

Trouble in the DORMS

A Guide to Residential Life Programs
for Higher Education Trustees



AMERICAN COUNCIL OF TRUSTEES AND ALUMNI
Institute for Effective Governance

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In the fall of 2007, one university conducted a program for all 7,000 students in its dormitories—and sparked a national scandal. Described as an educational “curriculum,” the University of Delaware’s mandatory residential life program was designed to achieve certain “learning outcomes” centered on “citizenship” and “sustainability.” The program went far beyond merely raising students’ awareness of civic issues and opportunities for participation. The residence hall directors and student resident advisors were, in fact, trained to push an ideological agenda.¹

At Delaware, the students living in the dorms—a population that included most of the freshman class—had to attend meetings where they were confronted with intrusive questions such as “When did you discover your sexual identity?,” “When were you first made aware of your race?,” and “When was a time you felt oppressed?” Those who were reluctant to answer questions, displayed the “wrong” tendencies, or tried to maintain their privacy were duly noted and pressured by the residential life staff to abandon their views. Describing the program as a “treatment” for students’ sup-



posed moral failings, residential life officials even kept files detailing students' beliefs and tracking their responses to the program.² Delaware had been conducting these kinds of residential programs for years. But in 2007, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) publicly exposed it—with over 500 pages of supporting documentation. Within days, the university suspended the program.³

Residential Life: What Trustees Should Know

When most people think of college dormitories, they think of bustling, noisy residence halls where students study, eat, socialize, and sleep. In recent years, however, dorm life has acquired a new dimension: a “curricular approach” to dorm activities designed, implemented, and managed by student affairs personnel.

The University of Delaware is just one example of this trend, having made national headlines during the 2007-08 academic year. Although Delaware's troubling program was shut down in the wake of news reports and public outcry, the philosophies and methods behind UD's program are, in fact, widespread. The purpose of this trustee guide is to illuminate trends in residential life programming, to explain their implications for individual liberty and freedom of thought, and to offer suggestions for what you, as a trustee, can do to ensure students' rights—and your institution's reputation—are protected.

Residential Life: Yesterday and Today

Current residential life programming has its roots in changes that occurred in American higher education throughout the 20th century. During that time, the research ideal espoused by the modern university gradually came to displace the traditional collegiate focus on liberal arts education. Increasingly, professors understood their work in terms of specialized scholarship rather than teaching and mentoring; meanwhile, post-war prosperity, the GI Bill, and the civil rights movement opened campuses to vast numbers of new students.⁴ These developments often created a guidance vacuum. As faculty focused more on research, they were less available for teaching and advising.

The problem was compounded by the erosion of the university's role *in loco parentis*. For decades, deans and administrators had maintained strict standards for student conduct, in effect fulfilling a parental role. During the 1960s, however, changes in the legal landscape compelled administrators to ease the enforcement of rules such as those concerning curfews, dormitory visitation, and dating.⁵ The practice of telling students what they could and could not do was replaced by a new, more subtle mode of administrative control centered on telling students what they could and could not think. In short, *in loco parentis* gave way to political correctness.⁶

As the academic landscape changed, a new corps of administrators—centered on student affairs—rose to prominence. The emerging field of residential life services was guided by influential groups such as the American College Personnel Association (ACPA). Responding to poor retention and declining graduation rates, ACPA has in recent years urged student affairs professionals to better “engage” students (particularly freshmen), with the goal of enhancing campus community and promoting “active learning.” Centered on fostering the “education and development of the total student,” ACPA’s current core values include “Diversity, multicultural competence and human dignity,” “Free and open exchange of ideas in a context of mutual respect,” “Outreach and advocacy on issues of concern to students,”

“Learning Communities”

Much of the “curricular” work of residence life professionals takes place in the context of establishing a supportive “learning community” for students. Hundreds of colleges and universities across the nation have adopted this model in an attempt to “bridge the gap” between students’ social and academic lives, placing particular emphasis on facilitating first-year students’ successful transition to college life. Although learning communities differ from one institution to the next, most follow a basic model: students are grouped into small “communities,” sharing a common core of classes and living together in the residence halls.

