Creating an Academic Culture: Issues in Residence Administration at Institutions of Higher Education[†]

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Abstract

This article explains the degree to which academic goals are integrated into the residential systems of institutions of higher education in Canada. This investigation utilizes survey and in-depth interview research methods to examine residence administration, academic programming in residences and academic faculty involvement in residences. The study found that there is little integration of academic goals into residence administration; academic programming exists in most residences but it tends to be fragmented and shortterm; and there is little academic faculty involvement in residences. Implications for administrators are explored.

Résumé

Cet article explique jusqu'à quel point les objectifs académiques sont intégrés aux systèmes résidentiels des établissements d'enseignement supérieur au Canada. Cette étude fait appel à des techniques de sondage et d'entrevue en profondeur pour examiner l'administration des résidences, les programmes académiques dans les résidences et la participation des professeurs à la vie des

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résidences. L'étude a révélé que les objectifs académiques sont très peu intégrés à l'administration des résidences. Il existe des programmes académiques dans la plupart des résidences, mais ceux-ci ont tendance à être fragmentés et de courte durée. Les professeurs participent très peu à la vie des résidences. L'étude examine les différentes possibilités de participation des administrateurs.

In recent years there has been a growing concern for the quality of student life in institutions of higher education in general and in their residence communities in particular. Everywhere, campus leaders have been asking how to make their institutions more intellectually and socially vital (The Carnegie Foundation, 1990). Faced with numerous social, political and economic changes occurring in the environment in which universities are embedded, university administrators have become particularly concerned about the extent to which their institutions are still able to achieve their goals, not the least of which is the academic and personal development of their clients, the students. As The Carnegie Foundation (1990) explained:

Colleges and universities today have become administratively complex . . . Especially disturbing, the academic and nonacademic functions are now divided into almost wholly separate worlds, and student life concerns have become the province of a separate staff, with a dizzying array of "services" provided. The question is: How can the overall interests of students be well served in the face of such administrative fragmentation? (pp. 4-5)

It may be argued that such fragmentation between the academic and residential structures can be justified on the grounds that residences should not necessarily be involved in academic matters. For example, should universities invade students' homes by introducing structured academic programs in residences or should they be mere hotel managers, providing only accommodation. Alternatively, should residences constitute a sub-system of the total university contributing to the achievement of university-wide goals?

There has been little research to establish the benefits of academic initiatives in residences. However, studies both in Canada (National Forum Secretariat, 1987; Smith, 1991) and the United States (Boyer, 1987) have identified excellence in education as a major challenge facing post-secondary education. Research on ways of meeting the challenge and improving the quality of university education has not only focused on traditional areas for reform such as curriculum (Pearson, Shavlik, & Touchton, 1989) and the academic profession (Clark, 1987; Simpson, 1990), but increasingly attention is being paid to student life in general (Axelrod, 1990; Benjamin, 1990; Light, 1990). It has been recognized that a student's educational experience is a combination of both classroom and outside-the-classroom education (Moffatt, 1989) and that the interaction between students and their environment shapes the students' attitudes and their experiences (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990; Sanday, 1990). However, despite the acknowledgment that the quality of the learning experience is impacted by the students' environment (Canadian Association of College and University Student Services [CACUSS], 1990), there is little research on the relationship between students' academic performance and their living arrangements. Most studies in this area have focused on the relationship between student development and macrosystem factors such as residence location, social climate, and residence architecture (Benjamin, 1988). This finding might be indicative of the fact that few residences have been structured to facilitate the achievement of academic goals.

Increasingly residence personnel have demonstrated an interest in strengthening the linkages between students' academic and residential experiences, often called the creation of an "academic culture" within the residence community. Culture in the context of an organization refers to "the set of values, guiding beliefs, understandings, and ways of thinking that is shared by members of an organization and is taught to new members as correct" (Daft, 1992, p. 317). An organization's culture may be manifested in many ways, but is typically identified by the patterns of planned activities carried out through social interactions (Duncan, 1989; Schein, 1990; Smircich, 1983). It is the role of administrators to influence and communicate the organization's culture through policy statements, personal actions and the formal structure and systems of the organization.

