

6

A residential learning community that melds academic affairs and student affairs concerns can address the whole student through fostering liberal learning experiences. Students can explore innovative and controversial ideas and activities designed to challenge their personal and intellectual growth in a community of faculty and student affairs staff who encourage, value, and support open exchange.

The Zen of Unit One: Residential Learning Communities Can Foster Liberal Learning at Large Universities

Howard K. Schein

In the winter of 1962 I hopped onto the Rock Island Railroad with a footlocker and a duffel bag. I rode from Chicago to Grinnell, Iowa, to spend four years engaged in a liberal arts education. I was a product of the Chicago public school system on my way to explore the academic unknown. Fifteen years later, when I began my 28-plus years as director of Unit One Living-Learning Program at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, the direction I took in developing a large living-learning program was largely and unconsciously shaped by my upbringing at a small, liberal arts college. I did not explicitly set out to recreate my undergraduate experience for the ten thousand or so students who have participated in Unit One. I'm sure that I was winging it for my first ten years. But I'm also sure that the values that I wrestled with developing at Grinnell College have been strongly embedded in my thinking about what an undergraduate education should be. Consequently, in my attempt to create a setting where my undergraduate experience can be attained on a large, Research-I university campus, I have focused on the basic values of a liberal education.

Basic Structure of Unit One

Unit One is a residentially based academic program. Generally classified as a residential learning community (RLC) and specifically as a living-learning center (LLC), Unit One, housed in Allen Residence Hall on the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign campus, was founded in 1972 with the

charge of creating an academic program in a university residence hall. Through an evolutionary growth process, Unit One has developed to be a program that gives undergraduate students the opportunity to have the experience of a small, liberal arts college at a large, Research-I university.

Unit One is superimposed onto and integrated into the residence hall structure. Unit One's core staff consists of a director, assistant director, office manager, two art instructors, two music program coordinators, and three undergraduate program advisors. Core staff are appointed either by the housing division or by their teaching departments with Unit One funds. The resident director and the area coordinator of Allen Residence Hall are also part of the Unit One core staff. This staff is responsible for administering Unit One's academic and non-credit-granting programs. Along with the core staff is a revolving teaching staff of about sixty instructors from various university departments.

Unit One has several basic programmatic features:

Academic: About seventy-five different credit-granting courses are taught each year. About fifty courses are taught each semester. Half of these fifty courses are taught for one semester only; the other half are repeated each semester.

Music instruction: One specific course provides private music lessons to about 180 students each semester.

Guests-in-residence: About six to eight guests are invited to spend one to two weeks in residency at Unit One. Guests live in an Allen Hall suite and engage with students in classes, in scheduled presentations, and in informal conversations and activities.

Non-credit programming, including topical discussions, documentary film showings, guest speakers, field trips, volunteer activities, and recitals.

The facilities that support these features have been built into the Unit One infrastructure, ranging from seven Internet-wired seminar classrooms and two large multipurpose spaces for classes and activities to studios for photography, ceramics, and electronic music and office space for faculty and staff (a more detailed description is at <http://www.housing.uiuc.edu/living/unit1>).

Liberal Education at Residential Learning Communities

My daughter is now a freshman at Grinnell, so I've paid special attention to how that school identifies itself. Its academic planning booklet (Grinnell, 2004–2005) puts forth their version of a liberal arts education:

A liberal arts education has at its center four things that distinguish it from other kinds of learning: critical thinking, continuing examination of life,

encounters with difference, and the free exchange of ideas. By offering an education in the liberal arts, Grinnell College endorses lifelong learning characterized by sustained intellectual curiosity and an open mind for assessing the unfamiliar. At the same time, by using critical thinking to assess evidence, to identify assumptions, to test logic, to reason correctly, and to take responsibility for the conclusions and actions that result, a student of the liberal arts can grow personally as well as intellectually. A liberally educated person should be capable of principled judgment, seeking to understand the origins, context, and implications of any area of study, rather than looking exclusively at its application [p. 2].