Learning communities, like many higher education initiatives, can be beneficial or harmful, depending on their execution and guiding philosophy. For example, freshman retention rates and academic achievement are often higher among students who participate in learning communities. This success has prompted the newly

and “Continuous professional development and personal growth of student affairs professionals.”⁷

These terms seem innocent, but as the Delaware Residential Life program shows, they can be manipulated in problematic ways.

As these objectives suggest, student affairs professionals have assumed a role that combines edu-

cational and career-enhancing prerogatives. Seeing themselves as supplementing, and even spearheading, the university’s educational mission, they define their role in terms that can compete with—and compromise—that mission. This is what happened at Delaware, where residence life professionals developed a “curriculum” that thoroughly undercut the principles of free inquiry and reasoned debate that are foundational to the academic enterprise.


“Sustainability,” “Citizenship,” and “Social Justice”

For most people, the word “sustainability”—a common one on today’s campuses— evokes envi-

established First-Year Experience program at the Catholic University of America, where learning communities take as their focal point the Western civilization-oriented humanities core curriculum required of all freshmen.⁸

But there can be serious drawbacks to the learning community model as well. Scholars have concluded that youth and academic inexperience of students can lead to “groupthink” without proper guidance; even well-run programs risk fostering conformity, cliquishness, and intellectual shallowness rather than a spirit of inquiry and debate.⁹

The moral of the story: The devil is in the details. ●



ronmental conservation, economics, and ecology. All are important. But they are not always what sustainability means in the context of residential life programming. Thanks in part to organizations such as ACPA, sustainability has taken on a much more varied and malleable definition that encompasses a range of social and political topics.

In a 2006 presentation at a conference sponsored by ACPA, residential life administrators Keith Edwards (of Macalester College) and Kathleen Kerr (of the University of Delaware) identified several “myths” about sustainability—including the idea that sustainability “is mostly about the environment” and the assumption that it is “secondary to the university’s core mission and function.” To the contrary, they said, sustainability includes such charged issues as “environmental racism,” “domestic partnerships,” “gender equity,” “multicultural competence,” and “affirmative action.”¹⁰ Other issues—among them “social justice,” “diversity,” and “citizenship”—are also frequently invoked, with similar implications.

While these topics can and should be legitimate subjects of study and debate in the classroom, poorly conceptualized or badly executed residential programming by non-academics can result in programs that stifle thought, questioning, and discussion. When that happens, so-called “educational” programming crosses the line into indoctrination.

The aim of such programming is not to study and examine these topics, but rather to advance a particular, ready-made conclusion as though it were self-evidently correct. Such anti-intellectual tactics are directly opposed to the spirit of exploration, openness, and unfettered debate that are essential to the undergraduate experience. And trustees should not permit them.


What Does This Mean for You?

It is tempting to hope that the University of Delaware's residential life program represented an extreme exception. But in many ways, the program has been considered a model for others to emulate. In fact, the University of Delaware's Office of Residential Life received two awards from ACPA in 2006 for its social justice programming.¹¹

As fiduciaries, trustees have an important role to play in overseeing student affairs and residential life. Here are some practical steps you should take to become informed about your housing program and to ensure that it protects student liberties and the faculty's educational prerogatives.

- 1. Ask for a report on your institution's residential life program, including its organizational documents.**

There are as many residential life programs as there are colleges and universities, and it's important that



you understand yours. Many are solid, responsible, and unobjectionable. But as Delaware illustrates, not all. As a trustee, you should feel free to ask for the “primary sources” so that you examine the program yourself, rather than rely on a brief presentation or executive summary. You should also ask detailed questions about how your institution’s residential life administrators implement the program. Is the program aimed at turning students into “change agents”? In what types of activities are students required to participate? In the Delaware program, the focus on sustainability, citizenship, diversity, and social justice announced an ideological agenda for which students were recruits. Invite the program administrators to a meeting and have them publicly explain and describe the programming.

