

Room and Board Redefined

Trends in Residence Halls



A place to sleep, a desk for studying, and a dining hall nearby. Until recently, students at colleges and universities in the U.S. had modest expectations for dormitory life. And dormitories have lagged behind other developments on campus and in American society overall. Considering all the social, technological, economic, environmental, and political changes that have occurred in the past few decades, it's interesting to note that many colleges and universities still have dormitories with shared restrooms.

That picture is changing, however, as schools compete for students and respond to a new level of student expectations. Institutions are asking questions about what their dormitories should be. Are they places to sleep? Socialize? Eat? Attend class? Meet with advisors? Are they dormitories, residence halls, apartments, or living-learning communities?

As colleges and universities deal with a blurring of the distinctions between dormitories and other facilities on campus, they are also wrestling with several trends that are shaping the discussion. Students don't learn only in class between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. They don't only study in libraries, and they don't just sleep in dormitories.

Surprisingly, many undergraduate students have never shared a bedroom or bathroom before coming to college. They want their own things in their own spaces. And they are used to leading busy academic, extracurricular, cyber, and social lives.

In addition, responding to the societal and education shifts, college and university housing officers are also

working to address shifts in the student population. Many colleges and universities are building residence halls as much as to attract students as to house them.

The Social Side of Today's College Life

People are social creatures, and learning is a social activity that occurs in many places beyond traditional classrooms. Campuses continue to reflect this. Community areas mingled among classrooms and lecture halls, small cafés spread throughout campuses, and lounge areas in libraries all support the social nature of learning.

Because learning is a social activity, students need environments that provide both formal and informal means for socializing and learning. And yet a desire for privacy still exists. Time alone to refresh is essential. Residence halls need to respond with choices that support both community and privacy. Giving maturing college students freedom and independence continues to be an important part of the college experience. At the same time, residence halls must provide enough structure to help new and transferring students make a smooth transition to college life.

“Any space on campus can be a learning space, and that includes residence halls,” says Jeff Vredevoogd of Herman Miller, Inc.’s Education Solutions group. “The intersection where people, place, and pedagogy come together is where possibilities for learning best take place.” This intersection is a mix of characteristics that define the design as well as the spirit of the place. “Effective learning spaces, including those found in residence halls, are adaptable, social, healthful, stimulating, resourceful, and sustainable,” says Vredevoogd.¹

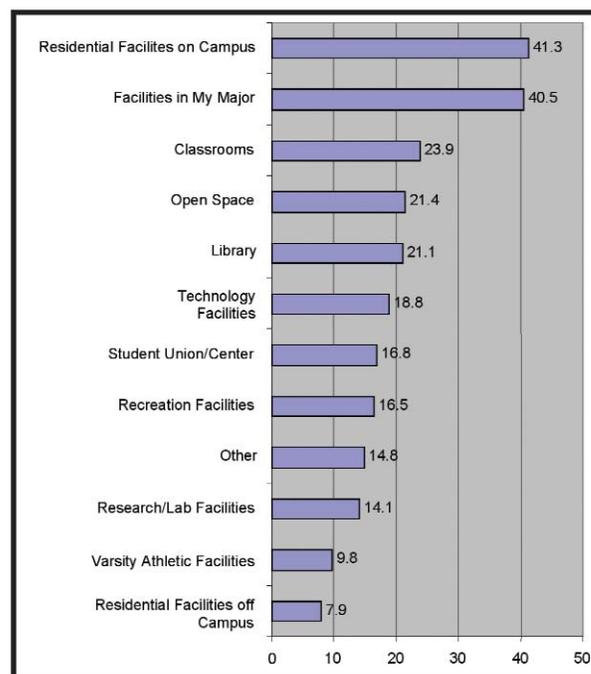
The Impact on Attracting and Keeping Students

When it comes to attracting freshmen, the residence hall plays a significant role in a student’s decision. APPA’s Center for Facilities Research (CFaR) recently surveyed college students across the U.S. to measure the impact facilities play in the recruitment and retention of students. Residential facilities ranked second in importance during pre-enrollment visits, second only to facilities related to specific majors. Along with facilities related to majors, libraries, technology, and classrooms, residential facilities round out the most influential facilities in the decision process.

