Talking Stick
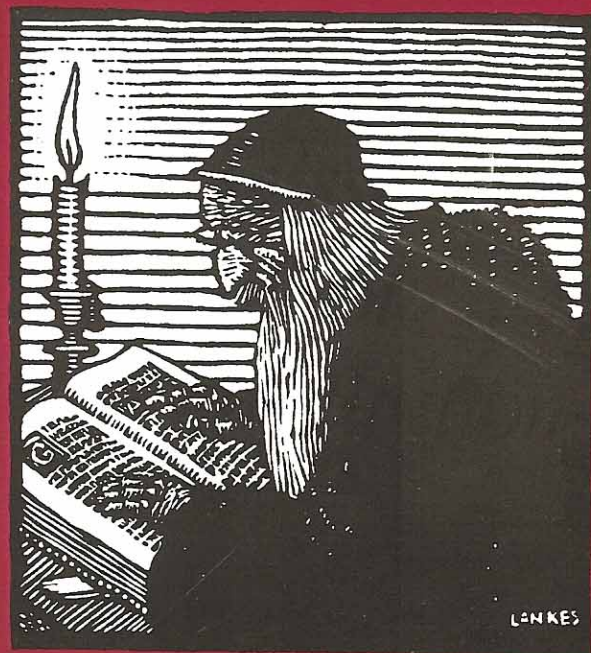
Enhancing student learning

Academic Initiatives

Supporting the academic mission of your institution

LANKES

Designing Residence Hall Facilities to Support Student Learning

Author: Brad Angelini is the Principle of Angelini and Associates Architects in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Introduction

This study and subsequent proposal to transform four traditional residence halls into Living-Learning Centers was generated out of the desire to improve undergraduate education at the University of Michigan. The consolidation of the four individual dining facilities in these buildings provided the 50,000 square feet of "found space" that made this proposal a possibility. The process that we developed during the study can be applied to both large and small campuses. The study was completed in two phases over three years. The first phase of the project developed a visual and verbal set of design guidelines that describes a Living-Learning residence. The second phase was to use these guidelines as a basis for the transformation of four traditional residence halls into a living-learning community.

The renovation and reconfiguration of the four residence halls that surround a student playing field on the central campus was promoted by the goal, "to expand and enhance the Living-Learning opportunities at the University of Michigan." Currently the ground floors of these halls have outdated dining facilities that are not able to efficiently provide the variety and quality of food that today's students desire. A proposal to build a new central dining hall and eliminate the outdated facilities in each hall, provided an opportunity to expand the support facilities for future living-learning programs in the abandoned spaces. As the project developed, phase two expanded to include the campus area around the halls which consisted of playing fields, an athletic complex, a graduate student apartment building, three academic buildings with research facilities, an observatory, and a proposed dining facility. This "campus neighborhood" which integrates these elements was created to support the daily lives of over 2,000 first year students; 400 upperclass students; faculty from multiple departments; and academic, housing, and dining staff. The development of the Hill Neighborhood is a pilot program with the potential of expanding to two other areas of the campus.

Academic Models

The academic model for the study was inspired by Alexander W. Astin's book, What Matters in College (1993). Astin lists 11 environmental factors that enhance educational outcomes. They are the following:

- Student-student interaction
- Student-faculty interaction
- A faculty that is very student oriented
- Discussing racial/ethnic issues with other students
- Hours devoted to studying
- Tutoring other students
- Socializing with other students
- A student body that has a high socioeconomic status
- An institutional emphasis on diversity
- A faculty that is positive about the general education program
- A student body that values altruism and social activism

Not all of Astin's environmental factors translate into physical form, but it was in the spirit of these factors that we proceeded with the design.

A physical model that we looked at was the George W. Johnson Learning Center at George Mason University (VA). Arthur Chickering and John O'Conner in their article, "The University

Learning Center: A Driving Force for Collaboration" (*About Campus*, September-October 1996) state that the center was created in recognition that the key to enhancing learning and personal development is not simply for faculty to teach better but to create conditions that encourage students to integrate academic studies with educationally purposeful activities outside the classroom. For our purposes we defined "outside the classroom" to mean "inside the residence hall."

