With depression and anxiety rates among college students growing, some college students are turning to animals as a source of comfort when they have issues revolving around these mental issues(Hoffman, 2015). Many colleges have implemented programs that bring in therapy dogs during exam periods to help relieve some of the students’ stress(Hoffman, 2015), but this is not enough for many students with chronic mental illnesses that don’t just appear during exams. These students need a constant support that is available at all times. Because of this, Emotional Support Animals should be allowed in campus housing.

While there is not a lot of research data on the effectiveness of emotional support animals, in the article from the new York times, “Joanne Goldwater, associate dean of students and director of residence life at St. Mary’s College of Maryland, is not concerned about objective evidence. ‘Having that animal has clearly helped to reduce stress and anxiety for some students,’ she said, ‘which helps them progress towards their degree.’(Hoffman, 2015)” The two students in the article have clearly benefited from having their emotional support animals in their dorms(Hoffman, 2015). Another arguments is that it is illegal to deny students with these mental disabilities their emotional support animals under the Fair Housing Act(Hoffman, 2015). This is a federal law that prohibits the discrimination of individuals with psychological disabilities and has the stipulation that they are required to have the accommodation of animals that provide emotional support(Hoffman, 2015). This argument was actually used in a case against a Nebraska college when they denied a student’s animal and the student won(Hoffman, 2015).

One argument against allowing emotional support animals in campus housing is that while there is evidence that it helps students who have mental disabilities, there are ways that students can abuse the system and use it to bring their pets, even when they do not have any true mental disabilities(Hoffman, 2015). Schools are putting restrictions in place to limit this, such as requiring documentation for both the student and the animal, but there are ways around these restrictions(Hoffman, 2015). It is possible to get emotional support animal letters on the Internet or get “diagnosed” by cybertherapists who will issue the document to just about anyone for a fee(Hoffman, 2015)

The two biggest bioethical principles that would play a factor in this argument are veracity and Fidelity. Veracity is the principle of telling the truth and for universities to allow students to have these emotional support animals, they need to trust that the students wanting them are being truthful and really need them(Zuber, 2020). For students that have a mental disability, the animals seem to greatly help, but there are always those who will abuse the system and there just has to be a level of trust in a situation like this that students will have veracity. Fidelity is the principle of being “faithful to agreements and responsibilities one has undertaken(Zuber, 2020).” Having an animal is a huge commitment and comes with many responsibilities, both to the animal and to others who are sharing the living space. If students are to have animals in the dorms, they have to be able to take care of the animal and take responsibilities for any damages and mishaps that come with having a animal in a dorm.

The policy that some institutions are using is to require that the animals have the same code of conduct as the students(Hoffman, 2015). This really helps with the fidelity principle as this requires the students who have animals to take responsibility for them and follow the guidelines(Zuber, 2020). This policy could be modified to include the requirement of regular check-in by a campus official to ensure that the animal is being treated well and all of the students responsibilities are being fulfilled. This could include serious consequences if the student is found slacking on their duties. This would greatly discourage the mistreatment of any animals and would also discourage some students who would fake the documents just because they think having a pet in the dorms would be cool.

Sources

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