THE RESIDENTIAL NEXUS

A FOCUS ON STUDENT LEARNING

NEXUS: 1) A means of connection; link 2) a connected series or group. *Webster's II Dictionary*

Introduction

In his definitive 1987 study of American Higher Education, Ernest Boyer reported that a fragmented sense of community had come into existence on many North American college and university campuses. In reference to university residences, Boyer stated that his study group found "a great separation – sometimes to the point of isolation, between academic and social life on campus. Colleges like to speak of the campus as community, and yet what is being learned in most residence halls has little connection to the classrooms; indeed, it may undermine the educational purposes of the college" (p. 5).

Subsequent national reports and research had similar observations, which has highlighted the need for colleges and universities to reform undergraduate education (Wingspread Group in Higher Education, 1995). Across the United States, responses to address deficiencies in the undergraduate experience have been generated by leaders in academic and student affairs areas. A renewed commitment has emerged within academe focused on student learning and the establishment of learning communities.

In 1994, ACUHO-I adopted a document that outlined the profession's commitment toward supporting and enhancing student-learning initiatives. *The Residential Nexus: A Focus on Student Learning* was compiled to show how housing and residence education professionals can best support learning functions both in and out of the classroom environment. Special focus was given to past trends, new theories, specialized programs, facilities, technology, and assessments. However, this was an infancy period for both housing and residence education professionals and, therefore, the understanding of long-term impacts on pedagogical practices were limited.

Since 1994, housing and residence education professionals have continued to play an integral part in the reform movement. Partnerships have been formed with our academic and student affairs colleagues in developing programs on our campuses around student learning and learning communities. It is hoped that this document outlines how ACUHO-I members can contribute and have contributed to this movement on their respective campuses. It is our intent to join with the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE), the American College of Personnel Association (ACPA), and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), who together published a document that called for collaborative efforts in enhancing student learning (Shared Partnerships, 1998).

Student Learning

The central focus of this movement has been on the changing perceptions of student learning. Historically, student learning was viewed as classroom centered; comprised of purposeful, structured activities; and typically dealing with cognitive development only. The role of students was passive as faculty imparted knowledge to them. This formal learning has been the sole purview of faculty who has maintained its separateness from other campus influences (Blake, 1996). However, research over the past two decades has shown that student learning is strongly influenced by a variety of interconnected out-of-classroom factors, most notably student-to-student and student-to-faculty interactions (Astin, 1993; Terenzini, Springer, Pascarella & Nora, 1995). In the Harvard Assessment Seminars, Light found that "students who get the most out of college, who grow the most academically, and who are the happiest, organize their time to include interpersonal activities with faculty members, or with fellow students, built around substantive academic work" (p. 6).

This research also has shown that students are not passive participants in their learning, but are actually quite active in how and what they learn. Students learn and acquire new skills using multiple frames of reference and are impacted by both classroom and out-of-classroom experiences (Baxter Magolda, 1992). Learning takes place not only through internal processes. Students use group processes to acquire knowledge and skills as well. Students have demonstrated a preference in how they learn. Learning style differences occur at various levels. Some students are more successful in settings that promote active and collaborative learning opportunities. Others prefer more passive environments and techniques. Many students prefer to pursue academic work in group settings, while others prefer to work alone. Other differences may occur around ethnic or cultural issues, nationality differences and gender differences.

Students learn in a holistic fashion rather than a compartmentalized fashion (Magolda, 1997). Learning does not stop when they leave the classroom. It is interwoven in the day-to-day activities and conversations that students take part in. They are partners in the learning process. The goal in this reform movement is to create campus settings that encourage student, faculty, and staff involvement in a variety of purposeful learning activities.

Learning Communities

According to Kuh (1996), "the concept of seamless learning implies that undergraduate activities and experiences traditionally assumed to be unrelated-such as courses and out-of-class experiences- can be intentionally arranged to be mutually supporting, thereby promoting higher levels of student learning" (p. 8). Such an environment provides students the opportunity to apply their classroom learning to the world around them; to reflect on those experiences; and ultimately, to integrate that learning into their frame of reference. These environments have been referred to as learning communities.

At the core of learning communities is the emphasis on all members working together in creating and understanding knowledge. Learning communities emphasize cross-divisional work

groups, provide more opportunities for faculty-to-student and student-to-student interaction, create a plethora of learning activities, and encourage an interdisciplinary approach (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Student learning is enhanced greatly in these settings because they provide the context to understand, to practice, to reflect, and to integrate the learning opportunities of the student.

