

Viewpoint

How to Build a Residential College

by Robert J. O'Hara

Critics of higher education in the United States have been missing their proper target for many years. It may be true on some large campuses that "tenured radicals" and trendy courses have politicized the curriculum and brought about a local collapse of Western civilization. But it is also true that radical professors have been annoying the establishment since Peter Abelard disturbed the church fathers in medieval Paris and trendy courses have been objects of scorn since Harvard University first allowed its students to substitute French for Hebrew (in 1787).

The real crisis in higher education today is not about the curriculum, it is about the poverty of student life. At most large universities in the last 40 years, the faculty have given up all responsibility for the lives of students outside the classroom and the resulting vacuum has been filled with nonacademic residence life departments. For a generation, troubles such as out-of-control dormitories, social isolation, alcohol abuse, institutionally promoted segregation, and a complete lack of connection between the classroom and life outside the classroom have plagued universities that nevertheless advertise themselves as "caring" and "student-centered."

The solution to the problem of the poverty of campus life is simple and radical: we must return the faculty to their proper place—not just as teachers in the classroom but as the principal influences on student life throughout the university. On some campuses, this is already happening through a return to one of the oldest models of university structure in existence: the decentralized residential colleges of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge.

A residential college, as I use the term, is a small, cross-sectional, social and academic unit within a large university. If a campus has a complete system of residential colleges, every student belongs to one. Each college is a

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microcosm of the campus as a whole. Because they are small, diverse, and fundamentally decentralized communities that include young and old, rich and poor, student and professor, artist and scientist, residential colleges provide the kind of stable and challenging social and intellectual environment that everyone in a university deserves.

In the United States, Harvard and Yale Universities were the first large universities to establish residential colleges, but their lead in the 1930s was not widely followed and it was assumed from their example that collegiate arrangements were only possible at wealthy institutions. But more recent developments have shown this assumption to be incorrect. The residential college model has caught on at institutions as diverse as Rice University, Princeton University, the University of Virginia, Murray State University, Truman State University, and even Middlebury College, which has recently decided that its 2000-student population is socially too large and needs to be subdivided. Outside the United States, residential colleges can be found in universities in Canada, Mexico, Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Singapore, and elsewhere.

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Contrary to common belief derived from the Harvard-Yale precedent, establishing residential colleges is not expensive, doesn't require any major changes to the curriculum, and doesn't even require that all students be in residence. What it does require is the decentralization and rearrangement of resources that already exist. If you're looking for a gimmick to get this year's enrollment numbers up, then residential colleges are not for you. But if you want to transform the educational life of your institution and fill it with imagination, loyalty, justice, compassion, wit, and generosity, then residential colleges *are* for you.

But how do you do it? What follows is a brief instruction manual, based on a comprehensive Web site I have developed, *The Collegiate Way: Residential Colleges and Higher Education Reform* (collegiateway.org). More detail on all the topics described below is available on the Web site. If you are ready for the whirlwind tour, please put your seat back and tray table in the upright and locked position. Here we go.

Membership and Administrative Structure

The quality of campus life in large U.S. universities has declined sharply since the 1960s as faculty have given up responsibility for student welfare outside the classroom and as institutions have become highly bureaucratized. *Therefore:* Create a system of decentralized residential colleges within every large university, each college having 250 to 500 members. Recognize that these residential colleges are societies (in Latin, *collegia*), not buildings. Divide the membership of each college into two classes, the senior members (fellows and associates) and the junior members (undergraduates and graduate students). Among the senior members, most will be fellows (faculty in the university); the associates will be university staff and members of the local community. Elect or appoint one of the fellows to be the master or president of the college, responsible for overall administration and reporting to the provost or the chancellor of the university. Elect or appoint another of the fellows to be the dean or senior tutor, responsible for student welfare and advising. Provide housing for the master and the dean within the college. Appoint the master and the dean for terms of five years at least, and make sure that they are hard-working educators with a genuine dedication to students, not administrative careerists or unproductive faculty in search of a sinecure. The positions of master and dean may be half time and will constitute one of the only major expenses in establishing a collegiate system in existing buildings.

Assemble the membership of each residential college so that it is a cross-section of the university as a whole. Select one or two fellows from each academic department, and add a sprinkling of university staff (a police officer, a librarian, a maintenance director, a computer administrator) and a few members of the local community (a rabbi, a business owner, a doctor, a lawyer, a government official) as associates. Likewise, draw the junior members from all major fields of study and from all undergraduate and graduate classes. Make the membership about one-sixth freshmen, one-sixth sophomores, one-sixth juniors, one-sixth seniors, one-sixth graduate students, and one-sixth fellows and associates. At the beginning of each year, publish a "face book" with the names and photographs of all the college's members, and preface it with an account of the history, traditions, and facilities of the college.