In residential systems of colleges and universities, an academic culture exists when residents believe in the importance of creating and maintaining an environment conducive to learning and share the value of academic success. This suggests that academic goals may not be the sole prerogative of academic faculties and departments. Residences may also have a vested interest in the academic orientation of students. This also implies the value of a liaison between residence life and academic faculties and departments in the development of convergent goals and complementary programs. Thus, an academic culture may be created by policies that emphasize the academic success of residents as a positive value, by the involvement of the academic faculty in residence life, by the structural integration of the residence administration with other components of the institutional structure, and by academic programming within the residence community. Do institutions of higher education create academic cultures within their residence communities and how do they achieve an interface between the residence life system and the larger university system? Many institutions appear to have student representation on several administrative committees. While this structural feature may ensure that the students' voice is heard by administrators, it is not clear to what extent the perspective of administrators seeking to create an academic culture is heard in the residences. The purpose of this research was to investigate the degree to which Canadian colleges and universities have integrated academic objectives into their residence systems. This was accomplished by examining residence administration, the academic programming offered and the faculty involvement in residences.

Methodology

To investigate these issues we used several approaches, including a national survey of administrators of residence systems, a survey of faculty at a mediumsized Canadian university and in-depth interviews with key residence stakeholders at the same university. Using these approaches allowed for comparisons at macro and micro levels of analysis. Issues identified in the national survey could be explored in more detail through a case study of a particular university.

National Survey

A questionnaire' was faxed to all residence administrators (N = 40) listed in the 1991-92 Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS) Membership Directory. CACUSS is the main organization of college and university student service professionals in Canada. Membership in CACUSS is open to all post-secondary institutions, including universities, colleges of applied arts, sciences and technology and community colleges. However, the membership population in 1991-92 consisted of 35 universities and five colleges. The questionnaire was three pages long and contained questions about the administrative structure of the residence community, the involvement of faculty members in the residences, social and academic programming organized for residence students and the total number of students in the residence community. An open-ended question was also included which asked for any other comments the respondent wished to make about their residence community.

In the cover letter that accompanied the questionnaire, respondents were also asked to provide any supplemental materials which they felt would provide further information on their residence community's structure and operations such as organization charts, residence handbooks or annual reports.

Twenty-two responses to the questionnaire were received, yielding a response rate of 55%. Eighteen of the respondents were universities and four were colleges. The universities and colleges responding to the survey represent

Total number of students in residence	
	N in sample
less than 500 students in residence	6
501-1,000 students in residence	4
1,001 - 2,500 students in residence	7
2,501 or more students in residence	5

Table 1 Total number of students in residence

a cross-section of type of institution (large versus small) as well as type of residence community. Table 1 describes the sample with respect to total number of students in residence.

Case Study

A case study of a medium sized university was used to further investigate the creation of an academic culture in residences. The university is located in Eastern Canada and was chosen due to its convenience. It has a student population of 9,400 and employs approximately 500 faculty. The research conducted at the university consisted of two main parts: a survey of Faculty and interviews with residence stakeholders.

<u>Survey of Faculty</u>. A survey of faculty at the selected university was conducted in order to measure respondents' attitudes and perceptions about the nature of residence life, especially with respect to academic goals. Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with statements about what residence life should be like, their evaluation of the current nature of residence life at their university, and their willingness to be involved in residence programs. Table 2 lists the attitudinal statements used in the survey. Faculty respondents were also asked closed-ended questions regarding their relationship with the residence community (for example whether or not they had ever lived, visited or held a position in the residence system). Additionally, open-ended questions asked respondents to provide suggestions for any academically oriented programs that could be offered in the residences and to give general comments about the residence community.

A random sample of faculty was drawn from the university telephone book. One hundred and sixty nine surveys were distributed through the campus mail. A total of 58 responses to the survey were received, representing a 34% response rate. Because this response rate is lower than expected, a non-response bias

Table 2 Attitude Statements / Faculty Survey

What residence life should be like:

"Residences should be mainly a social environment."

"Academic programs such as tutoring or special lectures should be offered in the residence community."