On the other side of the coin, residential facilities that weren’t satisfactory became even more important in the decision process. “Poorly maintained or inadequate residential facilities” was the number one reason for rejecting enrollment at an institution,

according to the survey.² The stakes are high, then, for an institution to maintain up-to-date and pleasant residence halls.”

Inadequate Facility at Rejected Institution (%)



David Cain & Gary Reynolds. March/April *Facilities Manager* 2006. Used with permission from APPA.

The residential experience is what helps link students to the university community,” says Michael Coakley, Arizona State University’s executive director of residential life. A majority of students who drop out of school during their first or second years, Coakley states, attribute their leaving to “an unsatisfactory housing experience.”³

The living-learning community model is in part a response to attrition among upperclassmen. There is growing recognition that when upper-class students move off campus, much more goes with them than room-and-board dollars. Janice Kassman, vice president of student affairs and dean of students at Maine’s Colby College, says “seniors are our best product; they give back to underclassmen, both inside and outside the classroom.”⁴

“The presence of juniors and seniors on campus contributes to the social and academic health of the school,” says Tom Gibson, assistant vice president of auxiliary and business services at Pennsylvania State University.⁵ The first phase of Penn State’s Eastview Terrace, which eventually will be a large, four-acre complex, is a quadrangle for upperclassmen only. Gibson knows that upgrading housing facilities is one of the ways Penn State competes and retains its overall reputation as a leader among U.S. research and undergraduate institutions.⁶

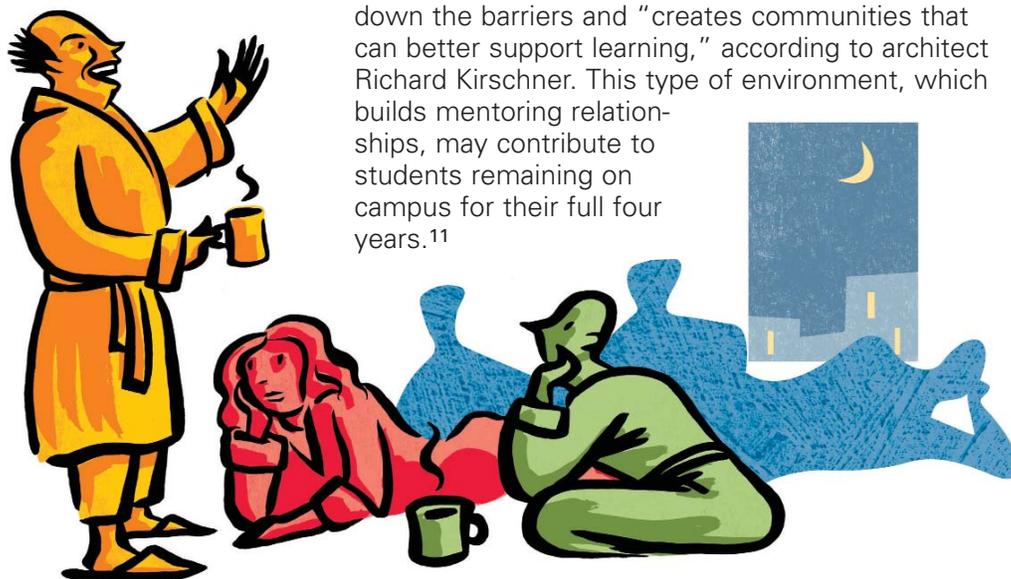
Residence halls play a role in keeping students engaged, as well. Architect Christopher Hill writes about institutions creating independent living environments to retain upper-class students on campus. Common spaces, single-room apartments, and full kitchen facilities are some of the amenities upper-class students are looking for in off-campus housing. So is independence. Colby College has recently opened a seniors-only residence hall, which includes perks and privileges unique to the senior residents.