The Information Gathering Phase: Analysis

A living-learning residence hall is necessarily a very complex building. There are many issues to consider when designing such a community, such as multiple users, mixed-use programming, and public/private overlaps that require careful planning during the information gathering process. This makes the information gathering process a critical phase before planning and design begins. The residence hall design and master plan and its relation to the rest of the campus is determined by a variety of factors including the student body make-up, the philosophy of the housing department, the types of programs offered in the halls, the relationship between housing and other departments such as the academic units, and the relationship with dining services. For this project at the University of Michigan, the information gathering process included a literature search, phone interviews with similar housing departments, and surveys and focus groups of students, faculty, administrators, and staff at the University of Michigan. We considered the students, the faculty, the administrators, and the staff, including the maintenance staff, as building user groups. Each group has specific and valuable information to contribute to the design process.

Synthesis: The Program (Real) and Design Guidelines (Ideal)

The next part of the process was to assemble the background information into a written document of facility requirements or program requirements. This is a description of the size of each room, the activity or function of each room, the furnishings and equipment, and which rooms should be adjacent to each other. This written document is reviewed by all of the original user-groups to see that everything is covered. Simultaneously, while the program document was being written we were drawing and writing the design guidelines document.

The design guidelines are ideal room plans and written recommendations that describe the perfect living-learning-residence hall without the constrictions of budget, size, conflicting program requirements, site restrictions, or even gravity. This is an important step in the process of creating a new building type so those concepts do not get lost in the difficulties of designing a real building. These guidelines serve as a quick reference while considering the feasibility of renovating an existing residence hall or designing a new living-learning community.

The Physical Environment: Four Components

The study and subsequent plans that were produced identified four complementary environments that make up the students' experience. They are: the neighborhood, the public academic spaces, the semi-public residential spaces, the students' rooms.

The Neighborhood. A campus neighborhood, like a city neighborhood, should provide the services necessary for every-

Designing Residence Halls (cont.)

day living—a place to live, a place to shop, and a place to play. The neighborhood should be comfortable, familiar and safe. The development of the campus neighborhood concept was a design breakthrough that had social, academic, aesthetic, and financial benefits. The largest social and academic benefit comes from the very structure of a living-learning program. The strength of a living-learning program is that it clusters people with similar goals and academic interests. This also can be a weakness in that because of common themes, it has the potential to cloister likeminded students away from the rest of the University. The neighborhood concept provides the opportunity for first year students in living-learning programs to enjoy the benefits of the familiar and the excitement of the unknown (the larger University). A shared academic community provides an environment for students in different programs and with different backgrounds to live and learn together; cross-fertilization of interests, backgrounds, and ideas provides the environment for a dynamic living experience.

The neighborhood concept groups adjacent residence halls together. These halls share amenities such as places to eat, places to play and exercise, classes and study areas, common academic support services, and social facilities. The sharing of facilities such as dining hall, computer labs, classrooms, and an auditorium makes available amenities that no one residence hall could afford to provide.

The four residence halls that are proposed as living-learning halls are just northeast of and less than a 10-minute walk to the center of campus, the Diag. These halls are aligned on a hill overlooking Palmer Field, an athletic field the size of two football fields with a track and tennis courts. The halls face away from campus and sit on the hill so that the front entry is one story higher than the back or Palmer Field entry. It is on the back or lower level, facing central campus, that the academic facilities will replace the dining facilities (see site plan). In addition to the four halls there is a large indoor athletic facility, an astrological observatory, a graduate student apartment building, three academic colleges and their research facilities, and a proposed central dining hall all located in close proximity to each other (see Figure 1).

