In 1967-68, the rules of sex-segregated dorm life came tumbling down, and students entered a new era of freedom.
CHAPTER 1

In Place of Parents

For more than a century, the University was every student’s mother and father. By law and by custom, the school operated in loco parentis—“in place of parents.” Its mission was not just to train students’ minds. It was to nurture their character, which in practice meant policing their conduct.

Decade by decade, deans, professors and students built a system of written rules and quiet understandings that governed much of student life, especially for women and especially in the dormitories. The regime of in loco parentis told students what to wear for dinner; what time to be home at night; and where, when and for how long they might receive guests.

Sex-segregated dorm life had rules about “late minutes” (the penalty for breaking curfew) and “open-opens” (the three-hour weekly window when dorms and rooms alike were open to guests of the opposite sex). There was even a rule for how many feet had to be touching the floor when one male and one female occupied a dorm room alone—three.

Enforcement fell to live-in housemothers—many of them faculty widows tasked with chasing down rule-breakers less than half their age—and student resident advisors (RAs), who had to play cop with people scarcely younger than themselves. With winks here and nods there, the system creaked along from one student generation to the next.

Then, in a few weeks around Christmas 1967, everything changed.

CHAPTER 2

Cracks in the System

Since at least the 1950s, with student numbers soaring, administrators had acknowledged that managing in loco parentis was like managing an empire in rebellion. Demands for student self-determination were rising all over campus, even in some circles of the faculty.

The fight was over two main questions:

1) When and for how long could dorm residents entertain guests of the opposite sex?

2) How late could women stay out at night? (For men, that point was moot. They could stay out as late as they wanted.)

Year by year, small cracks appeared in the system. In 1962, curfews were abolished for senior women. Junior women followed in 1965, then sophomores. In November 1966, Thomas Fox, the director of South Quad, allowed residents to close their doors when entertaining a member of the opposite sex during visiting hours. (When professors objected, Fox had to retreat.)

In the fall of 1967, the whole system came under siege.
It started with the women of Mary Markley Hall. First, members of the student judiciary of Van Tyne House said they would no longer adjudicate all cases involving alcohol in dorm rooms, but only cases in which a student “is infringing on the rights of others.”

Then two other Markley houses decided to drop the penalty of “late minutes” against freshman women who broke curfew. The Honors Steering Committee “encouraged other women’s houses to take similar action as a step toward entirely eliminating women’s hours.”

On Nov. 13, the women of South Quad’s Frederick House, asserting “the right of students to determine their own rules of personal conduct,” voted to allow 24-hour visitation for a trial period of two weeks. To publicize the point, 11 women invited friends—female ones—to visit “after hours.”

Then the Residence Hall Governing Board—a panel of five professors and two students—universalized the issue. They voted in December to allow all dormitory houses to set their own rules on visitation for one term, as an experiment.

“I visited dorms day and night talking to students,” said board member Frank Braun, a professor of German. “I looked like a damn spy, but I came away convinced that our students are realistic and mature enough to handle this.”

With that, higher authority stepped in. When students returned from their holiday vacation in January 1968, it was announced that the Board of Regents would hear public comment on the issues of visitation and curfews, then issue a new, campus-wide edict on the whole business.
“The regents told me they are not prepared to let something so vital go by default,” President Robben Fleming told the *Michigan Daily*. “I suggested the possibility of the hearing.”

It seemed clear that the campus was about to move from one era of student life to another, either through flagrant rule-breaking or by a negotiated peace. What was at stake, as one resident director put it, was the entire question of “to what extent, if any, will the Residence Halls continue to keep company with that overworked but under-evaluated phrase: *in loco parentis*?”

Student leaders expected resistance from the regents, so they mobilized.

“Power lies in numbers,” Bruce Kahn, president of the Student Government Council, told students. “If you demand *en masse* your rights, the University will be unable to prosecute you.” (That was overwrought; nobody was talking about prosecuting anybody.)

The housemothers, too, prepared for battle.

“Ethics, morals, practically everything has lowered somewhat in the last few years,” one of them told her superiors in the Housing Division.

