

# Review of Department of Residence Life and Orientation

February 24 – 26, 2013

## Introduction

The purpose of this review is to offer observations, commendations, and recommendations with regard to the Department of Residence Life and Orientation, within the Division of Student Affairs (DSA) at Grinnell College. This department is under the direction of Andrea Conner, Assistant Dean of Students and Director of Residence Life and Orientation.

Members of the Review Team consisted of:

- Aileen Calderon '14, Student- at-Large
- Richard Fyffe, Rosenthal Librarian of the College
- Nino Parker '07, Assistant Director, Alumni Relations Office
- Jeff Pedersen '02, Head Football Coach, Assistant Track Coach, Fitness Center Director
- Sivan Philo '13, Student Government Association representative (SGA VP for Student Affairs)
- Brenda Strong, Technical Assistant II, International Student Affairs
- Matha Thornton, Vice President for Student Affairs & Dean of Students, Randolph College

The review was conducted February 24 – 26, 2013. On Sunday evening, the review team met briefly with Houston Dougharty, Vice President for Student Affairs and Travis Greene, Dean of Students, who charged them with their mission. They also met with Andrea Conner, the Residence Life Coordinators (RLCs) and Laura Gogg, Technical Assistant II, and toured representative residence halls. Andrea was able to highlight some of her accomplishments, as well as point out some of the issues she thought warranted particular attention from the review team. Monday morning the review team met with various groups of faculty, staff, and students who either interacted directly with the Department of Residence Life and Orientation or were directly affected by the Department. Tuesday morning the team had follow up meetings with Andrea Conner, as well as Houston Dougharty and Travis Greene.

The review team was able to place their observations, commendations, and recommendations into four areas: **Staffing and Job Responsibilities, Collaborative Enrichment Program (CEPs), Residence Life/Student Experience, and New Student Orientation (NSO)**. Their observations and commendations will be listed for each group separately, and there will be one final recommendation section.

## **Staffing and Job Responsibilities**

### **Observations**

- The RLC positions are very demanding, often requiring twelve hour days or longer
- Compared to other schools, six is a large RLC staff, but given the current structure of the department, and their other responsibilities, the Full Time Equivalent is 4.5 (6 x .75), and seems to be an appropriate number
- The RLCs are connected more closely to the students than professionals at other schools
- RLCs now attend Students of Concern meetings, which is mutually beneficial for RLCs and the rest of staff within DSA
- The room draw process seems to be working smoothly
- Room inventory reports are inefficient and lengthy, the process needs to be modernized/made electronic
- The Technical Assistant II has a difficult task to prepare for the start of a new academic year with only an 11-month contract
- The Director of Residence Life and Orientation has a difficult combination of duties

### **Commendations**

- Bringing the RLCs into the Students of Concern meeting has led to better knowledge and collaboration
- Current RLCs appear to be more professional and well-respected than previous RLCs
  - RLC retention has improved dramatically, morale has increased and turnover has been reduced
  - Current RLCs understand liberal arts colleges and have better working relationships across campus
  - Current RLCs are better trained than in the past and have more understanding of the mission of a liberal arts college
- Andrea is well-respected and praised for her humanity and cooperative spirit
  - Under Andrea collaboration across campus has improved dramatically

## **Collaborative Enrichment Programs (CEPs)**

### **Observations**

- Because of time demands and the current implementation of CEPs, not all RLCs have received the professional development they were anticipating
- With two areas of responsibility (one being the CEP), RLCs are often spread too thin and don't get the benefit a CEP might otherwise provide

- The opportunity to create their own topic of interest is a good incentive, but that often leads to certain programs/areas not having the benefit of a RLC
- Currently the Technical Assistant II is not eligible for the CEPs, and the options for professional development are limited

### **Commendations**

- The CEP program offers tremendous opportunities for networking and professional development
- The CEPs have made the RLC position more attractive, helping us to hire better, more qualified talent for that position

## **Residence Life/Student Experience**

### **Observations**

- There is a need for more programming within the Residence Halls, but the RLCs are not given the time nor the resources to develop this programming effectively
- Student-staff expressed a need for some sort of incentive system, monetary or otherwise
- Student-staff are well trained, but they would like to receive some of the advanced training given to Hall Wellness Coordinators
- SAs would also like conflict management and confrontation training
- There is a need for more accountability from the Student Advisors (SAs), perhaps an accountability contract
- SAs need clearly defined roles
- The makeup of the SAs does not match the makeup of campus, a more diverse (in all senses of the word) group would be desirable
- The spring could be used for more training for SAs
- Students at Grinnell incur an inordinate amount of fines, when compared to similar institutions

### **Commendations**

- SAs appear to be better trained than in the past, they are more proficient at referring students to the appropriate resources