Creating Learning Communities—The Residential Nexus

University housing and residence life operations have great potential for being a nexus point in this movement. Tremendous opportunities exist for residential programs to become strategic partners in the enterprise of student learning—particularly in the creation of learning communities. Academic and student affairs colleagues recognize the value of the residential setting in providing forums for faculty-student interactions and developing a myriad of learning experiences. The Residential Nexus, where students and faculty can often come together on more common ground, can provide the co-curricular learning opportunities and programs that intentionally support and are connected to the curriculum. This integrated approach impacts the way students interact with each other and with faculty members in a manner that allows student learning to become the focal point for the interactions that will occur in the residential setting.

This residential nexus can cultivate new and creative opportunities for students to connect with one another and with faculty around student learning. Innovative curricular and cocurricular programs can emerge from these connections. To achieve this, partnerships must continue to be formed among faculty, student affairs staff, and students with the primary commitment to enhance student learning. To ensure that these relationships are mutually beneficial, common educational goals and objectives should be developed between these areas.

Forming Partnerships—Faculty and Residence Life Professional Relationships

For many years, housing and residence education professionals often have functioned quite autonomously within our campus communities. Therefore, approaches supporting student development were concentrated to the out-of-classroom experience and separate from in-the-classroom pedagogical practices. As self-supporting enterprises, the financial and programmatic aspects of our operations have evolved in a somewhat disconnected fashion from the core academic priorities of our institutions. Coinciding with this, a several-decade trend within the academic community has created faculty reward systems that value research, publications and the attainment of external funding. These trends have culminated in a campus culture, which has devalued teaching, learning, and the undergraduate experience.

With the renewed focus on student learning, we are seeing a swing back to the core purposes of higher education. According to Schuh (1999), "Student Affairs leaders began to move away from viewing student development theory as a foundation for the profession and embraced student learning as a new construct. Although student development theory is an important tool for anyone working with traditional-aged college students, student learning theories are now viewed as more encompassing of a broader role within the institution" (p. 84).

Since 1994, this resurgence of interest in student learning created great potential for student affairs staff and faculty to form mutually beneficial partnerships. To successfully connect with our academic colleagues, housing and residence education staff members have become and should continue to be knowledgeable of emerging trends in learning theory and pedagogical techniques. Many campus leaders, including faculty and student affairs professionals, have embraced a relationship designed to create coherence between the in-class and out-of-class learning experience (Schuh, 1999). This movement has come from both academic and student affairs areas and has been concentrated in residentially based learning communities. Three primary sources of sponsorship have occurred: (a) Programs where primary sponsorship comes from academic affairs, (b) Programs where primary sponsorship comes from student affairs, and (c) Programs where primary sponsorship comes from institutional leaders (Schuh, 1999). Although we have seen an increase in embracing these partnerships, it is still important for each university to review its unique culture and climate and decide which course of sponsorship and acceptance is best. With this, housing and residence education professionals should continue to use its "nexus" capabilities to recruit such relationships and help create environments that embrace student-learning initiatives.

However, we also should acknowledge the differences that exist between the "faculty culture" and the "student affairs culture." Certain stereotypical beliefs, such as faculty perceptions that student affairs has little connection to the curriculum, still emerge (Zeller, 1997). This can often be a deterrent to the formation of successful partnerships. Blake (1996) identified four major contrasts between faculty and student affairs staff. She described them thusly: "first, student affairs tends to attract people whose personality contrasts sharply with that of the typical faculty member; second, the nature of the learning that occurs in student affairs areas contrasts in fundamental ways with the learning in college courses; third, faculty and student affairs personnel, working with the same students, may be seeking contradictory outcomes; and, finally, each group at times feels "put down" by the other, even as they cooperate" (p. 5). An understanding and appreciation of these differences does help when the desire for collaboration wanes. Housing and residence education professionals must gain an understanding of the differences, serve as the catalyst for overcoming them, and continue to increase a knowledge base that includes a wide range of institutional issues and priorities as well as an understanding of emerging trends in academic affairs.

Residence Staff and Their Continued Role in Enhancing Student Learning

Housing and residence education staff members have a long tradition of providing meaningful out-of-class learning opportunities for students. These co-curricular programs have greatly enhanced the educational experiences of undergraduate students. For several decades, the basic theoretical underpinnings associated with programmatic models for residence education staff members have been cemented in the student development and/or wellness constructs. Although beneficial for helping professionals understand student maturational levels and need areas, these models have had moderate success in engaging students and faculty in the out-of-class experience. In addition, these models have at best been only loosely connected to the formal academic and educational missions of our institutions.

The student learning reform movement, since the 1994 ACUHO-I document, has helped create a new paradigm regarding the role of housing and residence education staff members.

