Residence Halls as Learning Communities: Residential Life and SUNY Brockport's Mission, 1960s - 2001

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Dr. O’Brien
According to the State University of New York College at Brockport's Mission Statement, the college

is committed to providing a liberal arts and professional education -- at both the undergraduate and graduate level -- for those who have the necessary ability and motivation to benefit from high quality public higher education; Has the success of its students as its highest priority, emphasizing student learning, and encompassing admission to graduate and professional schools, employment, and civic engagement in a culturally diverse society and in globally interdependent communities; and is committed to advancing teaching, scholarship, creative endeavors, and service to the College community and the greater society by supporting the activities of an outstanding faculty and staff.

These ideals have been woven into many areas of the college. One area that plays a major role in the development of students academically, professionally, and socially is the residence hall. Over the past 40 years, Residential Life at SUNY College at Brockport has continuously improved the residence halls to complement the college's mission on education.

The 1960s and '70s

During the 1960s-mid-70s, male and female students lived in single-sex dormitories and were expected to follow all the rules. Visiting hours, curfews, and quiet hours were enforced. If a student in possession of alcohol, he or she would be asked to leave the dormitory and possibly the institution.

The role of the Resident Assistant was equal to that of a hall monitor. It was not a student development position. A Resident Assistant in a female dormitory had to ensure all women were in their rooms by curfew, which was 10:30pm and could not leave the
building until 8am. If a woman wanted to leave her room, even to take a shower, she had to receive permission from her RA. When women did leave the building, they had to sign in and out and inform the staff where they were going; however, they still had to abide by curfew rules. The Resident Assistants also had to sit duty, ensure that men were not in the building, and on Sunday visitation, when men were allowed, it was the RA’s job to make sure women had their doors open. The Resident Assistant even checked that the female residents made their beds every day. Resident Assistants did not have to do a lot of programming since the Women’s Association handled programming. The main responsibilities of the RA were to inform students of upcoming events, and serve and protect their residents.\(^1\) In away, the RA was like a housemother. \textit{In loco parentis}, or in place of parents, was the rule of thumb in the residence halls.

The Resident Assistant selection process was radically different than it is today. Dr. Marion Shrank, who is now the Vice President for Student Affairs at SUNY Brockport, became a Resident Assistant at Brockport in the late 1960s. The process was fairly autonomous and revolved around the current Resident Assistants in the building. The Resident Assistants recognized potential candidates within the building and sent those residents a letter encouraging them to apply for the position. Candidates did not need recommendations from outside sources. The process had one interview with the entire staff from the dorm the resident lived in (about 9 staff members) and the candidate either got the job or did not.

As SUNY Brockport headed into the 1970s, alcohol became more prevalent on

\(^1\) Marion Shrank, interviewed by Nicole Campanali, (8 November 2001).
campus as the national social climate changed. The legal drinking age in New York State
was 18, and since the traditional college student was 18, alcohol was allowed on campus.
There was even a bar on campus called the Rathskeller located in the basement of
Seymour College Union. Until 1980, the college and the Brockport Student Government
sponsored “Spring-Ins.” “Spring-Ins,” large parties with music and free beer, were held
annually on campus. “It was plagued with many problems. Local high school students
skipped class to attend the celebration on campus. The ‘Spring-In’ was also marred by a
couple of violent fistfights and a brush fire.”\(^2\) One can only imagine the problems
alcohol caused once it was allowed into the residence halls.

Alcohol became a part of many social programs within the dorms. Faculty
members would host wine and cheese parties and according to Betsy Rosser, who is
currently the Assistant Director of Residential Life/Learning Communities, when
programs were held in Benedict/Dobson, a freshman residence hall, one might expect to
see a large truck filled with beer parked outside the dorm.\(^3\) As the number of
irresponsible drinking incidents rose, more and more students and staff members
complained about living arrangements. Drunken students vandalized many of the dorms,
and even more students complained about the disturbances rowdy, intoxicated students
created.\(^4\) There was a push from student staff members, or Resident Assistants, to create
co-ed dorms to combat the higher vandalism and other incidents taking place in primarily
male residence halls. Rosser explained, “When you mix the two [males and females]
together more stability is created because residents watch each other.” Female Resident

