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## College Dorms House More Than Students

By Brian Westley, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- When John Richardson wanted to avoid a lengthy commute to American University's campus, renting a nearby apartment just wouldn't do.

Instead, the easygoing 68-year-old professor decided to settle into a sprawling dormitory teeming with hundreds of students. It's not as unusual as it sounds: These days, catching sight of your professor on the way to the shower happens all the time.

Educators say a growing number of faculty are moving into dorms as colleges seek to revitalize campus life and shift away from the utilitarian, high-rise halls that sprouted when enrollment soared in the 1960s.

"There's been a separation between the culture of academic life and the culture of campus life," said Richardson, who suggested moving into a dorm after students complained that interaction with faculty was lacking outside the classroom.

There wasn't much structure to Richardson's living arrangement when he first moved into his one-bedroom suite in Anderson Hall about four years ago, said Gail Hanson, the university's vice president of campus life. The plan was to have him take it all in and see what happened.

Today, Richardson can be found handing out candy from a giant plastic bowl with a blinking red light attached as he greets bleary-eyed students during dozens of middle-of-the-night fire alarms. The well-traveled culinary enthusiast also prepares a buffet-style dinner for students a couple of nights each month, serving up Peking duck, Sri Lankan curry and Moroccan lamb.

"It kind of feels like you have a grandfather or an uncle living with you," said Aimee Malin, 20, a senior.

Having professors live among students is not a new idea, said Robert O'Hara, a higher education consultant who has created a Web site on the subject. The tradition stretches back hundreds of years to colleges in Great Britain and was adopted in the United States in the 1930s by [Harvard](#) and [Yale](#).

The concept was largely ignored, however, as colleges ballooned in size when the baby boom generation began coming of age. In many cases, O'Hara said, students were housed in what he calls "cinderblock student ghettos," where they were robbed of important relationships with faculty.

"There's been a real sense that 'Boy, what we tried in the late '60s has been really a flop so we'd better try something different,'" said O'Hara. The more recent faculty live-in arrangements, he said, came partly in response to a party culture and rampant alcohol abuse on many campuses.

Research shows that increased attention from faculty leads to higher academic achievement among students and a greater sense of belonging, said Karen Inkelas, a [University of Maryland](#) professor who studies programs that seek to integrate the in- and out-of-classroom experience. In return, more contact with students energizes faculty, she said.

Education officials say the popularity of faculty-in-residence programs took off in the past decade, though programs vary from school to school.

O'Hara said about two dozen schools nationwide now have Residential Colleges -- small, decentralized, faculty-led communities within a university that generally include a mix of students from various years and backgrounds. Prior to the 1990s, there were fewer than 10 of these college systems in the United States, he said.

At the [University of Virginia](#), there are three Residential Colleges with about 300 students in each, said commerce professor Brad Brown, who leads one of the colleges. Students participate in myriad activities, ranging from field trips to theme food nights.

"There are a lot of people who kind of get lost in the shuffle," Brown said. "With Residential Colleges, they have their own little group -- kind of like the 'Cheers' bar, where everybody knows their name."

The structure is more informal at American University, where Richardson lives in a typical dorm with roughly 800 students, mostly freshman. He escapes on weekends to Virginia, where he lives with his wife.

Educators don't keep track of how many colleges have similar models, but officials with the Association of College and University Housing Officers International note attendance is booming at their conferences about the programs -- an indication of growing interest.

For all their benefits, educators acknowledge the faculty live-in arrangements aren't for everyone. It's not always easy to attract faculty -- especially professors devoted to their research, gaining tenure or raising large families. And universities must be willing to pay the cost of providing faculty with room and board.

But professors who live in dorms say the stronger relationships with students make the sacrifices worthwhile.

Duane Leatherman, 60, who lives in a Residential College at Butler University in Indianapolis, said when a student's father died about six years ago, the mother called asking him to break the news. Leatherman said he and that student remain in touch.

"It really integrates the faculty and students into one community," he said of his experience in the dorms. "We don't view each other so much as them and us."

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On the Net:

More on residential colleges: <http://www.collegiateway.org>