Perceptions of the current nature of residence life at their university:

"The atmosphere in the residence community does not provide a good environment for students to study."

"Students who live in the residence community do not perform as well academically as non-resident students."

"The residence community is an integral part of our university."

"I would recommend residence life to new students."

Willingness to be involved in the residence community:

"I would like to be involved in the residence community."

"I would be willing to conduct/facilitate/present/organize an academic activity/program in the residence community."

could exist. The lack of a higher response rate could indicate a general disinterest in the residence community and issues associated with it. The results of the survey must be interpreted in light of this potential non-response bias.

Attitudes were measured using a seven point Likert-type scale with 1 indicating strong agreement with an attitude statement and 7 indicating strong disagreement. Table 3 presents the distribution of responses.

Interviews with Residence Stakeholders. To obtain the views of various participants of the residence community regarding their role in creating an environment conducive to the achievement of academic objectives, twenty two personal interviews were conducted with individuals in the residence community under study. The sample included members of the residence administration: dons, associate dons, residence fellows, proctors and academic resource persons (ARPs). Dons and Associate Dons are normally faculty or staff who live in residence and are responsible for the day-to-day administration of residence houses. Residence Fellows are faculty who also live in residence and are

Table 3
Faculty Survey: Summary of Mean Responses

Attitude Statement	1		2		3		4		5		6		7		Missing		
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	8	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Mean
1. Social environment	0	0	3	5.2	5	8.6	8	13.8	14	24.1	14	24.1	11	19.0	3	5.2	5.3
2. Academic programs	24	41.4	13	22.4	5	8.6	8	13.8	2	3.4	1	1.7	2	3.4	3	5.2	2.7
3. Atmosphere in residence	8	13.8	11	19.0	10	17.2	11	19.0	8	13.8	1	1.7	1	1.7	8	13.8	4.0
4. Performance of residential students	1	1.7	1	1.7	2	3.4	16	27.6	8	13.8	9	15.5	8	13.8	13	22.4	5.9
5. Residence as integral part	23	39.7	16	27.6	9	15.5	6	10.3	3	5.2	1	1.7	0	0	0	0	2.1
6. Recommend residence life	9	15.5	19	32.8	5	8.6	12	20.7	7	12.1	3	5.2	2	3.4	1	1.7	3.2
7. Like to be involved in residence	3	5.2	2	3.4	6	10.3	7	12.1	10	17.2	11	19.0	14	24.1	5	8.6	5.4
8. Willing to conduct academic program	5	8.6	2	3.4	11	19.0	9	15.5	5	8.6	9	15.6	12	20.7	5	8.6	5.0

Note: Respondents answered on a seven-point scale with "1" indicating strong agreement and "7" indicating strong disagreement.

responsible for educational programs. Proctors are experienced students who live in residence and assist the Dons. ARPs are academically successful students who provide peer tutoring and direct students to other academic support services. In addition to these administrators, elected student leaders in the residence community were interviewed.

Findings

Administrative Structure

A common finding from the three phases of this study was that the present structures of residence communities do not facilitate the achievement of the goal of integrating academic activities into students' residential life. For example, one of the most significant findings of the national survey relates to the role of the senior administrator in the various residence communities. Of the responses from 21 schools, 17 or 81% reported that the senior administrator in their system was a full time, non-faculty position. The job titles for this position included Director of Residence; Department Head or Director of Residences and Conference Services; Housing Manager; and Manager or Director of Residence Life. Responses to the survey indicated that these positions have full responsibility for the day-to-day operations of the residences including admissions into residence, academic programming (if it exists) as well as the hiring, training and supervision of residence personnel (e.g., Residence Assistants, etc.).

With respect to the reporting structure for the senior residence administrator in the schools responding to the survey, some report to the Director or Dean of Student Services while others report to a Vice President (of Student Services; Finance and Planning; or Operations and University Relations). This is significant because it reveals that no senior residence administrator reports to an academic Dean or Vice President, indicative of a clear separation of academic and student services functions.