\(^3\) Betsy Rosser, interviewed by Nicole Campanali (7 November 2001).
\(^4\) Betsy Rosser, interviewed by Nicole Campanali (7 November 2001).
Assistants still had the opportunity to work with all female sections in the Lower Quad, which is composed of MacVicar, McFarlane, McLean, and today Thompson. By 1977, all dorms except MacVicar and McFarlane were co-ed.5

Residential Life also tried to separate students by academic status. Many juniors and seniors did not necessarily want to live with 17 and 18 year old freshmen. The high rises and suites gave upperclassmen the option to live amongst others within their class. “Traditional dorms” were also created to accommodate upperclassmen that desired “an alcohol-free environment, no smoking in public areas and special rules for visitors and noise.”6

In 1978, Residential Life created the Progressive Environment and Academic Residence Hall Living Program or PEARL. This program gave students educational opportunities in the dorms; however, it was not implemented in every hall. Students could choose from a variety of living options: single sex option (all male/female sections); Restricted Alcohol option, which made the floor or entire all a “dry” facility; a 24 Hour Quiet option, in which quiet hours would be enforced; and a Wellness option. Students who were interested in the Wellness option would live in Mortimer Hall and have use of the fitness center located in the basement.7 The purpose of PEARL was not only to give serious students living options which would complement their studies, but, as Joe Franek, Jr., Director of Residential Life/Learning Communities explained, to “link up faculty to students, one faculty member per floor, and we did it in the upper quads because the college was not providing the individual caring concern.”8 to students. Senor

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faculty members could provide mentoring and advisement to students in the dorms. Linking faculty and students together was the first step in developing learning communities on the SUNY Brockport campus.

PEARL and similar programs were made possible because the campus was much smaller in the 1970s than it is today. Interaction between faculty and students was greater and more faculty/student get-togethers and dinners took place during these years. It was in the student’s best interest to familiarize him or herself with faculty because almost everyone was a Brockport for the same reason: to be teachers.9

The 1980s

By the 1980s, there were new changes throughout the campus to “help students understand the purpose and reason why they live in the residence halls.10 One of the major social changes to affect Residential Life policies was the change in attitude towards alcohol nationwide. In 1982, a new New York State law changed the drinking age from 18 to 19. This new law, which was passed in response to an increase number of DWI's involving teenagers, affected almost all freshmen. As a result, 29% of the SUNY Brockport student body was not legally underage.11 In order to comply with the new laws, the administration had “no choice but to pass new policy” on alcohol.12

As of December 4, 1982, “new measures were taken by the college to insure that students under the legal drinking age will not be permitted to drink alcohol in any of the

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8 Joe Franek, Jr., interviewed by Nicole Campanali, (7 November 2001).
9 Betsy Rosser, interviewed by Nicole Campanali, (7 November 2001).
schools residence halls.” This new policy became a challenge for Resident Assistants to enforce since the difference between an 18-year-old and a 19-year-old college student is not always obvious. Resident Assistants had to constantly ask for I.D.s, and ask intoxicated people to leave the buildings. Residential Life encouraged event planners not to serve alcohol at on-campus events. Alcohol use was also monitored within the dorms.

“In order to clamp down on underage drinkers, floor party requests must be approved by the RD [Resident Director] and this request must be signed by two students living on the floor and also by their RA. The supervision of the floor party will no longer be just handled by the RA from that floor, but also by an RA from another floor in the dorm. This doesn’t allow for RAs to ‘turn their backs’ and let someone who is underage slip into the party, because another RA will be watching to make sure this doesn’t occur.”

Residential Life wanted to “continue to develop and implement a comprehensive alcohol program to teach students to become responsible drinkers…” Staff met these goals by implementing Alcohol Awareness programs within the residence halls. Many social programs existed without the use of alcohol. During the 1981-82 academic year, there were a total of 535 programs, 242 were social, 181 educational, and only 112 were athletic or recreational. Many of the social programs included drug and alcohol awareness, holiday activities, ice cream socials, and self-defense workshops.

In 1985, New York State once again raised the drinking age to 21. However, it would not be for at least another 10 years before severe sanctions were placed on students for underage drinking in the residence halls.

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13 Sarda, 2.
15 Residential Life, 6.
In the same year, Residential Life created the “First Year Experience” for incoming freshmen. All freshmen that did not live at home with parents were required to live on-campus. The “First Year Experience” was “designed to provide students with a strong foundation for success. In addition to rules limiting smoking and drinking, a special program of student development activities will help you learn such necessary skills as self-discipline, effective study habits and personal finance.” With new alcohol policies and programs like PEARL, and the “First Year Experience” dorms, Residential Life was on its way to transforming SUNY Brockport’s dormitories into Learning Communities.

