

Colleges Extend the Welcome Mat to Students' Pets



Dilip Vishwanat for The New York Times

ENHANCING THE EXPERIENCE Elena Christian said that her Chihuahua, Annabelle, had made her social and academic experience at Stephens College better.

By **JACQUES STEINBERG**
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COLUMBIA, Mo. — When Allison Frisch goes shopping this summer for furnishings to decorate her freshman dorm room at Stephens College, she will be looking for a comforter for herself — and a matching doggie bed for her roommate.

That is because Ms. Frisch will be sharing her room with Taffy, her 10-year-old Shetland sheepdog. And Stephens, a women's college founded here in 1833, says it is glad to have them both.

Ms. Frisch is one of 30 incoming freshmen at Stephens who have asked to bring a family pet to campus when they arrive this fall. That represents an increase of 20 over last year's freshman class — so many that the college is renovating a dormitory for the students and their companions, most of them dogs and cats. The dorm, dubbed Pet Central, will have a makeshift kennel on the first floor, staffed by work-study students who will offer temporary boarding and perhaps a bath.



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AND YOUR LITTLE DOG, TOO Allison Frisch said that the acceptance by Stephens of her dog, Taffy, was almost as exciting as her own into the theater program.

allows snakes, provided they are “less than six feet long and nonvenomous” — Ms. Lynch predicts that that figure will soon rise.

“Colleges will begin to recognize that this is important to students,” she said, adding that in an increasingly competitive recruiting market for top students, becoming known as pet-friendly is another way for a college to differentiate itself.

Stephens, which began allowing dogs and cats in designated dormitory wings in 2003, said their owners tended to be especially organized and responsible and do well academically.

While acknowledging that a pet can provide a teenager relief from stress, as well as unconditional love, Dr. Harold S. Koplewicz, a psychiatrist specializing in children and adolescents, said he worried that taking a pet to college could slow the transition for some students.

“By having your pet there,” said Dr. Koplewicz, who is also president of the Child Mind Institute, “you could have an excuse not to go out and talk to people.”

Moreover, Dr. Koplewicz said he worried that allowing a student to have a pet might merely serve as a Band-Aid on what could be a more serious mental health problem, like depression.

With these efforts, Stephens is hoping to smooth the transition of some students who may be so anxious about leaving home or adjusting to college life that a stuffed animal will not be of sufficient comfort. They want the real thing.

Stephens joins a growing number of colleges putting out a welcome mat for pets. They include the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the State University of New York at Canton, which allow cats in some dorm rooms; and Eckerd College in South Florida and Washington & Jefferson College in Pennsylvania, which set aside rooms for students with dogs or cats and others who love animals so much they just want to live near them.

“I recognize this as being a trend that is tied directly to the whole notion of helicopter parenting,” said Dianne Lynch, who became president of Stephens last year and who is herself the owner of two dogs and two cats. “It’s harder and harder for students to leave home. Bringing this particular piece of home with them may make that separation easier.”

While about a dozen colleges have explicit policies permitting pets of some kind — Eckerd even

“You can understand that a college might make this accommodation,” he said. “That doesn’t necessarily address the issue that these are risky years.”

But Elena Christian, a dance major who is entering her senior year, said that being able to raise her 18-month-old Chihuahua in her dorm room had only served to enhance her social and academic experience at Stephens.

“She really keeps me calm,” Ms. Christian, 20, said as the dog, Annabelle, who weighs less than seven pounds, tugged on a red leash on the grass outside her dorm on a recent morning. “Sometimes during finals week, I get stressed out. She always does something that makes me laugh.”

Ms. Christian said that not long after she got Annabelle from a breeder, the dog provided her with perhaps the best lesson she had learned in college: that being responsible for the well-being of another requires constant vigilance.



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Searcy Hall, the pet central dorm on Stephens College campus.

That hard lesson came after she inadvertently left Annabelle alone in a pen in her 13-foot-by-15-foot dorm room without ensuring that the gate to the pen was closed securely. While Ms. Christian was in class, the dog scampered out and gorged on a nearby stash of beef jerky and chocolate. Her owner skipped her next class to rush Annabelle to the veterinarian, who administered Ipecac.

“She was not happy,” Ms. Christian recalled.

But man’s (or student’s) best friend may not make the best dormmate. And so Stephens, following the lead of Eckerd and Washington & Jefferson, has established a Pet Council made up of students and faculty members that enforces a lengthy list of strict guidelines. (One example: a dog is never allowed to roam free in a dormitory room while its owner is in class.) A repeat violation by Ms. Christian could result in Annabelle being removed from her care; indeed, two students lost their dog privileges last year after the Pet Council ruled that they were not taking appropriate care.

The college also takes noise complaints seriously; after a three-week grace period at the beginning of a semester, a yappy or barking dog can also be barred. And to respect the wishes of students who may not be so pet-friendly — as well as those with allergies — dogs and cats are not welcome in classrooms or in common areas like lounges.