Small, liberal arts colleges are structured to attain these goals. Faculty are hired to be teacher-scholars and they are rewarded for good, interactive teaching. Students who attend these schools have similar educational expectations, and these students are also likely to share similar values. At large Research-I schools, working toward a liberal education is problematic: faculty's role in regard to undergraduate interaction and teaching is usually ambiguous; the goals of professional education in non-liberal arts curricula sometimes run contrary to the goals of liberal education; the large size of the undergraduate population, combined with the multiplicity of undergraduates' educational agendas, present many problems in working toward the ideals of academic intimacy. Residential learning communities are designed to address these difficulties. In *Making the Most of College*, Richard Light (2001) alludes to the strengths of residential settings when he points out that "learning outside of classes, especially in residential settings and extracurricular activities such as the arts, is vital."

Residential Learning Community Structure and Campus Structure

Residential learning communities are academic programs housed in residence halls. These programs usually have a developmental underpinning, they frequently incorporate academic themes or courses, and they frequently are structured in response to their campus's specific needs. Residential learning communities serve many purposes. In some cases, they are constructed to address specific areas of academic inquiry (for example, they congregate specific curricula), or to address students' academic skills needs (for example, they congregate students who need specific support services), or to address students' extracurricular interests (such as wellness or community service).

On campuses where these programs are found, an underlying agenda for residential learning communities is tied to the concept of student success. Criteria for the learning communities' successes are consequently based on data that reflect measurable variables, such as retention in college or in specified curricula, grade point, reasonable progress toward graduation, adjustment to college, and timely choosing of a major.

Unit One is constructed differently. It was designed as a model for any Research-I institution to provide a setting that supports the kind of liberal learning agendas that usually characterize small, liberal arts colleges. Unit One's underlying agenda is not tied to such outcomes as grade point, adjustment to college, or retention and progress toward degree. Rather, Unit One's agenda is tied to the less easily quantified criterion of "quality of education," an underlying rationale for a liberal learning experience. We take for granted that the qualities of a liberal education are desirable to incorporate into undergraduates' educations. We also know that measuring successful outcomes is difficult, especially since many of these hoped-for outcomes are set in motion during students' undergraduate years and unveil themselves over lifetimes. "Quality-of-education" programs are risky ventures if these programs are held responsible for data-driven success, since objectively measurable outcomes are difficult to track. Success for programs like Unit One depends on administrations that accept qualitative data, largely in the form of faculty and student feedback.

For most residential learning communities, cosponsorship between the academic and student affairs branches of the campus (the latter usually through the housing division) is critical. On small campuses, this cosponsorship is usually collegial because all arms of the campus administration and the faculty are focused on the same goal: students' development in their academic and personal realms. On large campuses, however, where the faculty and student affairs agendas are not always coincidental, good working relationships are usually difficult to negotiate, maintain, and manage.

Student Affairs and Faculty Relationships

Student affairs operations tend to follow a linearly hierarchical model of the sort found in the corporate world. Campuses' student affairs philosophies, which typically are supportive of students' academic development, filter down uniformly through student affairs divisions, and accountability to specific points of supervision is very clearly recognized. Student affairs usually runs its sponsorship of residential learning communities through their housing divisions, where staff hierarchies and accountability are clearly delineated. If for no other reason than legal liability, this kind of accountability makes sense. Students' personal well-being is largely the responsibility of student affairs through living arrangements, campus health centers, campus recreation centers, and student entertainment venues. Whereas we don't frequently see court cases that revolve around professors brainwashing their students, we do see lawsuits that evolve from hazing, drinking, and date rape. (See Kuh, 1983, for a more detailed discussion of student affairs issues.)

Faculty operate quite differently from the student affairs model. Under the academic affairs umbrella, faculty try to pay little attention to administrative lines of report and behave more like independent contractors with dual allegiances, one to their departments and one to their disciplines (see, for example, Weingartner, 1996). Faculty do have lines of report, but

accountability within these lines is quite different from accountability that characterizes student affairs. With research being high on most Research-I faculty's priority lists, institutional lines of reporting are but one of several places toward which faculty must orient their behavior. Because their disciplinary colleagues largely judge faculty's academic worth, one set of faculty fealties is focused outside of their institutions and toward their national and international academic disciplinary peers. And because academic freedom promotes many different lines of thinking within departments and because disciplinary philosophies within departments and institutions are not necessarily uniform, faculty do not tend to toe a departmental or institutional line in the same way that their student affairs colleagues do.