Retaining upperclassmen on campus is a difficult issue to resolve, says Jane Wright, CEO and president of architectural and design firm Hanbury, Wright, Vlattas, and Evans. "It's natural for students at age 18 to enter a school and accept its terms and conditions. And it's natural for older students to grow into independent adults and seek ways to attain that independence." But, Wright continues, flight among upperclassmen depletes underclassmen of exposure to diverse age groups and behaviors and of mentoring opportunities and shared experiences within the residence halls.⁷

The Benefits of Blending Living and Learning

Creating spaces that blend living and learning takes more than an emphasis on keeping upperclassmen on campus. Deborah Bickford, associate provost for Academic Affairs and Learning Initiatives at the University of Dayton puts it this way:

"When we designed Marianist Hall Learning Space and also ArtStreet, we knew that we wanted to focus on creating spaces in which students and faculty could interact with each other as co-creators of learning. We didn't want to perpetuate the unfortunate separation of learning and living, and we didn't want to create yet another "living and learning" residence hall consisting of a traditional residence hall with a classroom or two attached. We wanted to create space and furnishings that represented an invitation for students and faculty to bump into each other, an invitation to work collaboratively in an environment that says, 'We respect learners and their need for comfortable, attractive, flexible space.'"⁸



Blurring of the lines between living and learning is creating opportunities for communities to emerge that expand learning and social benefits. Some residence halls go beyond connecting students by including faculty and graduate students in the facilities as well. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) outlines its vision for creating interaction between faculty and students through a residential setting.

The issue of faculty and staff housing is critical both for MIT's competitive situation and for the creation of a lively community on the MIT campus. Given the time pressures experienced by both students and faculty members, informal interaction is more likely to occur among faculty members and students who live near one another. All new student on-campus residential construction and renovation includes provisions for increased faculty housing.⁹

Norb Dunkel, director of housing at the University of Florida, sees the attraction students have to living and learning in both formal and informal ways within the residence hall community. A new complex under construction at the university will be an honors residence hall and include living space for faculty and students, faculty offices, classrooms, and areas for academic advisors, tutoring, small group study, library space, and activities.

"The academic piece of the college campus is being integrated into this residential community," says Dunkel. Students are excited about the design intent, he says, of having faculty not only "live there, but have offices there and teach them, and talk to [students] at night."¹⁰

The blending of living and learning, particularly when faculty and students reside together, helps to break down the barriers and "creates communities that can better support learning," according to architect Richard Kirschner. This type of environment, which builds mentoring relationships, may contribute to students remaining on campus for their full four years.¹¹

Amenities That Add to the Allure

Residence hall living/learning spaces should comfortably fit the people who occupy them and sustain their well-being. To create these healthful spaces, colleges and universities are applying what is known about the effect of space on the mind and the body. As they renovate or build new buildings, they are providing more natural light, choosing materials that improve indoor air quality, selecting furnishings designed to support the body, and providing training on how to adjust them.

Colleges and universities are finding that these and other amenities are essential to the appeal a campus has for prospective students—and for their parents. While students want a campus living experience that features the “comforts of home,” their parents are just as concerned about where their sons and daughters will live.

Baby boomer parents are more involved in their children’s lives than previous generations of parents. They insist on getting the most value—in terms of comfort, safety, and convenience—for the dollars they spend. “Parents are demanding nicer and safer campus housing for their children . . . and they expect more as bills rise.”¹²

The amenities students expect go well beyond carpeted rooms and kitchenettes on every floor. They are moving into their dorm rooms with much more than leftover furniture from home. Today, they come to campus with their own computers, printers, gaming systems, TVs, MP3 devices, cell phones, printers, and other “essentials” that they have integrated into their lives. Many of those essentials require connectivity. Internet access through wireless connections—considered an extra not long ago—is now a basic necessity. In fact, according to *College Planning and Management* magazine, 100 percent of residence halls built in 2000 had Internet access within students’ rooms.

Students are asking for more than just technology. Laundry facilities, air conditioning, and security systems are also givens today. Fitness rooms, satellite dining facilities, coffee shops, and convenience stores are routinely considered for new construction projects. Common spaces for socializing and studying are becoming abundant.