The differing style of each hall's architecture, the large scale,
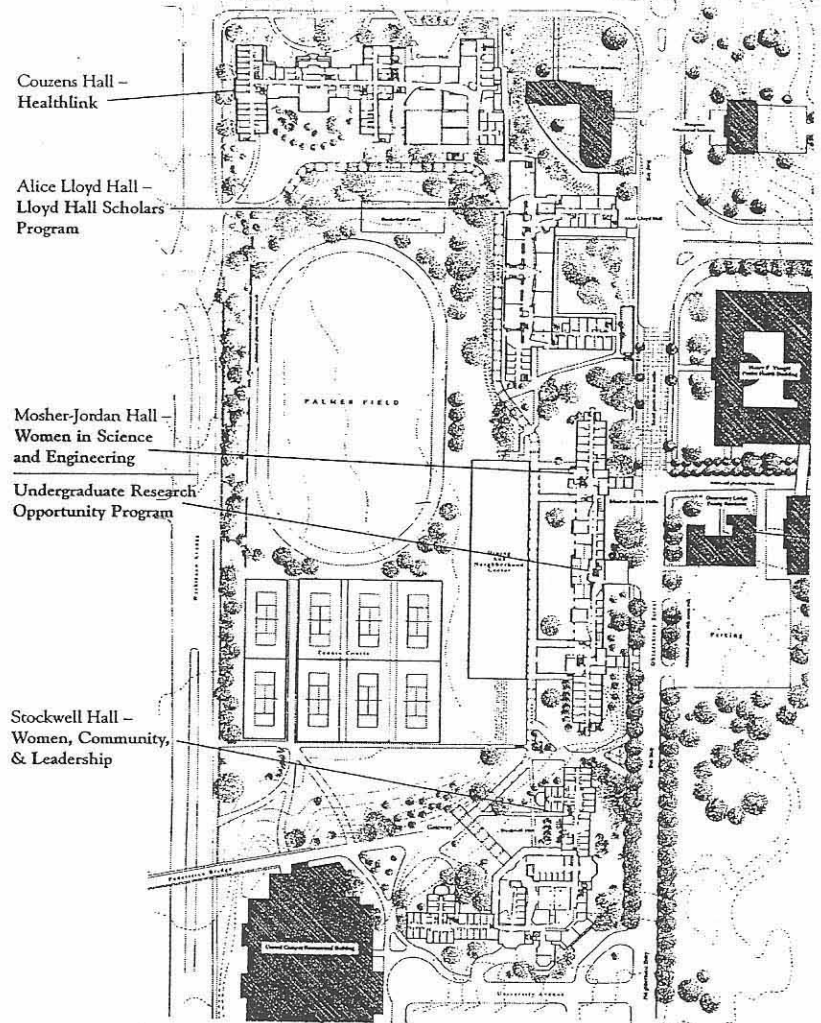

THE HILL AREA NEIGHBORHOOD

Couzens Hall –
Healthlink

Alice Lloyd Hall –
Lloyd Hall Scholars
Program

Mosher-Jordan Hall –
Women in Science
and Engineering

Undergraduate Research
Opportunity Program

Stockwell Hall –
Women, Community,
& Leadership

Figure 1. Site plan drawn by Justin Hall.

the physical relationship (in a line on the hill), and the individual programming isolated these halls from each other. Reprogramming the halls as living-learning communities required a stronger physical relationship among them. Additionally, the facility requirements identified on the wish list during the information gathering phase, such as large meeting rooms, advising and tutoring centers, and faculty support services, would put the project out of reach financially if each hall had all the amenities. By implementing the neighborhood concept the halls share facilities, staff, and resources.