Craft policies that encourage the junior members to remain in residence during their entire tenure at the university rather than move off campus. These policies should include things like providing single rooms to senior undergraduate and graduate students, offering exemptions from meal requirements, providing summer residence, providing employment within the college, and guaranteeing rooms to those who return from study abroad. Some older students will want to move off campus, of course, but you should ensure that those who do move understand that they remain full members of the college in every respect but residence. Ensure that all these housing policies are under the direct control of the faculty—with education as the objective—not split among several administrative divisions. In particular, be sure that housing is not seen as a campus business function: any institution that puts student housing in the same administrative category with vending machines and parking lots shouldn't be entrusted with student housing in the first place.

Appoint a series of resident tutors from among the graduate members of the college, and provide them with room and board in exchange for overseeing the life of 20 to 40 students on a corridor or staircase. These resident tutors should be older than most of the other students and mature and academically strong. They should report to the dean. Establish a student council to organize social and recreational events for the college, and have the junior members annually elect the officers of that body. The student council should carry out much of its work through committees (welcoming, travel, entertainment, birthdays, gardening, special events) that provide every interested student with an important role. The dean should attend the meetings of the student council to offer advice and support.

Buildings and Grounds

Although a residential college is a society and not a building, it must have a physical space of its own to carry out its work, a place that its members can help to build and to which they can develop a personal attachment. *Therefore*: Provide each college with one or more buildings that are under its year-round control. Unless the college buildings are being constructed from scratch, these will probably be existing dormitories. If they are high-rise dormitories, begin by tearing them down and starting over. In the words of Christopher Alexander, Sara Ishikawa, and Murray

Silverstein (1977) in their influential book *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction*, "There is abundant evidence to show that high buildings make people crazy." Define the boundaries of each residential college's property with hedges, walls, gates, and clear entrances, and have the members of the college landscape the grounds in a distinctive and meaningful manner, with patterns, colors, and scents that will stay with them their entire lives. Include butterfly gardens, collections of historic roses, beds of rare tulips and culinary herbs, stands of native shrubs and wildflowers, trees with edible fruits, and whatever else makes your grounds special. Avoid industrial-park landscaping at all costs. Distinctive landscaping is one of the least expensive and most effective ways to establish college identity.

Provide living quarters in the college for the junior members and for the master and the dean and their families. Arrange the student rooms around staircases rather than long corridors when possible. Also provide within the college a variety of offices and common rooms. These should include offices for the master and the dean, a junior common room (the college living room that is comfortably furnished for socializing, studying, card playing, napping, and holding receptions but *not* for television viewing), a senior common room (a private room for the use of the senior members), a library, a student council room, a game room, a guest room, and any number of other special purpose rooms as interest and space may dictate (a theater, a music practice room, an art studio, a garden shed, a carpentry shop). Install working fireplaces in the junior and senior common rooms, and decorate all the common rooms with art, sculpture, and other objects that reflect the history and traditions of the college.

Establish a dining room for the college that is big enough to hold all the college members for special events. The dining room is the most important common area in the college. If your campus only has large, centralized dining facilities, divide those facilities into separate rooms, one for each college. Like all the other common rooms, the dining hall should be decorated in a meaningful way by the members of the college. Flags of all the college members' countries or states should hang from the dining room ceiling.

Avoid fluorescent lights, unfinished concrete, cinder block, chain stores, and shopping mall food courts everywhere. (Do *you* display a giant neon Pizza Hut sign in *your* home?) Emphasize wood, brick, stone, green plants, and warm, filtered light.

College Life and the Annual Cycle

Essential to the health of any community is an established social rhythm, one that makes people feel comfortable and that they are a part of something bigger than themselves. *Therefore:* Establish a framework of weekly, monthly, and annual events that define the life of each residential college, and add occasional one-time events as needed. Never cancel the regular events, but hold them without fail, week after week, month after month, year after year. Serve food at every event: food is the currency of all social transactions in a residential college.

Hold a college tea every week for all the members, junior and senior, to socialize. Bring the senior members together every week for lunch in the college dining room, and individually invite a few students to join them each time. Feeding the senior members, and often the junior members, is another principal expense of any residential college program.