2. Ask if it’s really voluntary.

Are these programs *really* voluntary? Some defend ideological residential life programs on the grounds that they are not mandatory. Realistically, one cannot expect students who are new to campus to say no to events, meetings, and even ideas being pushed by adults in the dorms, especially when these things are prominently advertised, endorsed, and promoted. The bottom line: If a program seems coercive to you and your fellow trustees, ask that it be changed or eliminated—don’t leave it up to students to disentangle themselves.

3. Make residential programming a regular agenda item.


By asking questions and reviewing residential life regularly, the board can underscore its commitment to protecting student liberties and to securing appropriate faculty involvement. Consider requesting a campus climate survey (either a self-study or external evaluation) exploring the atmosphere in the residential halls as well as the classroom.

4. Involve the faculty appropriately.

Residential life staff should not be permitted to implement any educational programming unless it has been reviewed for accuracy and quality by the relevant faculty body or bodies. Faculty members are, after all, the experts on education. Residential life staff can help in this regard by hosting speaker series, faculty lunches, or other activities that enhance the interaction between faculty and students.

5. Channel resources into residential life activities that address students' welfare in ways that don't infringe on their rights.

There are plenty of activities that can get students involved—without intrusive pressure on matters of conscience, viewpoint, and belief. For example, workshops on study and time management skills can be helpful for students, while refreshment breaks and pizza parties can lighten the study schedule. The residential life staff members (both




professionals and student volunteers) are truly the “first responders” when it comes to roommate conflict resolution and “advisor on call” programs. They can disseminate information about security issues, emergency procedures, and alcohol policies. They also can and should be trained to recognize and respond to signs of substance abuse and mental illness. Furthermore, residential life officials can enhance student engagement by alerting them to educational opportunities in the larger university community.

6. Consider the costs.

Many residential life programs—and orientation programs—have admirable objectives like building community, fostering school spirit, and enhancing student engagement. But in these straitened times, you should demand to know the details, including the price tag. Have these programs accomplished their stated goals? Are the costs of the program justified by the results? Do the benefits offset the opportunity costs? The time spent attending mandatory (and non-mandatory) events and sessions can potentially crowd out time for spontaneous student discussion of intellectual, cultural, and political topics, not to mention time for studying and sleeping.

7. Encourage greater student-faculty interaction.


One of the least desirable facets of modern academic culture is that faculty are spending less time



interacting with students. As research and publication have become the main avenues for faculty promotion and advancement, advising and mentoring have increasingly been outsourced to residential life and student affairs officials. Restoring and rewarding faculty involvement with students can help foster a campus intellectual culture that extends beyond the classroom. One way to do this is through a model that places faculty in charge of places where students live, socialize, and learn as well. Residential colleges and similar arrangements create a more intimate, personal environment where students can have real contact with professors and develop a strong sense of intellectual camaraderie.¹²

8. Enhance academic rigor.

The average student at a four-year college or university spends about ten hours per week in class, and then about two hours a day on homework (which is less than half of what most professors say is necessary to do well).¹³ This leaves students with a remarkable amount of free time for extracurricular activities—as well as drinking and partying.¹⁴ “Educational” residential life programs are able to make inroads in part because the academic curriculum has ceased to be the major focus of students’ lives and schedules. The best way to mitigate this problem is to explore ways your institution can be more successful in providing an exciting, coherent, rigorous curriculum designed to bring students



together in a common conversation, and to increase academic rigor throughout the institution.


Designing and implementing a meaningful residential life system need not involve reinventing the wheel. The faddish initiatives popular on many campuses today often amount to little more than intrusive political indoctrination and bureaucratic micromanagement. At the very least, trustees should make sure that their colleges and universities are respecting students' basic rights to freedom of speech and conscience and not adopt—or tolerate—the kind of program that embarrassed the Delaware trustees and damaged Delaware's reputation. It is your responsibility to be informed.