## **New Student Orientation (NSO)**

### **Observations**

- More time is needed for training
- Would be better to have new students move in Friday evening and begin Saturday morning [that is actually happening this August]

- Approximately half the incoming class is here before NSO begins (IPOP, PCPOP, GSP, and Athletics), there may be an opportunity to connect those students immediately
- Some offices feel they are not represented during NSO
- Many of the topics introduced during NSO are too in-depth to be addressed satisfactorily during NSO, follow-up sessions throughout the year would be beneficial

### **Commendations**

- The decision to have NSO run by Residence Life was a positive change
- NSO runs more smoothly than it did in the past
- NSO does a better job of bringing the student community together
- There is a greater focus on accountability and self-governance
- There has been significant progress in bridging the special orientations and the general orientation

### **Recommendations for Residence Life and Orientation**

- **Residential Curriculum** – We suggest moving to a residential curriculum model and away from the traditional residential education program where success is measured by the number of students who attend. Success should be measured by how much students learn. A change of this magnitude takes time, patience and a staff willing to continue with the current model while designing a new learning model. A complete shift would take 2-4 years, but would help focus the work of the Residence Life and Orientation office and enhance the residential experience for Grinnell students. Students would no longer refer to residential programs as “study breaks”. Some suggested articles that would assist in the beginning include:

Baxter Magolda, MB (2004). Self-authorship as the common goal of the 21<sup>st</sup> century education. In M.B. Baxter Magolda & P.M. Kin (Eds.), *Learning partnerships: Theory and models of practice to educate for self-authorship* (pp 1 – 35). Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Baxter Magolda, MB (2004). Learning Partnerships Model: A framework for promoting self-authorship. In M.B. Baxter Magolda & P.M. Kin (Eds.), *Learning partnerships: Theory and models of practice to educate for self-authorship* (pp 37-67). Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Kerr, K. G. and Tweedy, J. (2006), Beyond seat time and student satisfaction: A curricular approach to residential education. *About Campus*, 11: 9–15.

- **Learning Outcomes** –The current learning outcomes for Residence Life and New Student Orientation are admirable, but very lofty and perhaps unattainable. If the department moves to a residential curriculum model, it would be helpful to review your learning outcomes. If you determine you would like to revise and/or create

new learning outcomes, we suggest keeping in mind what you intend for students to learn and how you will measure what they learn. It is useful to take into account the different developmental stages. For example, what are the learning outcomes for first-year students vs. a fourth-year student regarding appropriate confrontation of unjust or uncivil behavior in the residence halls?

- **Compensation for Student Advisers (SAs)** – Given the importance of the work that Student Advisers do, we suggest compensation for all Student Advisers. If compensated, more students who might otherwise be unable to hold the position because they need a paying job will be able to serve as SAs. It would also allow Residence Life to hold SAs more accountable and conceivably increase the perceived value of the position. At other institutions, when compensation has been increased, the caliber of and consistency within the student staff has also increased. The SA position is the backbone of student leadership on a residential campus and SAs should be compensated accordingly.
- **Hall Wellness Coordinators** - The Hall Wellness Coordinator student staff position needs to be reexamined. The SAs believe that the HWCs had received better training in areas like crisis response for which the SAs had responsibility and were better prepared for certain situations, however some students were unaware of their coordinator or any of the activities or programs they offered.
- **RLC Responsibilities** – In the current configuration, the six RLCs are stretched too thin. We believe that compensation for the Student Assistants and an increase in their responsibilities and accountability will ameliorate this. We further recommend that the Collaborative Enrichment Positions be reviewed. Based on our conversations, some offices depend a great deal on the .25 FTE. Given the ebb and flow of Residence Life, if CEPs continue, we recommend a review of how they fit with the responsibilities of Residence Life and Orientation to ensure that the most demanding periods of the semester do not occur at the same time. Once compensation and job descriptions are in place for the SAs and changes have been made to the CEP program, the RLC program should be reviewed again. If the RLCs continue to be stretched too thin, the Division may want to consider splitting up Orientation and Residence Life.
- **Technical Assistant II Position** - We suggest reviewing the Technical Assistant II position. Would it be possible to shift this role to a salaried position and also include a title change given that the job demands have increased and requires a broad spectrum of knowledge and responsibility. Based on our staff conversations, this position does not include enough hours to complete the required work.

## **Conclusion**

Our report is based on the Department of Residence Life and Orientation's Self-Assessment, materials provided by the Residence Life and Orientation Department and the conversations we had with our colleagues and students around campus. We commend the Department of Residence Life and Orientation for their great work with the Grinnell Community. The Review Team hopes that you will find this report helpful as The Division of Student Affairs moves forward to make Grinnell College provide the best possible learning experience for their students.