The design for the neighborhood needed a bold feature to bring the disparate elements together. A 1,300-foot pedestrian arcade became the main street that ties the community together. This covered and potentially heated, but not enclosed, circulation path connects the halls without compromising hall security or interrupting cross circulation paths. Residents and visitors will use this street to get from hall to hall and to the new dining facility. Aesthetically, the arcade ties the halls together (see Figure 2).
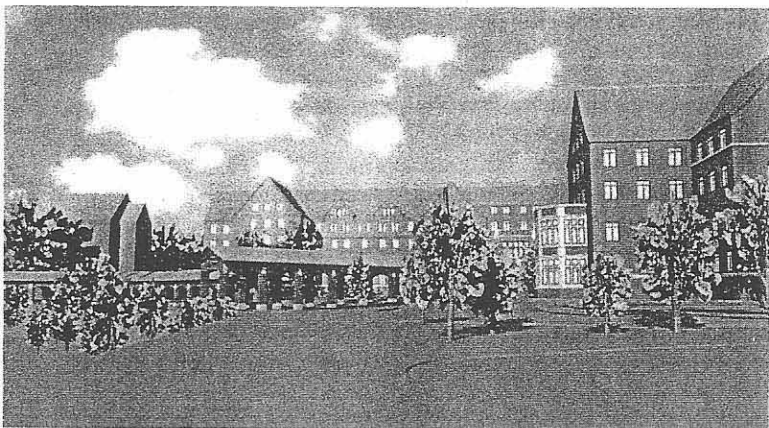

Figure 2. View of the arcade in front of Stockwell Hall. Computer Modeling and rendering by Eric Romano.

Designing Residence Halls (cont.)

Public Academic Spaces. The academic spaces should be designed so that they are easily accessible both to students who live in the building and for students from other buildings. Visitors should have direct access into the academic areas without going through the residential areas. The Hill Residence Halls are designed so that the public academic spaces are on the lower walkout level. Students from other parts of the campus have access to the academic spaces directly from the pedestrian arcade. Within the four halls the academic facilities include classrooms for a variety of class sizes; meeting and lounge rooms; workrooms; art studios; four libraries and four computer rooms; and faculty, administrative, and counseling offices. Again, because the halls share these facilities, students benefit from the variety and diversity of the programmed spaces.

Semi-public Residential Spaces. During the first phase of this study, we also looked at a residence hall on another part of campus to see if it too also could be transformed into a living-learning community. We concluded that because of issues of handicapped accessibility this renovation would be too costly. During the process we did study the halls on campus that students favored. The most popular halls tended to be the older ones. These buildings are likely to have wood paneled public spaces, varied ceiling heights, oddly shaped rooms, and floors that do not match the ones above or below them. Based on these observations we proposed some informal design guidelines.
• Well-designed residence halls give the student a feeling of individuality and a sense of place.
• Residence halls should not be defensible cold buildings, but should foster a sense of community, ownership, and belonging.
• Residence halls should offer spaces with a human scale and spaces that are variable.
• The building should be filled with light and provide views to the outside.
• The best circulation should be a series of nodes or spaces that can allow for informal social gathering opportunities. Well-formed circulation paths become opportunities for casual meetings, conversations, and play.

Students' Rooms. The student's room is a very important component of the environment in the living-learning community. While at school, the room is the core of the student's home. As such, the room plays important functional as well as symbolic roles. The student's room provides a means of self-expression, a place to find privacy, a retreat from the outside world. The multiple facets of the student room are important to recognize in making design decisions.

