

Students increasingly bringing "emotional support" animals to college

November 13 2015, by Glen Martin



Americans have not only embraced the Shultz dictum that happiness is a warm puppy: They're applying it to warm rabbits, kangaroo rats, pot-bellied pigs, cockatiels and ferrets. And for that matter, to decidedly tepid ball pythons, Cuban rock iguanas and Chilean rose hair tarantulas. The issue here isn't the type of beastie; it's that animals equate to happiness, whether you're at home, in the workplace, or in the stressful milieu that is the modern academy.

An increasing number of students believe they benefit from having pets

for [emotional support](#) or comfort. And those with diagnosed mental health problems—including anxiety, panic attacks and depression—are asserting their right to keep them in university residences at campuses such as UC Berkeley.

Although counseling or psychiatric care may be necessary to address these real and growing needs, pets can be a valuable adjunct for restoring the emotional equilibrium of troubled students. Some of the evidence for this is simply empirical: Who hasn't felt better stroking a furry cat or feeding a carrot to an equable equine? Though still relatively scant, there is scientific evidence for the positive effects of animal propinquity. A recent article in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology*, for instance, concluded that "animal-assisted intervention" may prove a good complementary therapy option for trauma.

Nobody claims the dorms are evolving into petting zoos. But animals are gaining a toehold (clawhold?) in Cal residences.

Which is all well and good if you're cool with critters in general—but what if you're afraid of dogs, allergic to cat dander, or freaked out by snakes, even the benign non-venomous kind? Is the French lop rabbit down the hall just the camel's nose under the tent, a harbinger that the residences will soon teem with—well, camels?

Probably not. Berkeley allow animals in the residences under guidelines established by two laws, the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Fair Housing Act. But the criteria for each are fairly explicit.

"The Americans with Disabilities Act covers people with psychological disabilities, and only authorizes dogs and in some cases, miniature horses," says Aaron Cohen, a staff psychologist for Berkeley's residential and student service programs. "And the animals must also be trained to respond to specific patient needs. For example, they can alert patients

who've missed their medications. Or a dog could be trained to put its head in the lap of a patient with bipolar disorder who's on the verge of a manic episode."

By contrast, emotional support animals, covered by the Fair Housing Act, can be any species, says Cohen.

"You'd require a diagnosis (from a qualified professional) of your condition and documentation establishing that it would be difficult for you to live in a stable and comfortable fashion in the residences without your animal," says Cohen. "But the animal doesn't have to be trained to perform a specific task."

That doesn't mean the animals are accorded carte blanche to act like utter animals, however. They are expected to conform to the same rules applied to human residents: No biting or mauling, spitting venom or defecating in hallways, let alone blasting music at 3:00 am in accompaniment to a beer pong tournament.



Adam Ratliff, Cal's critical communications manager, emailed California that "If the animal's and owner's behavior becomes a nuisance or danger to other community members (e.g., noise, lack of waste pick-up etc.) then we do contact students to help mitigate the community impact."

One freshman at Washington State University was allowed to bring a 95-pound pig into her dorm—and, because the pig refused to use the stairs and was stressed out by the freight elevator, wound up staying in the second-floor dorm room and using a litter box. "The other students thought the pig was kind of cool, " Hannah Mitchell, the dorm's

residential director at the time, told The New York Times, "but less cool when it began to smell."

It's easy to poke fun at the idea of housing swine or alpacas or Komodo dragons in the dorms, but as Ratliff indicates, requests are generally for more compact pets—felines, small dogs, and perhaps rabbits, guinea pigs or white rats.

Since the beginning of this school year, he continued, the university has approved all documented requests for both service and emotional support animals: 33 so far. All are either dogs or cats, wrote Ratliff, adding, "The type of animal does not impact our process or review."

For some students, the university can be a bleak and lonely place, and that seems especially the case for top, highly competitive institutions. According to the American College Health Association, almost a third of students found themselves so depressed at some point during 2014 that they couldn't function. Around 15 percent of Cal students used campus counseling services last year, up from 10 percent five years ago; at UCLA, that figure has spiked to 20 percent.

Throughout the UC system, student demand for [mental health services](#) has jumped 37 percent in the last six years.

As a way to reduce overall student stress, Berkeley's University Health Services has partnered with Tony LaRussa's Animal Rescue Foundation (ARF) to bring pups to Sproul Plaza once a month, with bonus visits during finals. These "Pet Hugs" events are open to all passersby, and very popular. "Cal is a highly competitive campus of 37,000 students and we at UHS are always looking for ways to help students manage their stress levels," the [health services](#) website explains. "Petting an ARF dog offers instant stress relief."

Cohen says he first heard of emotional support animals in 2004, "so that's a long time to have a conversation about the subject." And even now, he says, evaluation guidelines are not deeply detailed. "It's easier to determine (qualifications) if you're looking at psychological disability rather than emotional support," he says.

So is there potential for abuse? Can someone who is in every way well-adjusted and anxiety-free bring a kitty cat to the dorms just because he or she really, really likes cats? Of course, says Cohen.

"But there's the potential for abuse in many areas, and I really haven't seen much of it in our system," he says. "Emotional support animals are gaining acceptance. Even on the airlines, anyone can bring an emotional support animal for a fee, though I recall an incident where a guy with a huge pig was walked off a plane. It's a balancing act. We need to maintain guidelines, but we also want to support students. Further, it's the law. Under the Americans with Disabilities and Fair Housing Acts, service and support animals must be accommodated if there is documentation of need."

In Berkeley's dorms, no one seems to be getting in much of a lather about the issue. The general attitude seems to be: As long as no roommate is allergic or otherwise severely stressed by our four-footed (or six-or-eight-footed), winged, finned or scaled planetary associates, bring 'em on. Some students told California that a good alternative might be a separate floor for animal owners, or a "pet place" where the animals could be housed and visited regularly.

"I think (students) should be able to have emotional support animals because Berkeley is a stressful place," says Danny Chera, a freshman majoring in microbial biology. "Animals are a way of getting away from reality and kind of having something close to them. I have tons of pets at home, dogs, fish, birds. They keep me sane. I would love to have them

here. I think it would help me a lot."

Even undergrads who aren't wildly enthusiastic about the emotional support concept generally are supportive.

"I personally would not want to have a pet," says Hosefa Basrai, a freshman in pre-business. "Woofing would make me uncomfortable, especially at night. (But) I think if they need it, they should have them."

As for critics who complain that comfort animals are infantilizing [students](#)? Dorm residents apparently beg to differ.

"You could be 30 years old and still want the support of animals," says Chera, "because the bond you can share with [animals](#) you can't really get with people. Everybody deserves whatever they need to cope."

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

Citation: Students increasingly bringing "emotional support" animals to college (2015, November 13) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-11-students-increasingly-emotional-animals-college.html>

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