Professional and paraprofessional staff members have become key players and influencers in the area of student learning, learning theory, and pedagogical innovation. Although programmatic transformations have occurred since 1994, staffing patterns and general responsibilities for many housing and residence education professionals have gone unchanged (Zeller, 1997). In fact, as we have embraced this new movement, new responsibilities were simply added to already taxed leadership positions. To maintain a position at the forefront of reform, we must be willing to look at changes in our departmental structure and be willing to reject old approaches and review plans to connect roles with academic affairs and/or with the paradigm of student learning.

However, it is evident that this new focus on student learning has greatly influenced staff selection and training practices, programming models, and the role the housing staff has played within the context of facilities and occupancy management. Also, some new positions, which combine roles between academic affairs and student affairs, have been created, and therefore, have changed the organizational structures of residence life programs. These include positions with the sole purpose of creating and nurturing academic initiatives between the two divisions. This continued focus allows housing and residence education professionals to be key influencers in the core functions of their institutions and to be equal partners with faculty and student affairs colleagues.

Specialized Programs That Have Focused on Student Learning: The Nexus Point

As student learning has become the point of contact for the development of strategic partnerships between housing professionals and our academic colleagues, programmatic offerings have emerged which connect classroom instruction and the out-of-class experience. The following models represent existing programs that have evolved on many campuses:

Residential Colleges — The collegiate model is the most fundamental type of residentially based academic program. Dating back to 1200 AD in England, the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge were used as models for the original institutions of higher education in North America and Australia. Residential Colleges offer degree-granting programs in settings where students and faculty live and work together. All classrooms, library support, faculty offices and residences, and student residences are in the same facility. Variations of this model can be found today in many countries, including Australia, Canada, and the United States.

Living Learning Centers — Specialized residential programs that have direct connections with a specific academic program are generally referred to as living-learning centers. Typically, very strong partnerships are formed between an academic program and the residence staff. For instance, faculty maintain office hours in the hall, classes are taught in the building, and programming efforts are focused around an academic theme or major. Examples of such centers include honors programs; programs for women in math, science, and engineering majors; and Pre-Med programs.

Theme Housing – Programs that offer opportunities for students with special interests to live and work together are referred to as theme housing opportunities. Residential staff often are the key sponsors of these programs, yet receive significant support from academic and student affairs colleagues. Such programs might include Wellness Hall, Leadership Halls, International Halls, and Substance Free Housing.

Academic Residential Programs — Providing academic support services and programs to selected student groups re-quires strong partnerships between academic affairs and student affairs staff. The residential setting is an ideal location for providing "front-line" service in the areas of academic advising, career planning and placement, tutoring, student group formation; and programming in study skills, time management, library usage, and so forth. Such programming involves the services of many campus departments and thus, requires coordination and collaborations between a variety of academic affairs, student affairs, and residence life constituents on campus.

Residential Learning Communities — Creating opportunities for clusters of students who live together to attend classes together are generally referred to as residential learning communities. Close working relationships are developed with faculty in order to maximize the benefits of these offerings. Specialized course assignments, student groups, and faculty involvement programs all take place in the living-learning group when close partnerships are formed.

The First Year Experience — Arising from research into student retention, first year experience programs work toward integrating freshmen and, at times, transfer students into campus life. Specialized housing configurations, which maximize student affairs and academic affairs services to first-year students, have proven to be effective in achieving the above goal. To provide institutionally based coordinated opportunities to new students, strong partnerships are developed between the key campus players (both academic and student affairs) who support the transitional needs of new freshmen and transfer students. The residential setting is often the ideal setting for providing these services.

Since the inception of the original *Residential Nexus: A Focus on Student Learning,* many successful specialized programs have been created, thanks to the efforts and support of housing and residence educational professionals. University of Maryland – College Park, Michigan State University, Ball State University (IN), Bowling Green State University (OH), and Northern Arizona University, just to name a few of the many institutions committed to student learning, have developed partnerships between academic affairs and students affairs by using the residence halls as their nexus point. These newly created specialized programs have brought together faculty, students, and staff and helped redefine the mission of their housing programs.

The Role of Technology

Over the past eight years, residentially based technologies have become increasingly visible on college campuses. Zeller (1997) wrote that, "in-room connectivity, residential computer labs, and residential cable television networks all provide great opportunities to support campus learning initiatives" (p. 11). These services must become a strategic component of an institutional plan to create a "seamlessness" to the educational experience, which connects the classroom, the library, and the residential setting. However, to actualize the benefits of such technology, housing and residence education professionals must work with faculty to use such technology to support pedagogical practices. In many occasions, use of cable technology, combined with residential based classrooms, have virtually turned traditional housing units into fully equipped multimedia learning environments. As we look to the future, voice, video, virtual, and data technologies will be a primary venue for making in-class/out-of-class connections. Although assessment efforts on the impact these technologies have on the learning experience is in its infancy stage, they will be the avenues that allow learning to occur anywhere, at any time.