Currently, in residence hall design there is a move towards suites, smaller clusters of students, and more singles. This may be popular but may prove to work against the development of the larger floor community. Easy access to peers and sharing space and experiences with roommates are important for first year students. On the other side, students do need time to themselves. Because of this, it is important to design a room that can be personalized and can be arranged to provide privacy. This is achieved through the shape of the room and types of furnishings used. In a recent survey we conducted at the University of Michigan more than 90% of the students selected an "L" shaped room layout. Two "L" shaped rooms side by side occupy the same amount of space
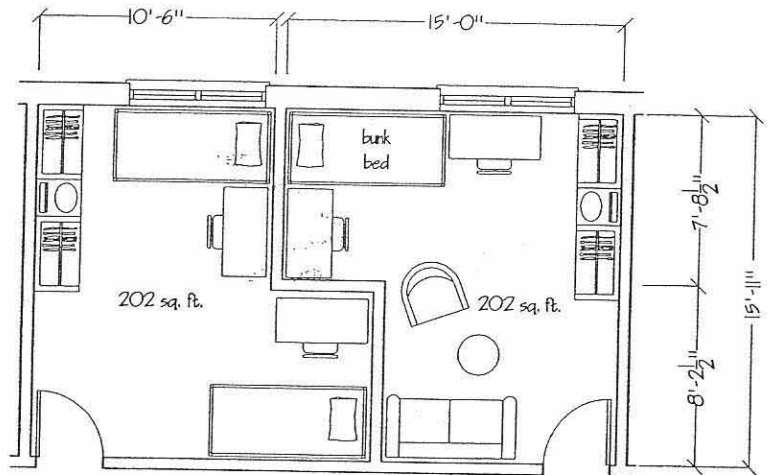

Figure 3. "L" shaped student rooms fit together to form a rectangle and occupy the same space. Plans drawn by Andres U. Cortes.

as two rectangular rooms (see Figure 3). Additionally, you can insert a shared bathroom between the rooms to complete the rectangle (see Figure 4). The "L" shaped layout in conjunction with furniture that is modular and can be stacked and assembled in a variety of ways provides a lot of flexibility. Students can arrange their room into public-private spaces, study-sleep spaces, or two sleeping areas, with varieties in each of these options. Other recommendations that we found from the survey were:
• Student rooms should have sinks.
• Students should be able to control the temperature in their rooms.
• Windows should also be operable, preferably as an upper transom for safety.
• Students should be able to paint their rooms, selecting from a variety of colors supplied by the residence hall staff.
• The walls should be made of a material or in a way that students can hang posters, artwork, and bulletin boards on it.
• Rooms must be designed to accommodate the growing number of electrical appliances.
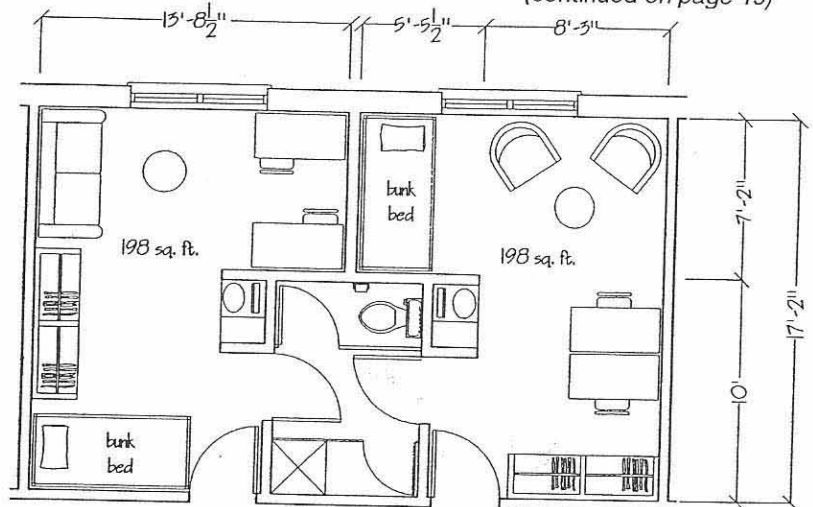• Design rooms to maximize storage.

Figure 4. "L" shaped student rooms with a shared bathroom. Plans drawn by Andres U. Cortes.

Reinventing Our Approach to Staffing for Student Learning

Authors: Fred Fotis is the Director of University Housing at Pennsylvania State University in University Park. David Butler is the Director of Housing at the University of Delaware, Newark.