The 1990s – 2001

During the 1990s, Residential Life began to come closer to a true learning community. A learning community is “designed to create environments that promote greater student involvement, improve faculty-student interaction, and a more supportive peer climate. They are also designed to assist students in integrating diverse curricular and co-curricular experiences.” “The three major requirements for an effective learning community are (1) programs developed to act and react to students’ needs, (2) staffing to foster programs, (3) facilities designed to meet the group’s needs.”

SUNY Brockport’s Residential Life began to implement these aspects in order to

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develop its residence halls into a learning environment in which students could apply
techniques and material learned in the classroom to their living situations. In 1990, three
computer rooms were created in Benedict, Briggs, and McLean. Residential Life’s goal
was to get a computer in every room. Today, Internet access is available for up to two
computers in each resident room. Quiet hours were even expanded on the weekends
from 2am-7am to midnight-7am. "In the residence halls, great emphasis is given to
your right as a student to study in your room, suite, or apartment. The right to study will
be maintained over the right to entertain."  

Consequences for noise violations also became more severe. The first time a
person violated the noise policy, the resident would meet with the RD after staff member
wrote an incident report, and a written warning would follow. If the same resident
violated policy a second time, he or she would be placed on residence hall probation and
mandated to complete community service. The third time a person violated policy, he or
she would be placed on conduct probation and possibly, reassigned to another hall, their
equipment would be stored for the rest of the year, complete community service, and the
resident’s parents would be notified. Residents, however, rarely reach a “level 3.”
Many student staff members do not report noise incidents unless the violation is repeated
often by the same student(s). According to Rosser, there are more pressing issues such as
self-mutilation, attempted suicide, drugs, and alcohol to deal with.  

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21 Office of Residential Life, “SUNY Brockport Residence Hall License: The Terms and Conditions of
College Residence Hall Occupancy 1990-91,” 2.
22 Office of Residential Life/Learning Communities, Alcohol/Substance and Noise Incident Response
Model, (revised July 2000).
23 Betsy Rosser, interviewed by Nicole Campanali, (7 November 2001).
"Many colleges feel that alcohol misuse is the biggest concern on campuses because the federal government pays more attention to the misuse or illegal use of drugs other than alcohol."\(^{24}\) According to Janosik, over the past ten years, the drinking behavior of college students has not changed dramatically\(^{25}\); Brockport is no exception. Severe consequences have been imposed on those caught in underage drinking. Consequences also applied to those who serve minors, and to those who are disruptive under the influence of alcohol. The new alcohol policy that was revised in 1999 states that "(1) possession of alcohol by persons under 21 is prohibited in the residence halls. All freshmen dorms are alcohol free, or 'dry' buildings. (2) Those who bring alcohol on campus are held fully responsible for the use or consumption by themselves or others."\(^{26}\) According to policy consumption of alcohol is also prohibited in common areas, lounges, and hallways. Students are not allowed to bring beer balls, kegs, or multiple quart-containers and games that encourage the consumption of alcohol are forbidden. One minor change to the previous alcohol policy is that students can no longer "display any alcoholic beverage containers, signs, lights or other paraphernalia in residence hall windows or in places visible from outside the residence hall."\(^{27}\) If paraphernalia is found, the consequences are the same as if the resident was in possession of alcohol.

Brockport is now one of the leaders in the nation with their "Two Strikes and You're Out Policy." Only a handful of colleges and universities have this type of policy. According to the Incident Response Model that was revised in July 2000, the first time an

\(^{25}\) Janosik, 506.
\(^{26}\) Office of Residential Life, Alcohol Policy, 1999.
\(^{27}\) Tim Briody, "New Alcohol Policy on Campus," The Stylus, 8 September 1999, 1.
underage student is caught with alcohol, he or she is placed on a “Level 1.” Parents are notified, an alcohol awareness workshop is required, and the student is placed on conduct probation. The second and final level, or a “Level 2,” requires the student to go through a substance screening, their conduct probation is extended, they are restricted from residing in and entering all residence halls, and once again their parents are notified.

Many of the students at Brockport responded positively to the change. It was the students, once again, who advocated “for a stricter policy. Many were tired and frustrated with the disruptions some students created when they consumed too much alcohol... staff was also put into some intolerable positions trying to respond to incidents dealing with alcohol.”