In the survey of faculty, respondents did not acknowledge this separation. This is illustrated by the strong level of agreement ($\bar{x} = 2.1$) shown for the statement "The residence community is an integral part of our University." This perception may be attributed to the fact that in the university studied there is a tradition of academic faculty involvement in the residence administration at all levels. For example, the senior administrator is normally a full time faculty member and, as previously described, faculty live in the residences.

There was no clear support for this perception of integration in the results of the in-depth interviews with members of the residence community at the university studied. On the one hand, the senior residence administrator reports to a Dean of student services as opposed to an academic Vice President, a reporting structure which does not contribute to the integration of the academic and non academic divisions of the university. This was specifically recognized as a difficulty by the senior residence administrator. On the other hand, the other faculty members involved in the residence community perceived that they often bridge the gap between the residential and academic aspects of the students' lives. Although the respondents felt the time required as administrators detracted from their primary academic responsibilities, some respondents felt that their involvement with residences improved their teaching performance. An explicit attempt to incorporate academic activities into students' residential life has recently been made through the introduction of a program called Living to Learn in a few residences. This program is intended to provide a stronger link between students' academic experiences and their life in residence by utilizing the ARPs to coordinate a variety of academic programs in the residences. This initiative is indicative of a growing concern across Canada for increased academic programming in residence communities, although there is considerable variation in the number and type of programs offered.

Academic Programming

In 19 or 86% of the schools responding to the national survey, some type of academic programming was in place. The most popular programs mentioned, were short term programs including those related to study skills. Twelve of the 19 schools have some form of study skills workshop. There was less consistency in the other short term programs mentioned. Examples of programs mentioned were workshops on essay writing, stress management, time management, nutrition and cultural programs (e.g., attending the theatre or symphony concerts). A few institutions also mentioned tutoring programs and 24 hour quiet hours during exams as academic programs.

In the survey of faculty, strong agreement ($\bar{x} = 2.7$) was indicated for the statement "Academic programs, such as tutoring or special lectures, should be offered in the residence community." The responses to this statement are somewhat consistent with the responses given to another statement in the survey: "Residences should be mainly a social environment." There was some level of disagreement with this statement ($\bar{x} = 5.3$), with 43% of respondents responding with a 6 or 7. Taken together the responses to these two statements show a concern on the part of faculty that the residences have some academic programming.

The mean response to the statement "The atmosphere in the residence community does not provide a good environment for students to study" was $\overline{x} = 4.0$. However, as the distribution in Table 3 indicates, there was significant agreement (50% of the respondents) to this question. By comparison, 17.2% expressed disagreement and 19% were undecided. In addition, the mean result should be interpreted in light of a large non-response to this question. Approximately 14% of the respondents did not respond, perhaps because they did not feel they had enough knowledge of residence life.

Disagreement ($\bar{x} = 5.9$) was expressed with the statement "Students who live in the residence community do not perform as well academically as nonresident students." However, the non-response to this question was even higher than for the study environment question discussed above. Twenty-two percent of the respondents did not feel that they could comment on the academic performance of residence students. The significant non-response to these items may be further evidence of the fragmentation that exists between the academic and residence sub-systems of university life since these respondents appear to have given limited consideration as to whether there is a relationship between residence life and the achievement of academic goals.

In response to an open-ended question regarding the possibilities for academically oriented programs in the residences, respondents made a wide variety of suggestions. These included mentoring systems, tutoring programs, competitions among houses for best Grade Point Average, informal discussion groups on various topics such as science in society and current political themes, math tutorials, study skills workshops, use of computers, cultural programs, life skills (such as managing time and money), grammar sessions, language sessions, discussions of ethics, using female faculty as role models for residence students, seminars on job hunting strategies, having representatives from various departments visit the residences, and support groups for health issues. As with the national survey, these suggestions were for the most part short term in orientation.

In response to questions about academic programs or other initiatives in their houses, some residence personnel said that they had been involved in setting up academic programs. These programs included tutoring and workshops on various topics such as drug and alcohol abuse. The majority of respondents did not think that students expected academic programs in their residence and some felt that only a small minority of students would be interested in such programs. One of the Associate Dons described how they had circulated within the House a list of possible activities for the year including social, cultural and academic activities and that no students had indicated an interest in the academic activities.