The Context

It has been said that the only thing higher education finds more difficult than the concept of change, is rapid change. Like many other institutions in our society, the past 30 years have forced major changes on higher education. In 1969, personal computers, fax machines, and cable television were nearly nonexistent on our campuses, our administrative processes were largely done by hand, and "information technology" was a phrase from science fiction. In 1969, affirmative action programs had just started to impact enrollments, students had become politically active in a variety of social problems (racial issues, women's issues, the environment, the war in Vietnam), even though one had to be 21 to vote. In the past 30 years, higher education has retrenched, then experienced growth. It has created new majors and research, built new campuses, renovated buildings, sought to teach in more diverse voices (this can be argued), and embraced the new technology. At the same time, it has responded marginally to requests for more accountability, hung on to the concept of tenure, and (many would say) not significantly changed its fundamental approach even though there have been radical changes in the population it serves.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s we created "residence hall communities" with the goals of bringing people together, complementing classroom learning, and amplifying the stages of human development. We discovered several challenges, many of which are still present today:

1. Student development was the foundation of all residence hall programs. Our best developmental tool was RA programming. It did not need much funding, and while students came only if dragged or hungry, we knew that if we did programming students would learn from it.

2. RAs were concerned about being "enforcers" and reported they could not be effective in their "teaching" responsibilities if they were "cops." It was getting harder to get the best students to become RAs.

Designing Student Rooms (cont.)

Conclusion

The planning and design of a new or renovated residence hall is different for each college or university. The physical, programmatic, and financial requirements in conjunction with the building users will shape a building unique to the campus. It is the process that we used at the University of Michigan, not the final design, that can be useful to other colleges and universities. The information gathering and program synthesis phase, before any physical lines were drawn, is a process that can be applied by all institutions. The inclusion of the four user-groups: the students, faculty, administration, and staff in the programming process provides a body of information that is valuable in setting the foundation and guiding future design decisions. This process brings out many opinions and conflicting priorities, but in all of this one goal is clear: The residence hall should provide a safe well-maintained environment where each student is able to fulfill his or her intellectual, social, and spiritual potential.

> *Action is needed on many fronts. We cannot continue to use 30-year-old practices if we are to address current issues.*

3. Maintenance problems were not easily solved, and staff believed they did not have enough to say in renovations and furniture selection.

4. Faculty involvement was important to a successful residence hall program, but only a few faculty could find time beyond research and teaching to participate.

5. Enrollment determined both occupancy levels and budgets and we felt we could not do much to impact occupancy.

6. Residence hall staff did not believe they were valued by upper administration and faculty.

7. There was no sound way to measure our impact on student learning, nor to demonstrate our value to our institutions.

Considering our situation today in light of the above list, we find new meaning in the phrase: "The more things change, the more they stay the same."

The students of 30 years ago, for whom we created residence hall communities, had many descriptors:

1. They did not mind sharing a bedroom, or the bathrooms. (They did at home.)

2. Few had cars, and not many worked off campus.

3. They viewed the campus as a safe place where crime did not happen. They were generally right.

4. Students respected authority and rarely complained. With their families, they generally accepted room assignments, bills, and service levels.

5. They spent little time watching TV, and their critical tools were typewriters and stereos.

6. Students got involved in hall government knowing it would make them better leaders.

Do those descriptors still fit today's residents?

Our Progress?

Given the major changes of the past 30 years, how is it possible our profession remains so wrapped up in the status quo? As a profession, have we been stuck in day-to-day functions and, therefore, remarkably insulated from the changes around us?

Today's residents question authority (in both appropriate and inappropriate ways) and are more informed consumers. Their parents have specific expectations for their room and board dollars. Today's residents seem to have little interest in our programs, with many believing they possess a complete set of established values/standards, and do not want us to challenge them in any manner. At the same time, we have some students who are excited about learning, hungry for dialogue and new ideas, and interested in volunteerism and service. Students, with their different needs, present our biggest challenge. Will we step up to the task it if means we have to change?