New Trends in Facilities and the Impact on Student Learning

In recent years, housing and residence education professionals have become more involved in the administration of maintenance, renovation, and construction of the facilities where the Residential Nexus occurs. This has challenged housing and residence education professionals to maintain the infrastructure of aging buildings while building new living units with updated designs. Clearly, architectural and interior design and general upkeep all impact students' behavior and ultimately their ability to learn. Likewise, the ability for students to feel connected to a community is equally important. Banning (1996) stated that, "the physical designs of residence halls play an important role in providing both for privacy and community" (p. 10). The Residential Nexus is demanding more from facilities and overall decisions on design. Zeller (1997) wrote that "each facility poses its own challenges, but the need exists to renovate with the goal of designing quality educational space that supports learning and academic achievement" (p. 10).

As an example, in 2000, Princeton University (NJ) created a new residential living environment, that included social space that complemented the educational curriculum based on social and academic interaction in the residence halls as well as in the classroom (*College Planning and Management,* Oct. 2001, p. 36). Over the past eight years, there have been many successful stories of rehabilitating and/or creating new housing facilities while refocusing on student learning. The newly constructed University Learning Center at George Mason University is an example of this type of architectural conceptual design (Chickering & O'Conner, 1996; Geraghty, 1996; Zeller, 1997).

As we continue to move forward, architectural and interior design schemes need to consider not only aesthetics and long-term usage issues, but also the impact these settings have on promoting and enhancing the learning process. Housing and residence education professionals have become more familiar with private partnerships, use of architectural fundamentals, and current design trends to create new architectural designs and the conversion of aging infrastructure that best provide for student learning experiences.

Assessments

Upcraft and Schuh (1996) characterize assessment as a process to collect and analyze data in order to describe and understand the effectiveness of institutional programs. This information is used primarily to improve said programs and pedagogy, but it also is used to add to our knowledge of student learning and development, and in a recent trend, is used to address accountability issues with external groups such as accrediting agencies, state governments, and parents. A good assessment program contains clearly defined measurable goals and objectives, a plan for collecting the data, a plan for analyzing the data, a plan to use the results to improve institutional performance, and then to start the process over again (Bauer & Hanson, 2001). Assessment is an ongoing affair and often raises more questions than it answers.

Because student learning takes place both in and out of the classroom, an effective assessment program requires a coordinated and collaborative effort from academic and student affairs. Student learning is a complex theory and, therefore, needs a complex assessment program that uses multiple measurement strategies and involves multiple perspectives. For example, quantitative and qualitative approaches compliment each other because both provide a different way of describing the student learning experience. The same can be said for faculty and student affairs staff. Collaborating on assessment activities is one manner in which the barriers between academic and student affairs can be overcome. The student learning experience is the responsibility of the whole institution and so should the assessment of that learning experience.

Successful assessment programs are as varied as the institutions that developed them. Common elements among them are faculty and student affairs staff working together, agreement on learning outcomes, acknowledgement of the uniqueness of their campus culture, and an understanding of their student body (Kuh & Banta 2000; Bauer & Hanson 2001). These programs help bring student learning into the forefront and provide a common understanding of the student experience at their institution.

Conclusions

1. The process by which students learn has proven to be quite complex and has changed the belief that the student is a passive participant in learning to one where they are equal partners in the learning process. Students learn both in and out of the classroom and by a variety of methods. Their learning intertwines both cognitive (academic) and affective (student affairs) areas. Academic and student affairs staff have started to collaborate on developing programs that provide related curricular and co-curricular activities.

2. The emergence of living and learning theory as a foundation for the future of student affairs work has been an exciting trend which offered great potential for enhancing the role practitioners play on our campuses. For housing and residence education professionals, we have begun to demonstrate that our commitment to enhancing the facilities, technology, and programs has made the living environments a true nexus point. Therefore, the true sense of co-curricular initiatives has emerged. However, decisions regarding the implementation of these recommendations must continue to be made on a campus-by-campus basis.

3. Individualized programs that specifically address individual institution mission and needs have been and should continue to be developed. Based on stereotypes or a lack of understanding between faculty and student affairs, students will be hurt by continuing the fragmented approaches we have manifested in the past. Our only chance for overcoming the deficiencies of the past lies in the intentional cultivation of partnerships among students, faculty, and student affairs staff—built around student learning as the foundation. Housing and residence education professionals have an opportunity to continue to be key players in this reform movement and we must seize this opportunity to do so.

4. Because student learning is a complex process that occurs both in and out of the classroom, effective assessment must involve a coordinated effort from academic and student affairs staff. Well-defined goals and objectives, methods of data gathering, analyzing the data, and distributing the results are key elements in a successful assessment program. Such a program uses multiple measurement strategies and involves multiple perspectives.

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