Other schools throughout America changed their alcohol policies in response to on-campus alcohol incidents. In 1998, R.I.T.’s, campus became “damp” because 80% of the students in the residence halls were under the age of 21. Unlike Brockport, R.I.T. focused more on the behavior of their students rather than if they are possession of alcohol. This policy went into effect in 1992 because “administrators said they felt the drinking laws were unenforceable and caused other problems.” Nighttime programs for students also increased during this time. R.I.T. forbade its on-campus Greek system to have alcohol at their parties and the campus bar closed early on weekdays and now on weekends.

The University of Massachusetts’ (UMASS) alcohol policy is similar to Brockport’s. UMASS in 1998 imposed “stricter sanctions for students who violate any of

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28 Joe Franek, Jr., interviewed by Nicole Camparali, (7 November 2001).
the four alcohol prohibitions on campus: possession or consumption of alcohol by anyone under the age of 21; drinking in a public place; possession of a keg or large quantity of alcohol; and dispensing alcohol to a minor... Students charged with less severe violations such as public drinking will have to attend a two-hour alcohol education program, while repeat offenses can lead to removal from student housing. For more serious charges, such as giving alcohol to minors, students can face expulsion from on-campus housing, probation, and even suspension from the university.  

As you can see, Brockport, like many universities, has made an effort to "crack down" on underage drinking. Brockport used to be known as a party school, however, this is not the image the college wants to convey to the public. As a result, stricter penalties were created for those who broke their housing agreement with the college. Every year at check-in, or when a student transfers and chooses to live on-campus, he or she is informed of the alcohol policy. The student is given a pamphlet, which is reviewed with a RA, containing the consequences of underage drinking or possession of alcohol in a "dry" dorm. The student then signs a housing license, which states the rules and regulations within the dorm. A student, whether new or returning, can never say he or she did not know about the alcohol policy if caught.

Another program in the residence halls that was revived was the faculty-in-residence program. In 1999, Residential Life reinitiated this program to link students and faculty to create learning communities. As before, the purpose of the program was to extend the students' academic and cultural experiences at Brockport outside of the

classroom. Faculty in-residence was expected to be involved in the learning community especially in the area of programming. But how effective has this program been? Compared to other colleges and universities, Brockport's faculty does not seem very involved with students and programming.

At San Diego State University, Ryan Schneider, a faculty in-residence, creates and carries out programs that will increase students' academic success. Some of his programs include "Time Management," "Top Ten Tips for Improving Your Writing," and "How to Write the Perfect Paper." A colleague of his holds multicultural potlucks in the dorms.31 Dalene Stangl and Rick Richardson, both faculties in-residence in Bassett Hall at Duke, interact with residents on a regular basis. Some of their activities include monthly dinners with students and other faculty members, cultural events such as trips to symphonies, Duke basketball games, monthly movie nights, small study groups, bake-offs, and swing dance lessons.32 At North Dakota State University, faculty in-residence also hold dinners with faculty and students and other programs like Adopt-A-Faculty, and lecture programs.33 These programs allow students to interact with faculty and thus get to know and become more comfortable with faculty. These programs also develop skills in which students need to succeed in college.

Unfortunately, these types of programs within SUNY Brockport residence halls are not evident. Many of these programs are left to the resident assistants to create and

carry out. Also, few faculties in-residence do take advantage of the office and office hours they can hold within the dorm. However, some faculties in-residence are academic planning advisors. Some hold their Academic Planning Seminars (APS) in the dorm rather than in a traditional classroom setting. Many of these students live in the same dorm their APS instructor lives in. This gives some of the students a better chance to get to know the faculty in-residence, and a valuable resource at hand.

As a result of Residential Life’s attempt to develop the residence halls as learning communities, the role of the Resident Assistant has changed dramatically from the role in the 1960s and 70s. Resident Assistants are now viewed as a leaders and role models within the SUNY Brockport community and responsible for “developing a personal relationship with all residents in the building, student referrals, programming, keeping students informed of campus events, assisting the Resident Director with operation of the facility, check-in/out of students, reporting maintenance concerns, enforcing policies and procedures, sitting duty, doing regular rounds of the building and various administrative tasks.”