Though in years past Stephens has barred pets weighing more than 40 pounds, that rule is being relaxed, with the belief that some of the biggest dogs are often the most docile. Unlike their

owners, dogs and cats are not subjected to preadmission interviews, but proof of vaccinations is required.

For Ms. Frisch, 18, who starts at Stephens in the fall, Taffy's acceptance was almost as exciting as her own into the college's theater program.

Indeed, Ms. Frisch enjoys being around her dog so much that when she was cast in a community production of "The Wizard of Oz" as the Wicked Witch, she arranged for Taffy to play the role of Toto. (She said her father never shared her passion for Taffy, relegating the pooch to the basement.)

While Ms. Frisch's family lives just 15 minutes from the Stephens campus, she said that she expected some homesickness and that having Taffy with her would undoubtedly help.

"I took her for a walk on campus the other day," she said. "I told her, 'Yeah, Taffy, we're going to be happy here.'"

Excerpts From College Pet Policies

By **JACQUES STEINBERG**

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Following are excerpts from some colleges' policies on pets in dormitories:

Washington & Jefferson College

Washington, Pa.

“Dogs may not exceed 40 pounds in weight when fully grown. Pit bulls, Rottweilers and wolf breeds, or any mix combining these, are not allowed on campus at any time.”

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Cambridge, Mass.

“Students must be able to prove that their cat has been neutered or spayed.”

Eckerd College

St. Petersburg, Fla.

“Any cat or dog living on campus must be at least one year old and have lived with the student or the student's family for at least 10 months prior to living on campus.” Snakes must be “less than six feet long and nonvenomous.”

Stephens College

Columbia, Mo.

“A three-week grace period at the beginning of the semester allows you and your pet to adjust to life in the residence hall. After this time, continued disruption can result in having to find another living arrangement for your pet (e.g. sending the pet home).”

University of California, Los Angeles

“Students may not bring or maintain pets in residence halls/suites except fish in small tanks not to exceed 10 gallons.”

JACQUES STEINBERG

Some colleges and universities limit pets to students who have been at the school for more than a year. Even Eckerd only accepts pets that lived with students before they started taking classes. Emily Rosenfeld, a first-year student at Stetson University in DeLand, Florida, spends time with her Chihuahua, Archie, in her dorm room. Goodman-Wilson expects the number of pet-friendly schools to grow, partly because of the increase in emotional support animals in the United States. Their owners are required to carry a doctor's note stating that the person needs the animal to help them deal with a mental health condition. Once policies are in place for emotional support animals in student housing, this can open the door to permitting pets on school grounds, in general. At Lees-McRae College, students are allowed to have pets in select on-campus residences. Before the academic year begins, the college hosts an open house for students with pets. Stetson University permits dogs in three on-campus residences. The campus also features a dog park.[5]. Since 2006, Washington & Jefferson College has set aside Monroe Hall as the "Pet House." [6][7] During the 2009-10 school year, 10 students lived in the Pet House; that number jumped to 34 in the 2010-11 school year. [8] The college only permits "family pets" that have been owned by the student's family for greater than one year. [9]. "Colleges Extend the Welcome Mat to Students' Pets". The New York Times. Archived from the original on February 5, 2012. Stephens College has extended the welcome mat to students' pets for more than 10 years. Combining standard dorm amenities with a pet-friendly policy, Searcy Hall, also known as "Pet Central", has a doggy daycare center for your fur baby when you have to make a run to class. "Being an out-of-state student, my pup helped me adjust to a new place," Stephens College freshman Hailey Ehr said. Eckerd College lives by the philosophy that students should bring a part of home with them. An extensive list of animals can reside in 14 of the residential halls. Your next-door neighbor could be Bella the chocolate lab or even Daffy the duck. Eckerd designated pet owners and non-owners alike to the Pet Life Staff to make sure students follow the guidelines outlined for their pets. Jacques Steinberg, "Colleges Extend the Welcome Mat to Students' Pets", N.Y. TIMES, June 6, 2010, at A16 (estimating that twelve colleges allow pets). Jan 2011. Ryan See. Lytle. Bring Your. U S Pet To College. News. In times of war or scandal, dogs are welcome public companions, but not so in periods of economic hardship. Read more. Article. Your child's first pet: Some advice from the American Academy of Pediatrics. December 2015. The Brown University Child and Adolescent Behavior Letter. Alison Knopf. There are so many reasons for having pets around the house, especially if you have children as well. For students who are beginning college with no established friendships there, the prospect of meeting new people can be nerve wracking. With a pet by your side, a student has a ready-made topic of conversation, says John Sullivan, dean of admission and financial aid at Eckerd College in Florida. "Students can bond over their pets, and I think that can be a way to meet some additional people on campus," Sullivan notes. Many colleges and universities have created housing policies that let students live with certain pets, though it's important to consult your school's policies before packing your pooch, as these regulations differ by campus. These 10 colleges and universities, listed in alphabetical order, are among those with pet-friendly policies on campus.