

April 1999 Residence Life Survey Results: The Student Concept of Self-Governance

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This survey was administered by the Office of Student Affairs. It began by asking students' opinions of the existing policy, according to which Residence Life Coordinators (RLCs – young adults with Masters degrees who live in the residence halls) do not enforce rules, but instead serve as a resource to help the students. Responses to this and other questions turned out to provide insight into Grinnell students' concept of student self-governance.

Survey Results

88% say that RLCs should not have responsibility for rule enforcement.

This response pattern is best understood by examining the underlying reasons given.

72% of the reasons given contain the (often implicit) argument that no one should enforce rules.

- We are responsible adults. (30%)
- It would violate self-governance (to have a non-student, or anyone at all, enforcing rules). (16%)
- The absence of rule-enforcers is good practice for life after college. (7%)
- There aren't many problems, so policing isn't needed. (7%)
- It feels more comfortable not to have anyone around who can punish you. (6%)
- The absence of rule-enforcers is an essential feature of Grinnell. (6%)

One additional reason was given that is specific to RLCs and does not indicate whether someone else should enforce rules.

- Students are more likely to seek help from an RLC if they don't fear punishment. (16%)

Those who said RLCs should enforce rules argued that

- There are serious problems, and there would be fewer problems if a non-student enforced the rules. (11%)

When asked what problems in the halls concerned them, almost all students mentioned one or more of the following:

- excessive noise at night
- wild parties with drunkenness and messes
- vandalism, with the guilty parties not taking responsibility
- smoking on non-smoking floors
- violations of bathroom policies
- indecent behavior
- theft of food or kitchen property
- lack of cleanliness
- a general lack of people showing respect for others

Some also complain of resident apathy, an unwillingness to discuss problems, and the difficulty of expressing their concerns about problems and having action taken.

What is important about the RLCs?

- They are available whenever students need them. (77)
- They are (trained) counselors. (56)
- They are friendly, caring, supportive, approachable, good listeners. (49)
- They help solve problems and mediate disputes. (36)
- They provide a safety net in emergencies. (24)
- They have information on issues and policies, and provide a link to the administration. (23)
- What students say to them is confidential. (13)
- They open locked doors and the trunk room. (11)
- They coordinate and support the Student Advisors. (9)
- They promote social bonding in the halls. (4)

When asked about the most valuable aspect of living in the residence halls, almost everyone says it is the opportunity to meet people and socialize.

What Grinnell Students Mean by Self-Governance

The “self” in “self-governance” refers to individuals, not to halls, floors, or the student body as a whole. Its salient feature is an absence of rules and/or rule-enforcement.

It is supported by a belief that rules are not necessary.

- We do not need specific rules to get along with each other.
- The true meaning of self-governance is that we are mature enough to take care of ourselves.
- If we are really going to be self-governing, then we need to take responsibility for our own actions and that does not include having someone tell us what rules to follow and enforcing them.
- Self-governance has little to no meaning behind it when rules governing behavior are applied. An absence of enforced rules increases our responsibility as young adults.
- We need all the autonomy we can get.
- We are old enough to control our own actions and we shouldn't need to be told what to do or not to do.
- I like it that there is no authority figure on the hall. If there were, I might feel a little cramped, like I was being monitored.
- Most rules (particularly drug and alcohol) don't need to be constantly enforced because for the most part nobody is getting hurt or bothered.

Those who think RLCs should enforce rules hold the same individualistic concept of self-governance.

- Sometimes students need an older adult to enforce rules or end conflicts. After all, some students do not know how to be respectful and to govern themselves.
- On certain floors self-governance breaks down, and there needs to be more of a structure for dealing with these instances.
- Someone from the staff needs to maintain discipline and order in the residence halls. Especially during weekends when some people get intoxicated and act irresponsibly by creating noise and damage property.
- Sometimes I wish there was some power to enforce the rules when people get out of hand, loud and unruly.
- We need people to govern us. Alcohol, drugs, and other things go on. No one stops it.
- Some people abuse self-governance with vandalism, etc. Some don't understand shared governance, but most people appreciate the autonomy of self-governance.
- It's a great policy until there are rules that need enforcing.

Only eight students mentioned rule-enforcement by students as part of self-governance. In some of these comments, it is possible that the student still adheres to the individualistic definition of “you govern yourself and I'll govern myself.”

- We are old enough to follow the rules and everyone works together to make sure each individual follows the rules.
- Self-governance implies that we are responsible for enforcing our own rules.
- Rule enforcement as the responsibility of those to whom the rules apply enhances character and provides experiences valuable to resident hall life.
- I think we are responsible enough to enforce rules for ourselves.
- I think that rule enforcement is handled well by people within the hall.
- Halls should learn how to operate on their own, which includes rule enforcement.
- Leaving enforcement to popular pressure encourages a responsible and responsive community which is interested and invested in itself.
- I feel the community part of self-governance is not emphasized enough by the RLCs as well as the student staff. By saying “community,” I mean that self-governance doesn't just involve the individual being responsible for him/herself, but also responsible for the actions of those around you. People don't realize that they need to look out for others beyond the care that a school without self-governance would require.