Publish a college newsletter every week. Convene the student council every week, and have the council sponsor a dimly lit coffee bar and a movie night every week. Each month, organize a trip to a local museum or historical site or mega-bookstore. Have a monthly nature walk around your campus or a monthly stargazing evening. Hold secret rituals every month under the full moon.

Have a grand welcoming event for the new students at the beginning of each year, with lots of food and time for socializing. The student council should have an active welcoming committee that introduces all new members to the life and traditions of the college. Select a series of dates throughout the year to celebrate, in some special way: national holidays, religious holidays, natural events, and historical anniversaries. Sponsor two or three big outdoor events every year: a toy boat race, a croquet tournament, an open reading of the 1812 Overture, a hymn sung to the rising sun on the first day of spring, a reenactment of the Battle of Agincourt on St. Crispin's Day. Teach the students by example that they can sustain a vibrant social life at little expense if they use their imaginations and borrow, donate, work, recycle, preserve, scrounge, and improvise.

Set up a college e-mail group for year-round chatting, and require the senior members to subscribe to it, in digest mode at least, along with the students. Add incoming freshmen to the group during the summer before they arrive. Establish an official college Web site (including a

Other Resources on Residential Colleges

This article is modified from material on the author's Web site, The Collegiate Way: Residential Colleges and Higher Education Reform (collegiateway.org). This site takes each of the recommendations in this article and expands upon them in detail, providing many practical examples of residential college structures that work and don't work, answers to common objections raised against residential colleges, extensive case studies of residential college life based on the author's own experience, and a directory of residential colleges at universities around the world.

The most important work in print on residential colleges within large universities is Mark B. Ryan's *A Collegiate Way of Living: Residential Colleges and a Yale Education*. Ryan was dean of Jonathan Edwards College at Yale University for many years and is one of the founders of the new residential college system at Mexico's Universidad de las Américas-Puebla, the first collegiate system in a large Latin American university.

An important study of the poverty of campus life in large universities is *The Abandoned Generation* by William H. Willimon and Thomas H. Naylor. Willimon, dean of the Duke University Chapel, has followed this volume with another report on student life, *Old Duke-New Duke* (available from www.chapel.duke.edu).

A delightful memoir of life inside a residential college is Polly Stone Buck's *The Master's Wife*. Despite the many changes in manners over the years, anyone with experience inside a residential college will immediately recognize Buck's world.

An important work on the humane design of social environments is *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction* by Christopher Alexander, Sara Ishikawa, and Murray Silverstein. Although it does not discuss residential colleges, no one interested in the design of social communities should ignore this work.

complete archive of the history of the college), and allow any number of unofficial Web sites to link to it.

Design a coat of arms for the college. Make it dignified, with a simple design that students can draw on their own foreheads without too much trouble. Manufacture college stationery, holiday cards, neckties, pins, buttons, and scarves. Print your own paper money to pay student volunteers, and make the money redeemable in chocolate or some equivalent standard of value (if one can be found). Choose a light-hearted college mascot (something more imaginative than lions and tigers and bears; there are 10 million species to choose from). Attribute human qualities to the mascot, and invite it to comment, preferably with much sarcasm, on the state of the world. Assemble around the mascot a company of acolytes in the form of other stuffed animals, and bring the entire menagerie to all major college events.

Adopt a college cat. Even if it is not technically allowed indoors, it will provide much happiness to the members of the college. Provide the college cat with its own outdoor living quarters.

Buy an archival-quality blank book for each common room in the college to serve as a journal and commonplace book. Write an introductory page inviting contributions, and leave the book on a table in the room. Several weeks later, when it is full of dreams and fears and gripes and doodles, have everyone sign a farewell on its last page and a welcome on the first page of the new book that takes its place. Carefully preserve each completed volume for posterity.

Pastoral Care

The personal welfare of every residential college member is of vital importance. *Therefore*: Establish a strong formal and informal network of support within every college. The master and the dean should be highly visible, especially in the first few weeks of every year. The resident tutors should not only provide support for their own residents but should also act as "morale informants" who monitor the temper of the student body. Listen very carefully to complaints, and never suppress dissent. Many students talk to custodians and maintenance workers before they speak to faculty members; make sure these support staff know that they play an important role in the college community, and encourage them to befriend and offer advice to students. Do not follow an approach that is popular in student affairs circles—one that views every student as in need of "coun-

seling" of some kind. This is patronizing and condescending. Students are not broken or defective, and they should not be talked down to. Students are merely inexperienced and need encouragement, friendship, advice, and leadership by direct example rather than "counseling."