Other than programming, some faculty residence personnel mentioned aspects of the facilities and atmosphere in the residences that create a better academic culture. The availability of computer facilities in the residences as well as reading lounges were mentioned in this regard. Two respondents spoke of the need to get more faculty members involved in the residences on an informal basis. One respondent expressed the need to create a more academic environment that would provide for informal learning since students might resist yet another formal learning situation, especially in their homes. Another respondent felt that although students may not have previously expected academic programs and supports in residence, those expectations were changing in light of programs such as Living to Learn.

Some residence faculty expressed disappointment regarding the lack of a residence-wide program for students. They also mentioned the lack of communication between the members of the residence community who are specifically involved in programming. This further supports the impression that the academic programming that does exist is not systematically integrated across the entire residence community.

In general, the proctors viewed academic programming in the residences as desirable. Although most thought that the Living to Learn program was very valuable and that it should be introduced in more residences, they felt that some residences were more conducive to such programs than others and that it should not be adopted across the board in all residences. There was some concern about the need to change many students' perception of a residence as a convenient location for social activities before academic issues can be addressed effectively.

The elected student leaders interviewed indicated that they are not involved in initiating academic programs at all nor could they see a future role in this regard. However, one respondent did indicate that student leaders could serve as a liaison between residential students and faculty members. The interviews with the various residence stakeholders indicate that student leaders have not taken responsibility for developing academic initiatives in residences. Any such programs have originated with the residence administration. This raises the question of whether it is appropriate to impose academic programming on residence life or whether it should be left in the classroom.

Faculty Involvement

Only half of the institutions that responded to the national survey have any faculty involvement in either the academic programming or administration of the residences. Of those 11 who mentioned faculty involvement, five of them indicated that the involvement of faculty was "minimal" and usually consisted of a few faculty doing some programs (e.g., study skills workshops) in the residence houses. It is important to note, however, that many of the respondents whose residence community has little faculty involvement mentioned that they would like to increase the frequency of faculty involvement.

Those residence communities which had faculty involvement seemed to follow one of three patterns:

- 1) In the majority of cases there is minimal faculty involvement where the faculty come into the residences to do a few programs during the year, as described above.
- 2) In two schools faculty live in the residences in positions similar to what has been described as a Don at the university studied.
- 3) In a few other schools programs are in place to encourage the interaction of faculty and residence students. At one university, for example, retired faculty members serve as mentors for individual students. Similarly, another university has recently begun a program called Honourary Residents, where faculty are assigned to a floor and attend events with students on that floor.

Two statements on the survey of faculty measured their willingness to be involved in the residence community. The responses show substantial disagreement with the statements "I would like to be involved in the residence community" ($\bar{x} = 5.4$) and "I would be willing to conduct/facilitate/present/organize an academic activity/program in the residence community" ($\bar{x} = 5.0$). This unwillingness to be involved contrasts with the recognition of the need for academic programming in the residences as discussed above. Although the respondents made several suggestions for programming, they were not willing to accept the responsibility for implementation.

Some possible reasons why faculty may be reluctant to be involved in the residence community were found in responses to another question on the survey. Respondents who had considered applying for a position in residence were asked to identify perceived advantages and disadvantages to this involvement. One of the most significant results was that 57% of those who had considered applying thought that such a position would require too much of a time commitment. Perhaps related to that result, 30% of those who had considered applying thought that such a position would have a negative effect on their careers. The benefits to holding a position in residence as identified by those respondents who had considered applying were: contact with students (55% of the respondents), impacting students' lives (50%), a sense of involvement (41%), room and or board offered (40%), and a sense of community with other faculty and students (29%). Further insight into this issue was gained through the interviews with faculty employed in the residence system.

When asked what part of their role they liked the most, the overwhelming response by these faculty members was the opportunity for continuing contact with students. One respondent indicated that her role as Don had "significantly enriched" her life and another said that he enjoyed seeing the students mature and being part of that process. However, like the non-residential faculty, all of the respondents acknowledged the significant time commitment necessary in being involved in residence life. When asked whether or not their role facilitated or hindered their faculty position, all respondents replied that the time required did detract from other activities such as research or other committee work on campus.

