Daily Opinion

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COMIC BY COLBI LORANGER, ASSOCIATE MANAGING EDITOR/THE DAILY CAMPUS

UConn needs more support for freshmen



Since it was built in 2016, the Peter J. Werth Residence Tower has housed hundreds of students each semester. The eight-story building is home to many diverse Living and Learning Communities.
FILE PHOTO/THE DAILY CAMPUS

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Throughout adolescence, going to college is presented as "the best four years of your life." Its portrayal in pop culture, the crazy stories told by your parents and the long-distance phone calls from friends at university all describe it as a young adult oasis. What doesn't always get mentioned is how isolating the experience can be and the loneliness that comes along with it.

When I first came to the University of Connecticut, I knew no one. As an out-of-state student from the Southeast, no one from my high school went to UConn and I didn't have any family members in the area. Needless to say, my freshman year was difficult; friendships take time to form and even though I joined plenty of amazing clubs and extracurriculars, there were moments when it felt like standing on the outside looking in. There were many times I considered transferring; it was difficult to see that those feelings of isolation would eventually end. During those moments, it would have been helpful to have external support, something more than WOW Weekend or a basketball game to help me feel that I truly belonged here. Something I felt that was missing — the presence of a supportive resident assistant.

Throughout my freshman year in Shippee Hall, I could count on one hand the interactions that I had with my RA. Outside of mandatory floor meetings, I never saw them, and when I did reach out to discuss some issues I was having on the floor, I had to resolve them on my own regardless. The role of an RA at UConn should be more than room checks and writing students up for underage drinking.

The few interactions I had with my RA, though, were overwhelmingly positive. Their advice helped me talk to my advisor about undergraduate research, which ultimately led me to become involved in a lab. Had I had that mentorship throughout my freshman year, I think it would have been a much more positive experience.

I also understand that students on campus may not want their RA to become more involved in their lives because of the nature of the role. Perhaps RAs may not be the best solution for supporting new freshmen, but Floor Mentors might be.

Floor Mentor is a position that upperclassmen can fill in Learning Communities at UConn. A part of their role is to provide two hours of active mentoring each week, along with participating in other trainings. In a description of the position from UConn's Learning Communities, Britney Salas, an alumna of the program who worked at WiMSE House, said, "I applied to be a Floor Mentor because of the abundance of support and kindness I have received from this community since my freshman year, and I wanted to give back as much love as I could in the role. This experience...served as a reminder that no one is ever alone. Creating bonds with mentees has provided me equal support on my hardest days, by receiving the same encouragement I have given them...The beauty of mentoring is that we have so much to learn from each other."

This testimonial is evidence that this kind of mentorship should be in other freshman-year residence halls outside of Werth. These students work to foster a sense of community and inclusion on their floor, collaborating with RAs and other mentors to create an environment that makes students feel they belong. Having floor mentors in all freshman dorms would make a difference, and it's something that UConn should consider implementing as part of the first-year experience.

I made it through my freshman year, and now, as a sophomore, I have found my people and have started to find my place at UConn. But there were moments when I thought the feelings of isolation and loneliness would never end. From talking to my peers, it seems that these emotions are common amongst first-year students. Getting RAs more involved and implementing floor mentors in a widespread manner will help freshmen feel supported and not alone.

However, until that happens, it's time for students to take the lead. If you come to UConn from Connecticut, it can be easy to form groups with the people you have known in high school. But I sincerely urge you to talk to people and form bonds with students that may not have those connections; you never know how much they really need it.

To choose or not to choose? For feminists, that is the question

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Feminism is at once centered around a simple question, a complicated theory and complex situation. Beyond the external struggles of the historical and endless fight to be seen as equal, the feminist movement faces another, more internal struggle: the huge divide between choice feminists and those that are diametrically opposed to them.

Coined by author and lawyer Linda Hirshman, the term "choice feminism" describes the belief that any action a woman chooses is automatically empowering. The fact is, before feminist movements became truly effective, women did not have any choice at all. So now, a woman using her agency to make any choice reflects her inner feminist beliefs.

Hirshman, however, created the term to assert the fact that not all choices are inherently feminist, and she is right. It reflects a deeper self-absorption enveloping society now; people make choices that benefit themselves the most, forgetting the responsibility that they have for civilization and those that have come before them. Choice feminism means that women can make choices that support the patriarchy, inadvertently or not.

They forget that there was once a time where women did not have the choice. Women like Mary Wollstonecraft and Susan B. Anthony fought for equal rights through collective action. They weren't thinking of just the personal benefit; they were thinking of how future generations of women would use these rights to uplift each other and go further than they ever could. I don't think they could have imagined categorizing women under their conflated choices.

But in a country with an increasingly conservative government, categorization is necessary. Kristi Noem, for example, was elected as the first female governor of South Dakota and rose to the position of secretary of homeland security. In that respect, she is the pinnacle of the goals of the feminist movement: she used that fight and all that it has given her and other women to rise to a respected position within the federal government. However, she has used that power to perpetuate an immoral immigration system and has even allowed for the continuous rape of detainees in ICE detention centers.

Another example is Justice Amy Coney Barrett. She is only the fifth female Supreme Court Justice in the history of the United States but has used the opportunity given to her not to uplift future generations of women but to suppress their freedom of choice by voting to overturn Roe v. Wade.

Many choice feminists would most likely say that the choices these women have made are empowering because hundreds of years ago, it would not even be permitted for women to have that position and access to that power. However, if a woman's choices actively promote the patriarchy and work against women, then she probably cannot claim the title of feminist.

The downside to this categorization is its extremeness. Even just wearing makeup every day could classify a woman as a choice feminist, because doing so reinforces patriarchal beauty standards. Maybe it is necessary to put feminists in these boxes but sometimes it is almost judgmental in nature.

And what do these extremes do to young women trying to find their identities in feminism? Increasingly I notice women my age turning towards conservatism and traditional roles and I wonder if it is because they were unable to find feminist spaces welcoming. Feminists have always been falsely called man-haters, but perhaps the classification within our community has made us seem like women-haters too.

I am most definitely a choice feminist, and it is not just because I wear concealer whenever I can. I went through an awkward phase, as most young teenagers do, where I was figuring out what I liked to wear, how I wanted my hair to look and the overall impression I wanted to make on people. I was so insecure in my image that instead of regarding this phase as temporary, I decided that I was just unimpressive and not worth anyone's attention. In that silly phase that seems to be a rite of passage for everyone, I decided that I was ugly and that I would be that way forever.

This phase coincided with the point in my life where I started becoming aware of feminism and what resulted was immense guilt. The conclusion that I came to and the feelings that I could not help were a moral failing. If I was a feminist, why did I care about the way I looked? Didn't I know that the only way to dismantle the patriarchal beliefs within myself was to be neutral about my appearance?

Granted, this guilt was entirely self-inflicted, and I outgrew it by giving myself grace. After all, I was 14! But what about the young women who are guilted by external parties? Their growth is hindered by guilt and judgment, and it makes the feminist movement seem elitist, when most feminists are happy to bring more women towards the movement.

Critiques of choice feminism are not incorrect. But there comes a point in every woman's life where she makes dubious choices or thinks only of herself. There are some who choose not to be introspective, but there are also many who make changes within themselves. The feminist movement should not only be welcoming, but it should also be educating. When we give grace to each other, we form tighter bonds. We can become more capable of transforming the relationship between women, activism and society, if only we learn to forgive minor transgressions and support each other as the original purpose of feminism dictates.