

Future Trends in University Housing

Look for residential communities to support educational and curricular objectives

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Changes in higher education over the past decade, with particular emphasis on reform in undergraduate education, have precipitated the emergence of a new and often enhanced role for college and university housing operations. This reform movement has created opportunities for campus housing administrators to work collaboratively with academic administrators and faculty to create residential communities that support the educational and curricular objectives of our institutions. Living-learning centers, residential colleges and other academically focused theme housing options have all been given renewed attention in recent years.

Although some assert that this is a return to our historical roots founded in the residential colleges of Oxford and Cambridge, these new models offer opportunities to improve and energize student learning and classroom instruction in ways that have not existed previously. Important educational programs have been developed through pedagogical innovations, curricular reforms and new campus technologies—all predicated on the acknowledgement of the educational importance of the out-of-class experience.

Housing administrators are no longer able to simply coexist with their academic colleagues. This new trend is calling for us to become partners with faculty in order to seamlessly connect in-class instruction with the out-of-class experience.

This trend presents both opportunities and challenges for university housing administrators, and will continue to do so through the next several years. As we shift our departmental mission statements and strategic planning priorities to address these initiatives, the focus on student learning will, in turn, have a profound impact on the structural foundations of our organizations: budgets, facilities, staffing resources and residential programs. In particular, key administrative issues will surface in the areas of facility renovation and construction, budget reconfiguration and new technologies.

Many housing operations are undergoing major renovations of existing facilities or are constructing new residence halls for the first time in decades. Facilities built in the 1960s are in dire need of renovation. These facilities pose particular problems as we work to enhance the student living and learning environment.

The building boom of the 1960s brought major expansion to housing inventories, yet left us with an abundance of high-rise buildings with minimum quality public space. Each facility poses its own challenges, but renovations should incorporate quality educational space that supports learning and academic achievement. Classrooms, libraries, group study areas, computer labs, academic advising centers and tutorial spaces are all being introduced into renovations, as well as in new construction. I believe a new architectural and interior design subfield must emerge to support residential student learning initiatives.

Another fundamental change for housing operations is in the institutional financial realm. Through the 70's many housing operations budgets received subsidies from their institutions for personnel, program and facility needs. The past 25 years has seen a significant swing away from this budgeting pattern, to one where housing operations have been expected to be totally self-supporting. Increasingly, we have been expected to contribute to our institution's operating budgets as compensation for the use of institutional services.

This new movement of connecting in-class with out-of-class experiences provides new opportunities for funding of personnel, housing programs and facility renovations. Creative budgeting strategies need to emerge that allow housing administrators, academic administrators and executive officers to achieve institutional goals by reconfiguring and merging existing financial resources.

In addition, external funding sources can be sought as innovative learning and teaching programs are created. Traditional structures of budgeting and financial allocations will need to be challenged and changed. When academic and student affairs can achieve mutual goals, these types of budgeting reconfigurations can emerge. Yet it is imperative that these new residential initiatives be developed with an institutional commitment of maintaining competitive room and board rates.

Finally, residentially based technologies are changing the way we look at campus housing. In-room connectively, residential computer labs and residential cable television networks all provide great opportunities to support campus learning initiatives. These technologies will provide students with tremendous educational resources and allow them to interact with faculty and each other in more productive ways. Although many campuses have installed these features in their residence halls in the past few years, the expense of maintaining them and enhancing them will pose great challenges. It is also important that we realize the potential of these technologies in terms of their supporting the instructional and pedagogical goals of our faculty.

The interest in developing academically focused residential communities is bringing reform to the university housing profession.

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