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In the Trenches...

Success Lives Here: The Impact of the Residential Experience on Student Success

by Ana Hernández

The opportunity to join a community sharing the common goal of pursuing one's academic dreams, coupled with the unique experiences and perspectives each member contributes, creates a truly rich environment.

Impromptu late-night debates over political, philosophical and social issues outside a residential setting are hard to match. Imagine living in a community where diversity is embraced, social responsibility is valued and lifelong friendships are formed. These communities develop in residential halls on university campuses around the world.

Living on campus is an important step for any student in building a solid foundation for success in college and beyond. More than convenience, it is about making connections, building community and finding one's place both academically and socially at an institution of higher education. Residential students are invested and involved in campus life and are more likely to be satisfied with their university experience, develop a strong affinity to the institution and persist and progress at a higher rate than those who have never lived on campus.

The life skills developed as part of a residential community will stay with students well after graduation. The residence hall environment offers not only the convenience of easy access to campus resources, events, organizations and job opportunities, but also unique leadership and service-learning options.

Recognizing the importance of a high-quality residential experience to students' success, the University of South Florida (USF) recently implemented a live-on requirement for all first-time-in-college students to encourage this enhanced engagement. USF's Housing and Residential Education department uses a multipronged approach to support student success and a seamless transition to the campus community – emphasizing relationship building, programs and sense of place.

Dedicated professional and paraprofessional staff are instrumental in any student success initiative. The connection starts with the individual resident assistants who serve as peer mentors and campus resources as residents navigate the campus, classes and roommate relationships. The residence life professionals living in the halls create a safe and welcoming community focused on student development. The faculty-in-residence who live in the halls and faculty fellows who share their time and talents over lunch or a cup of coffee enrich the experience of all those who cross their path. Their approachability and genuine interest in residents break down any perceived barriers that might exist between student and professor.

The engagement with students through programming, classes in the halls or casual conversation pay dividends to faculty as well by informing their research and approach to teaching.

Housing and residential education professionals at USF take a holistic approach to facilitating students' academic and personal success. The pro-

grammatic efforts in residence halls are built upon intentional learning outcomes such as social responsibility, multicultural maturity and competence, effective communication, personal responsibility, academic competence, critical thinking, and leadership development.

Strong living learning programs are the hallmark of a successful residential education program. They offer smaller communities within the larger residential environment. At USF, eight living learning communities provide distinct living options for students interested in communities with a specific academic focus (Honors College, Business, Engineering, Advertising, or INTO USF international program) or affinity (Transfer Cluster, Wellness, Green Sustainability). Each learning community allows residents to build upon their common interests to form strong networks that personalize their university experience while also allowing connections across academic disciplines. The success of these programs compels new living learning communities to be introduced each year.

Academic initiatives in the halls take many forms and touch thousands of students with their breadth and depth. Collaboration with academic and student affairs partners across campus is critical to the success of residential academic initiatives.

Initiatives range from personalized letters offering resources and academic coaching for students who have not been successful on midterms to large-scale final review sessions with dozens of faculty and thousands of study participants. The outreach efforts continue with the Achieve-a-BULL learning program supporting residents placed on academic probation after their first semester.

Students have the opportunity to return to campus early to participate in a workshop on study skills, time management, test-taking techniques and tutoring resources. Residents also enjoy casual interaction with faculty and staff through "Lunch and Learn" programs, "Evening with the Experts," "House Calls" and various career exploration programs.

The residential facilities themselves support student success by providing a safe, comfortable atmosphere where students thrive. A variety of living options are available to meet the unique needs of each student. The opportunity to share a meal in a dining hall, gather in hall lounges for study groups, or learn how to share space with another individual all happen in the residential environment.

Communities are formed in the halls. Lifelong friendships are forged in the halls. Learning about yourself and others occurs in the halls. Lives are changed by the residential experience.

Ana Hernández is dean of housing and residential education at the University of South Florida.