But on Jan. 19, 1968, the regents signaled that they, too, were ready for emancipation. They just wanted to make the momentous proclamation themselves.

They voted to allow each housing unit to set its own visitation hours, all in keeping with “the maintenance of good taste” in pursuit of “the goal of mature self-government.” (Only Regent Paul Goebel voted no. “If my judgment is proved wrong,” he said, “no one will be happier than I.”)

And, at least for a trial period of one semester, the regents struck down curfews for all women students in the residence halls.

But there was a catch. For a girl to have “no hours,” her parents would have to give written permission.

Were mothers and fathers ready to turn their daughters loose, with no one acting in the parental role?
The letters from parents flowed in. Of 1,734 freshman women, the parents of 1,457 gave their permission.

It seems a surprisingly large majority until one hears the testimony of a male member of the class of 1968, who recalled that his girlfriend—a talented writer whom he later married—forged and signed letters on behalf of the mothers of “an astonishing number of her friends.” It would not have taken many forgers of her quality to artificially inflate the number of women freed from “hours.”

John Feldkamp, U-M’s formidable director of housing for many years, was in no mood to surrender the final outpost.

“The policy that the University finds unacceptable pre-marital sexual intercourse continues in effect,” Feldkamp wrote in a private memo to Housing staff. “Further, the new policy sanctions only visitation, meaning the periodic visiting of guests. Specifically, cohabitation and overnight visitation will subject students to University discipline.”

But when Feldkamp’s memo was leaked, he gave ground. “I don’t pretend to be an expert on pre-marital sex,” he told the Daily. “Personally I can’t imagine that any mature woman could have intercourse in a dormitory.”

Roger Rapoport, editor of the Daily, could.

“Let’s be honest about the whole thing,” Rapoport urged readers of his weekly column. “You know the real reason why you cheered when the regents decided…to exempt freshman women from curfew and let students…set their own visitation hours. You were getting sick and tired of trying to sandwich everything into those old-fashioned three-hour open-opens required under the old policy. No more of that ‘I really do love you but I don’t want to get any more late minutes’ jazz. No more resident advisor stopping you to ask why that girl you said was only your ‘sister’ tripped the fire alarm at 5 a.m. Sunday morning while trying to sneak out of the building.”

Responses from bona fide parents ranged from an expression of confidence that “the added freedom and responsibility placed in [the students] will contribute to their development, educationally and socially” to the belief that the regents’ decision “is in violation of a basic responsibility of a University and violates good sense as well.”

Most RAs supported the change. “Some attack this policy in that it encourages promiscuity,” a Couzens Hall RA told the Housing Division. “I don’t feel this is true. Anyone who has stood in a women’s lounge at closing has seen that privacy is not necessary for excessive displays of affection.”
Prophecies of a rush to lewdness and license failed to come true. There was not even a universal shift to 24-hour, seven-day-a-week visitation regimes. Some men’s floors made that change—“more of a glandular response than a result of meaningful discussion,” one Bursley Hall RA reported—but many chose to allow 24-hour visitation only on weekends. Only three women’s floors chose the 24-7 regime. On men’s floors, it was widely observed that noise decreased and civility rose during the hours when women were around.

On an East Quad men’s floor with liberal visitation, an RA said “most residents have expressed their feeling that life in the house seems significantly more normal these days than in the old days when women were a sort of regulated taboo to be unleashed only on weekends—or, to be smuggled into one’s room for a visit much the same as grass or acid might be sneaked in for insidious diversions. College men have no desire to look at their women friends as they do drugs.”

If that was not quite what administrators wanted to hear, it said at least that students were adjusting to freedom in a certain spirit of moderation.

As for the specter of sex, housing staff judged that open hours had led to something less than a revolution. “A few students will have a girl in all night,” reported South Quad director Thomas Fox, “and many would like to. The general feeling of [resident directors] was that little, if any, sexual intercourse occurs. Occasionally, the couple may sleep together, but the staff was quick to point out: a) this would probably have occurred without the new hours; b) sleeping together does not imply sexual intercourse.”

After a few months, Fox said, “Contrary to being the ultimate ‘thing,’ the presence of women during the week is now looked upon as passé.”

– James Tobin

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