These common spaces blend relaxing and studying. They are places much more in line with the multi-tasking nature of students. Among other ideas, the ACUHO-I’s 21st Century Project, an effort to design a prototype residential facility for the future, is exploring shifting walls that let students create more community or personal space.¹³ While these trends

address the collaborative nature of study, they also enrich the student experience. Giving students spaces that work for the ways they live and learn is at the core of innovative building design.

Providing these features as well as upgrading the infrastructures of aging dorms come with a hefty price tag. Nearly 60 percent of housing officers said upgrading dorms is a major problem, and 41 percent state they’ll be doing just that within five years. The median cost for a residence hall being constructed today is \$20 million, about \$171 per square foot.¹⁴

Cost and Size of Residence Halls	
<i>(Results from a survey of 46 residence halls currently underway)</i>	
<i>All figures shown are medians</i>	
Total Cost	\$19,600,000
Construction Cost	\$15,096,500
Furniture and Furnishings	\$770,000
Fees	\$1,967,750
Size of Project (square feet)	105,000
Number of Students	357
Square Feet per Student	339
Cost per Student	\$56,449
Cost of Furnishings per Student	\$2,157
Cost per Square Foot	\$171.44

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Sustainability and Campus Housing

Sustainable design will continue to be an important planning characteristic. It has become so much more than “paper, plastic, and glass” containers by the back door. There are two reasons why.

First, students and faculty alike are more aware and concerned than ever about environmental issues. In a recent study, concern for “improved health and well-being” was the most critical social reason for constructing sustainable buildings on campuses.¹⁵

The second reason ties to an emerging realization of the fiscal advantages of sustainable construction. In the same study, “operational cost decreases” resulting from green construction was cited as the most important trigger to faster adoption of sustainable school buildings. Slightly higher first costs are quickly recouped through energy savings.

These savings become even more important because the cost of college housing will continue

to rise, particularly if student numbers decrease. But students can and will bear only so much of the rising costs. Designing efficient and cost-effective facilities will help control operational costs. According to the U.S. Green Building Council, sustainable technology can save a university “20 to 50 percent off their energy bill after heating, cooling, and lighting thousands of dorm rooms.”¹⁶ In addition, building codes and tax incentives will continue to drive environmentally responsible construction practices.

In some places, a concern for the environment is the reason behind where students choose to live on campus. At Michigan State University, for example, incoming freshmen may participate in the Residential Initiative on the Study of the Environment (RISE). RISE students are housed in Hubbard Hall, where several required courses are taught. This living-learning environment brings students from the several colleges and disciplines together to build a sense of community based on solving environmental problems.¹⁷

But sustainability entails more than green building practices. “The sustainable building is the building people want to keep,” says Jane Wright. “If a building isn’t well designed, it doesn’t create an endearing place, a place that gives a sense of belonging. The social things we talk about are a huge part of the sustainability story.” Places that are vibrant and full of life and of function are sustainable places. The buildings we construct, adds Wright, should “increase students’ energy to the conservation of the earth’s energy.”¹⁸

Planning for adaptive re-use can be another path to sustainable design. Mixed-use, multifunctional residence halls will continue to make sense in the future, as institutions may choose to decrease beds in favor of adding classrooms or social areas, whether to address shifting student populations or facility needs.

Partnering to Meet Changing Needs

While colleges and universities manage 90 percent of their new facilities, some are looking for alternative ways to support the changes that are occurring in residence hall design. They are opting to partner with private management firms to outsource all or parts of the operations work. This outsourcing joins other services, such as food management and cleaning services, which have been contracted for years.

Capstone Development Corporation is one of the largest college housing management firms in the country. The company’s website states that, in the past 10 years, it has developed facilities with over 25,000 beds. Capstone partners with institutions on a variety of levels, from turnkey operations to a joint-management system.