Resident Assistants are expected to know how to “deal with suicidal students, criminal violence, drug abuse, rape situations, students with dangerous weapons, racial problems, AIDS, and students who are experiencing mental health problems ranging from depression to schizophrenia.”

Residential Life requires Resident Assistants to take part in pre-semester and ongoing training to learn to deal with these issues. They complete an education class (EDC

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This course along with various workshops help Resident Assistants become aware of contemporary issues many residents may face in the dorms from discrimination to stress, sexually transmitted diseases to eating disorders, and cults to relationships.

As the role and responsibilities of the Resident Assistant has changed, so has the process and the type of student Residential Life looks for in a RA. Academically, students who apply for a Resident Assistant position must be a full time student (carry 12 credits) and have a GPA of 2.5 and maintain that average as long as he or she holds the position. Today, in addition completing an application and submitting two reference letters, which cannot be from a Resident Assistant or a Resident Director, candidates must go through a lengthy interview process. This process includes a one-on-one interview with a Resident Director that the candidate does not know. In order to get a better impression of the candidate, he or she is normally asked questions that do not pertain to the position. The candidate also goes through a group process interview. The point of this is to observe how the candidate works and communicates with others in a group setting. These are important skills a Resident Assistant must possess.

However, there are a number of Resident Assistants that pass this process that are not fully committed to the position. Sadly, many students become Resident Assistants because of the remuneration: free room and partial board. These Resident Assistants are not effective and seldom contribute to the residence hall as a learning community. They fail to enforce policy and fail at motivating students to interact with others and establish a community feeling within their section.
In March of 1980, the Office of Residential Life published in their newsletter, entitled *Promethean*, "research shows that residence hall living has a profound impact on the student: we have an impact on shaping people's lives. Through our programming efforts we have the opportunity to bring many new experiences to the students..." SUNY Brockport's residence halls do have an impact on the students who live in them. Over the past 40 years, Residential Life has made great strides in developing a system that attempts to meet the college's mission on education and student success. Through various programs, rules, and living options, Residential Life has created a relatively safe environment for students to socialize in. There is a lack of participation from a majority of staff members in pursuing SUNY Brockport's mission on education. If SUNY Brockport's residence halls are to become a true learning community in which the development of students' skills and education is the priority, then it is the student staff members who must take the next step. They must create programs that will fit the needs of students as well as manage their floors better.

The type of student attending SUNY Brockport today is very different from the student of the 1970s. Brockport's current president, Paul Yu, and his administration has targeted a more academically focused student who is generally more well behaved than the students of the 1970s and '80s. As a result, vandalism in the dorms has dropped as well as the number of alcohol and drug incidents. However, Residential Life cannot measure the change accurately because they rely on incident reports from student staff members. Many staff members look the other way when students break rules. Often, it is still the complaint of many students that they cannot do their work in their rooms.

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because their neighbors are being too loud. This is an issue that must be addressed. Residential Life has placed the resources at hand for staff members. It is up to them to utilize these resources to fully create a learning community within the residence halls of SUNY Brockport. If Residential Life continues to work on the weaknesses of the residence halls, no doubt they will reach their goal of developing the residential halls into a true learning community.


Bibliographic Essay

The majority of sources I used for this paper were from the College Archives. I only used secondary sources when I compared Brockport to other colleges in New York and throughout the United States. These sources were excellent, however, there was so much information, and I did not know where to begin. My biggest challenge was figuring out exactly what I wanted to do with the material.

I looked at various Stylus articles on new rules, regulations, and programs within the dorms. I also looked at different Brockport Student Handbooks from the 1980s-'90s. These were helpful because if you look hard enough, you can see the change in policy Residential Life was making to accommodate the change of the type of student attending Brockport. I also conducted interviews with Dr. Marion Shrank (Student Affairs), Joe Franek, Jr. (Residential Life), and Besty Rosser (Residential Life). These three people were excellent sources because all have been at Brockport for a number of years. Rosser and Shrank both attended Brockport as undergraduates and held Resident Assistant and Resident Director positions.

I also own some of the primary sources I used because I am a Resident Assistant. I have been collecting various handouts and manuals Residential Life provides RA’s with during training and throughout the school year.

My secondary sources came primarily from books written on residence hall systems and from the Internet. To compare Brockport’s Faculty In-Residence program, I performed a random search of colleges that have this type of program. I felt a random search would give me a better idea of what the national scene looks like rather than picking and choosing colleges to look at.
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