Implications & Conclusions

In this research it was assumed that an academic culture in residence systems of institutions of higher learning would be manifested in the integration of residence administrative structures into other structural systems in their institutions, academic programming and faculty involvement in residence communities. The three phases of the research revealed several interesting findings regarding these subjects. There was much consistency in responses to the national survey in expressing the need for increasing the academic component of residence life. However, this is not yet reflected in the structural linkages between the residence communities and the rest of the university administration. The findings of our study of one specific university show some attempt to establish such linkages more formally. The university studied is somewhat atypical in its relatively high level of faculty involvement in residence life. However, even in this case the structural linkages are fragile. Outside of those faculty members directly involved in the residence community, very few others are willing to participate actively in creating an academic culture in the residences. These findings have implications for residence and university administrators.

One implication is that administrators should explicitly articulate academic objectives for residences. These objectives could assist in the allocation and utilization of available resources toward the creation of an environment conducive to the complete development of the student. This formal recognition of the importance of the academic role of the residences could be further strengthened by making senior administrative positions in the residence systems academic appointees who can provide academic leadership. Having academics as senior administrators could serve many purposes including the implementation of academic initiatives in the residence community and the fostering of closer relations with the rest of the institution. This would ensure that the residence system has a voice in the academic community. It would also make available to the residence community expertise in research methodology which could be used for monitoring and evaluating academic initiatives in the residences.

Moreover, formal reporting relationships can be established to link the residence community to the academic component of the institutional hierarchy.

Another factor hindering the integration of the academic and nonacademic dimensions of institutions is the lack of a reward structure for faculty that recognizes the contribution that their involvement in residence can make to the achievement of overall institutional goals. By rewarding active participation in residence activities, administrators at institutions of higher education could signal the importance of such activities and encourage more widespread participation. There is a stated policy at the university studied that accepts faculty involvement in the residence community as a contribution toward the teaching and service components of the faculty assessment process. Nonetheless, faculty still expressed concern over the detrimental impact that such involvement could have on their academic careers because of the time and energy diverted from more traditional academic pursuits such as research.

The research also suggests that both formal and informal academic initiatives in residences should be explored. Currently academic initiatives in most residence communities are implemented on an ad hoc basis with no apparent unifying purpose. Such initiatives are often provided by various student services as an adjunct, outside of both the residence system and the classroom. This situation may contribute to the lack of enthusiasm on the part of faculty members to become involved and the perceived disinterest by students in formal academic programs in residences. If more faculty were to become involved, students may be more willing to participate in such programs. In addition, creating an academic culture in residences through increased academic initiatives and systematic faculty involvement may have a positive impact on retention rates. After their first year, many students often move out of residence in order to live in an environment more conducive to studying. Thus, creating an academic culture could motivate students to remain in residence longer.

The current disinterest in formal academic programs in residences underscores the perception by faculty and students alike that learning can only take place in the structured environment of a classroom. Yet, increasingly individuals are being required to engage in lifelong learning in order to cope effectively with change. The concept of lifelong learning implies that learning occurs in a variety of formal and informal ways and is not limited to the fulfilment of degree requirements. Moreover, informal learning experiences often enhance the learning from structured activities. Even business organizations recognize the need for continuous development of their employees and seek to create a culture of learning (Senge, 1990). Should institutions of higher learning not assume the responsibility for developing such skills in their residential students? The findings of this research reveal that most of the academic programs in place across the country are initiated by administrators rather than by students. Even peer systems such as the Living to Learn program are initiated and organized by residence administrators. The lack of complete student ownership of such programs may limit the extent to which these programs can be successful. Rather than exclusively implementing structured programs, administrators should allow scope for innovative, student-driven programs in response to student needs. Institutions of higher learning should be seeking to empower their students to initiate some programs themselves, with administrators and faculty assuming the roles of facilitator and mentor.

Notes

¹ Copies of all instruments used in this research may be obtained from the authors.

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