Today, and for most of our history, the group who deals at the most basic level with our residents, and all their accompanying issues, is our student staff. Their function and training has changed little. The positions are no longer as competitive nor

Reinventing Our Approach (cont.)

prestigious, and the basic duties have remained unchanged. We know student staff need to address the living-learning needs of the students, but does it make sense to place this critical role on the shoulders of staff with the longest position descriptions, the least hours of work required, and the lowest level of life experience and training? Do student staff members really need to be a jack of all trades, or can we identify the one, two, or three most important things they do, and make those their focus (and give them the resources they require to accomplish those things)? Most importantly, we need to ask the very question which most frightens us: Are student staff positions truly the best way to use our resources to impact student learning? Although our best professional judgment, instinct, and our concern over liability and risk, will tell us student staff is a key component of our residence hall operations, we have little quantifiable information to support our belief that staffing truly impacts on student learning.

We have been a profession that has functioned on instinct, testimony, anecdotal information, feelings, and the implicit knowledge that our residents need us, and no one else can fill the void, at least we hope that is the case. If we care about students, believe a college experience is about learning, and believe we can be an important part of the total college learning experience, do we have the strength and conviction it takes to address the difficult questions?

A Call to Action

Action is needed on many fronts. We cannot continue to use 30-year-old practices if we are to address current issues. Our resource management, both money and people, must improve; the faculty must step up and provide more leadership for our residential learning based programs to be successful.

As caring professionals who believe in our role in the education process, we urge you to face the following issues, consider whether these suggestions move us in the right direction, and act to address the following challenges:

1. Address the issue of student staffing with a zero based approach, clearly identifying resident learning needs and determining the type of staff needed to meet those needs. Consider: How do students learn? What do/should students learn through residence hall living? Which of our current philosophies/emphases/goals best support student learning?

2. See learning as our focus, address the following provocative and nontraditional considerations to more carefully examine our current approaches and make room for new focus. (Note: A September 1998 *Talking Stick* article reviewing initial information from the ACUHO-I Benchmarking Survey found residents identifying many of our traditional residence hall emphases (staffing, programming, etc.) as having no impact on their overall satisfaction).

If an RA student staff position is still crucial, make it more workable for full-time students.
• Eliminate as many administrative functions as possible. Eliminate any facilities responsibilities from the position.
• Eliminate the judicial/disciplinary functions of the position.
• Eliminate all programming responsibilities except social/interactive programs.
• Focus exclusively on our student staff/RAs facilitating a sense of belonging.
• Use campus emergency personnel to deal with emergencies.
• As a multifaceted enterprise, hire staff with different training and experiences to work on different aspects of our functions.

• Carefully weigh the positives and negatives for out-sourcing some information to refocus staff resources on student learning.

3. With learning as our focus, supervise staff with a clear demand for results. Staff will learn from getting results, but their learning must not be our main focus. Students are our charge, our customers, and our main focus.

4. We cannot continue to ignore our need for a thorough, deliberate and complete assessment of the way we do business. This assessment needs to be all-inclusive: reviewing job titles and functions, the organizational structure, how resources are assigned, how we prioritize; and determining both what our residents, and institutions need, and how we can focus our emphasis on learning (if that is our goal). A necessary question in this review would be: "Do our student staff positions impact on learning?" We cannot continue to assume our current way of doing business really works for today's students. Additionally, we cannot continue to remain totally focused on our day-to-day operations, giving the excuse we do not have the time, energy or resources to be introspective, and to plan.

It is not possible to be introspective and to plan without good data. Good data can provide an accurate picture of our residents' needs, a way to consider what is being done in other residence hall programs, and an understanding of the "effective practices" in our profession. We need to begin continuous, credible, comprehensive data collection, and analysis, to create and implement sound improvement plans. We need to ask those hard questions, carefully look at those things we may hold dear, determine if they have impact we require, and act accordingly. We are responsible for taking the first steps on our home campuses. Trusting that our profession does make a difference, and knowing we have the talent in our profession to be a documented part of the student learning experience, we encourage you to become part of the commitment to continually improve.