Dorm Project's approach is not to kick someone out immediately when they break a rule. She said students do get removed from the dorm based on their behavior: Physical fights and substance use could lead to someone being asked to leave.

## Improving Supports

The Dorm Project did make one major change after the first year of the program in how it vets applicants. In the first year, students didn't have to undergo an interview, but now they do. Smalls said the Dorm Project now does more work with students to set expectations for what dorm life will be like and what kind of behavior is acceptable. The Foundling says students who apply are rarely turned away.

In the 2018-2019 school year, Patricia and another student formed a youth advisory board (YAB) at Queens College "in order to foster community, give the students a voice, and gauge program health." She says they hosted four well-attended events. Among their requests to the Dorm Project staff were more programs for students and more training for the CSCs.

Patricia says her experience with the administration around the board was "disempowering." The Dorm Project wanted the YAB to lower the 2.5 GPA requirement it had set for organizers, in line with the Foundling's approach of supporting and including students at all levels. Patricia felt the GPA requirement was reasonable, since being part of the group is a time-consuming responsibility. She says the Dorm Project also asked them to expand the advisory board to all campuses and recruit student leaders there, not just at Queens College. Patricia wanted a different structure, with chapters on each campus rather than one board that was centrally organized.

"Dorm Project leadership did not support our vision for the youth advisory board," Patricia said. "So we decided to cut ties."

Smalls agrees that Patricia and her colleagues struggled with the Dorm Project's concept for the board, and said a new advisory board will start convening in October. She also said that workshops and events have been introduced in response to student feedback, covering topics such as conflict resolution, supporting students' adjustment to dorm life, internship readiness, and study skills.

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