Loft-Right, a private housing complex adjacent to DePaul University’s campus in Chicago, opened its doors in 2006, and is managed by the Scion Group. The plush living arrangements include breathtaking views of the city, private bedrooms, complete kitchen facilities, and bathrooms shared by no more than two students. Costs are around \$1,000 a month per tenant. “You know it’s good when your parents walk in the room and say ‘Can I live here?’” said one new resident of Loft-Right.¹⁹

Yet the residential life experience, according to some, can’t be outsourced successfully. Residential life is part of the culture of a school, and an essential component of a student’s experience. Witold Rybczynski is a writer and professor of urbanism at the University of Pennsylvania. In an essay titled “Good Dorms Make Good Friends,” Rybczynski writes of the unusual building type he calls the dorm. He notes that most new dorm buildings have adopted architecture more like “a typical garden-apartment block or motel,” reflecting “the sad fact that many dorms are becoming more and more like commercial housing. What is gained in comfort and convenience is lost in bland neutrality. That stands in contrast to the unique experience of living in an academic atmosphere that college dorms once represented.”²⁰

The Influence of the Urban Model

The University of Cincinnati’s Main Street project embodies the intersection of people, pedagogy, and place. Referred to as a “student-life complex,” Main Street’s concept follows a community planning model that features an active and vibrant core of mixed-use buildings within the campus community. UC’s Campus Recreation Center brings together a suite-style 224-bed residence hall, a convenience store, a restaurant, and classrooms in one 350,000 square-foot, 24/7 facility.

“Main Street is the fulfillment of a vision to transform the quality of campus life and make our university a better place for students to learn, grow, and play,” says Mitchel D. Livingston, UC vice president for student affairs and services. “These new facilities will make this campus more attractive to prospective students and at the same time ensure more enrolled students are retained to graduation.”²¹

Like the Main Street Project, more and more universities are following the principles of New Urbanism, creating complete residential communities. Large-scale, multi-floor, single-corridor, and single-use dormitories are being converted into, or replaced with, vibrant communities of diverse residents and uses. Interestingly, this model harkens back to earlier

times when faculty and students learned, studied, lived, and ate together.

Emphasis on educating and engaging the whole person and on fostering lifelong learning has been revitalized through the design of the built environment. Such environments intentionally create a sense of place and belonging. "A dormitory is not just a place for students to sleep," says Eva Krebs, vice president of student affairs and dean of students at Pacific University. "Residence halls are living and learning environments where people make their home. They explore and gain self-esteem and find their potential."²² There are many ways that this new breed of residence hall is helping to make that happen.

Pacific University's newest residence hall will house sophomores, juniors, and seniors with a mix of room styles, from shared-bedroom suites for sophomores to private bedroom, apartment-style quarters for upperclassmen. The idea, according to Pacific staff, is to offer more options and choices.²³

Northern Illinois University's Stevenson Hall was built in the 1960s. Typical of that era's construction, the original dorm was large—housing 2,000 students—and filled with built-in furniture. In 1998, it was renovated, the built-in furniture torn out, and many more features added. Privacy was one of them. Increasing the square footage of a double room and reducing the number of students sharing bathrooms address the expectations of current students, most of whom have never shared a bedroom.²⁴

The Stevenson's renovation also includes a central connection area, where students living in the hall's four towers can come together to socialize and study. Part of this public area includes a convenience store, café, and lecture space.

People + Pedagogy + Place = Possibilities

The integration of living and learning, according to Wright, has the opportunity to merge and manifest itself within the residence hall.²⁵ If the learning components aren't considered as important as the living components, the integration weakens. Residence halls can—and should—become that intersection of people, pedagogy, and place, Jeff Vredevoogd believes.

Designing residence halls that add vibrancy, energy, and build a sense of community will increase students' energy, in Wright's words, and enrich their living and learning experiences. How better to nurture a spirit of life-long learning than to weave living and learning into the everyday experiences of students.

To contribute their best to students and the larger community, colleges and universities must enlist

every aspect of the campus experience in promoting learning. That focus needs to include the residence hall. By applying the same thoughtful planning used for other learning spaces to the residence hall, the dorms of the past can become living/learning spaces of the future.

Notes

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