ACTA thanks University of Delaware professors Jan Blits and Linda Gottfredson, as well as Adam Kissel of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, for their valuable counsel on this trustee guide.

ENDNOTES

1. The University of Delaware's residential life "curricular" materials are available at the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education's website: <<http://www.thefire.org/index.php/article/8575.html>>. These materials summarize specified "learning outcomes" and describe the training program for students working as residential assistants.
2. Office of Residential Life Research Agenda, Report #1 on Strategic Change "Assessment and Information Sharing," Presented 26 September 2006 <<http://www.thefire.org/pdfs/f3dd33e562a3289f10d86888911b7a8d.pdf>> p. 14.
3. Patrick Harker, "A Message to the University of Delaware Community," 1 November 2007, *UDaily*, accessed 23 February 2009 <<http://www.udel.edu/PR/UDaily/2008/nov/letter110107.html>>; Adam Kissel, "How the Dorms are Politicized: The Case of the University of Delaware," National Association of Scholars, 22 January 2009 <http://www.nas.org/polArticles.cfm?doctype_code=Article&doc_id=499&Keyword_Desc=How%20Many%20Delawares>.
4. Anthony T. Kronman writes in detail about the rise of the "research ideal," the expansion of the student body, and other developments in the American university and their ramifications for undergraduate education in his book *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).
5. According to Eric Hoover, the 1961 Supreme Court case *Dixon v. Alabama*, in which the Court ruled that students could not be expelled from college without due process, spelled the beginning of the end for *in loco parentis*. He argues that the late-'60s

- student protests and the granting of voting rights to 18-year-olds in 1971 through the 26th Amendment sealed the doctrine's demise. "'Animal House' at 30: O Bluto, Where Art Thou?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 5 September 2008, Chronicle.com, 23 February 2009 <<http://chronicle.com/weekly/v55/i02/02a00103.htm>>.
6. Donald Downs, *Restoring Free Speech and Liberty on Campus* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 8-25.
 7. "About ACPA," American College Personnel Association, Myacpa.org, 29 January 2009 <http://www.myacpa.org/au/au_index.cfm>.
 8. First Year Experience, Catholic University of America, accessed 11 May 2009 <<http://firstyear.cua.edu>>.
 9. David Jaffee, "Learning Communities Can be Cohesive and Divisive," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 9 July 2004, Chronicle.com, 27 January 2009 <<http://chronicle.com/weekly/v50/i44/44b01601.htm>>.
 10. Keith E. Edwards, Kathleen G. Kerr, "Social Justice and Sustainable Development," Tools for Social Justice Conference, 13 November 2006, Kansas City, MO, 6 January 2009 <<http://www.myacpa.org/task-force/sustainability/docs/TFSJ%20Sustainability.ppt>>.
 11. "Residence Life wins social justice education awards," *UDaily*, 7 February 2006, Udel.edu, 26 March 2009 <<http://www.udel.edu/PR/UDaily/2006/feb/justice020706.html>>.
 12. One resource is The Collegiate Way (www.collegiateway.org), an organization dedicated to improving campus life through residential colleges.



Institutions employing this model (inspired by Oxford and Cambridge Colleges) include Harvard, Yale, Princeton, the University of Miami, Murray State University, Truman State University, and the University of Central Arkansas.

13. See “Experiences that Matter: Enhancing Student Learning and Success,” National Survey of Student Engagement Annual Report, 2007 <http://nsse.iub.edu/NSSE_2007_Annual_Report/docs/withhold/NSSE_2007_Annual_Report.pdf>, 13.
14. Mary Beth Marklein, “College freshmen study booze more than books,” *USA Today*, 11 March 2009. <http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2009-03-11-college-drinking_N.htm>.



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