Avoid as many disciplinary problems as possible in advance by having a clear, simple, and short list of college rules and by insuring that no one in the college is anonymous. Anonymity breeds vandalism and violence. If your rule list does not fit on one page, simplify it. In any large community, some disciplinary problems are inevitable, of course. When they do occur, handle them as you would handle problems within a family and avoid legalistic proceedings. If person or property has been harmed, have the offender produce a written apology and make the damage right. In more serious cases, invoke the formal procedures that already exist within the university or refer the case directly to the campus police or medical services. Establish strong friendships with the campus police officers who work on the ground in your area; they will know more about what is happening on campus than the entire university administration put together.

Spend a great deal of time walking the college corridors, staircases, and common rooms at night. Nighttime in every residential college is of special importance because the majority of college life takes place at night and that is when students are most likely to be sad or lonely. Carry a dish of candy as you walk around. Talk with students, sit in for a hand or two in a card game, watch the evening news, read in the junior common room, and generally provide "a little touch of Harry in the night." A university that genuinely cares about the welfare of its students will allow the master and the dean to arrange their work schedules occasionally so they can stay up in the college until midnight every night. All the fellows should be required to spend a night or two every year in the college guest room as a condition of their appointment, and on those nights they should participate in the evening life of the college. Students are amazed and impressed when faculty spend time with them in the evening.

Publicly recognize the accomplishments of all college members. Human beings naturally want to feel important and appreciated, so never miss an opportunity to single out students and faculty both for recognition. Do not make the college newsletter a vehicle for dry administrative announcements; make it a gazette of prizes won, trips taken, offices held, speeches given, flowers planted, sto-

ries told, pictures painted, contests entered, scholarships awarded, witticisms pronounced, clubs founded, planets discovered, and worlds conquered.

Do not leave students alone in times of tragedy. Any college that survives long enough will suffer the death of a member or some other heavy loss. Make the grief communal. Forget your classes and your meetings; stay up with the students all night in front of the fire, singing hymns, reading poems, and telling stories. Plant a tree in memory of the friend lost, and place remembrances among its roots as you set it in the ground.

Academic Life

Education is the purpose of a university. *Therefore:* Fill every aspect of college life with academic opportunities, especially informal academic opportunities. Have words of the day, poems of the week, maps of the month, and all sorts of other intellectual diversions. Have students keep lists of the birds seen from the college grounds and calendars of the blooming times of flowers. Determine the longitude and latitude of your residential college and build a sundial to mark the hours (after students have investigated the history and design of sundials). Trace the history of the land your college occupies: who has owned it over the centuries and what it was like many years ago. Start a debate society to provide entertainment for the college one night each month. Have students maintain a garden of historic plants. Take field trips to local wildlife sanctuaries. Begin collections of coins and stamps from around the world and establish exchanges with residential colleges in other countries. Establish a literary society that sits together once each week to read plays, poems, jokes, and other forms of literature. Sponsor a short story prize or other literary award within the college or within the university at large. Publicly present an award each term to those students earning top grades in their course work.

Place a magazine rack in the junior common room and subscribe to several high quality publications from a range of fields. Subscribe to one local, one national, and one international newspaper. Leave a dictionary, a desk encyclopedia, an atlas, an almanac, and a book of quotations in the junior common room at all times.

Develop a small college library. One large room is sufficient, and it may double as a computer room. Appoint student librarians to monitor the room when the library is open, thereby providing an important opportunity for service. If

you have no money, begin the collection with donations. Ask each of the senior members of the college to donate one book each year, a book that has been important in their lives. Ask retiring faculty in the university to make donations. Establish special collections within the library for autographed volumes, maps, music, and publications by college members. Place a plaque in the library each year with the names of that year's librarians and donors.

Begin a series of small, one-hour courses called tutorials. Have the fellows teach these in the college as informal electives that investigate any subject of interest, from comparative grammar to game theory to African folktales to soil science, and if necessary provide modest compensation for each tutorial fellow. Create a special tutorial that all incoming freshmen must take, but do not make this freshman tutorial a content-free study skills course like the "University 101" courses that are popular now on many campuses. Instead, make it a substantive introduction to the idea of liberal education that is coupled with academically oriented tours of the university and the surrounding community.

Lastly, shine light into darkness, strike fear into tyrants, discover stars, and sail in the wind's eye.

Now you are ready to begin. Combine all of the above, stir occasionally, add a drop of luck, and after four years you will find that you have changed your institution and your students forever. 📖

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