At my institution, for instance, the housing division has a mission statement that is printed on the back of the picture identification cards that staff wear around their necks, and the department of residence life in the housing division has a vision statement, "Growing, Learning, and Mattering, for every person, on every floor, in every community." These mission and vision statements are actively invoked as the conceptual foundations that guide the creation of policies and programs, and we are frequently asked to rationalize how given actions are consistent with this mission or vision. One would be hard pressed to find a comparable statement that faculty attend to at any Research-I institution.

Student affairs tends to make solid commitments to making sure that positions that are key to programmatic success are staffed. If, for instance, the housing division creates the position of program coordinator of a residential learning community, the odds are great that, despite staff rollover, the position will be filled. If a faculty member commits to teaching a course at a residential learning community, that faculty's commitment is not likely to last more than several semesters; faculty work agendas are ever changing—new committee work, new departmental administrative assignments, sabbaticals, changing teaching obligations, and more all cycle into faculty's long-term schedules. And when a particular faculty leaves an RLC, replacement is usually problematic. Finding a new and appropriate person from within the faculty ranks to cycle into this teaching slot may be difficult, especially since this person must come from within the ranks of existing faculty who may or may not have the time, expertise, or inclination to participate in the RLC.

This raises the issue of teaching personnel. Many RLCs use instructors other than regular faculty—adjunct faculty, graduate teaching assistants, and departmental instructors who are not on a tenure track. In some cases, RLCs are convenient teaching assignments for spousal hires who do not want or who cannot get regular, tenure-track assignments. Hiring instructors who are not on a tenure track presents interesting issues: The absence of regular faculty can be a flag that the faculty are not interested in the RLC concept. Critics may contend that the level of instruction at RLCs is subpar. How Unit One addresses this issue is the topic of the next section.

How Unit One Assesses Instructional Issues

Campus policy assigns issues of course and instructor credibility to the colleges and departments that offer instruction at Unit One. Instructors are appointed to teach Unit One courses under the guidelines that the instructor's department uses to make any of its appointments. As well, when we construct topical, experimental, or noncurricular courses to be taught specifically at Unit One, the department under whose rubric these courses are offered must approve these courses. In this way, Unit One's academic offerings are consistent with campus instructional policies.

Unit One utilizes teaching personnel who represent all levels of instructors, including TAs, adjuncts, and regular faculty. TAs and adjunct instructors typically teach courses and discussion sections of large lectures that repeat on a regular basis. Regular faculty are usually found at Unit One teaching a revolving group of first-year seminars. These faculty are recruited on a yearly basis.

Adjuncts and advanced TAs teach our experimental, noncurricular, and topical seminars under the umbrella of Unit One Extra Options. These one- or two-credit-hour seminars have several key features: They are graded on a pass-fail option; their topics change in response to instructor and student requests; and they are meant to be small, highly interactive groups of five to fifteen students with a good deal of student-instructor interaction. In some cases, these seminars are outgrowths of regular courses where the instructor can take the course beyond the syllabus (for example, for the ethics course the seminar could be the Ethics of Dissent; and for the child psychology course, the seminar could be Exploring Parenting and Family Processes). In some cases these seminars are stand-alone (such as American Sign Language for the Deaf or the Roots of Popular Music); in some cases we introduce service-learning through these seminars (such as Art and Social Action; Volunteer Projects at Local Elementary Schools).

When TAs teach these seminars, they design their courses under the supervision of departmental faculty members, with oversight by the Unit One director. This seminar series has given many advanced graduate students a way to design and teach their own courses and is seen and used by departments as another vehicle to prepare their advanced students for the rigors of teaching in the profession. An added advantage to graduate students who teach these seminars at Unit One and who are looking for small-college teaching positions is a valid resume addition that reflects knowledge of a model of teaching generally found at a small, liberal arts college.

Bridging the Waters Between Student and Academic Affairs Philosophies

Although in the large-campus model student affairs is split from academic affairs, students certainly don't envision their lives with this split. For students, their lives are whole entities with emotional, physical, and intellectual

concerns wrapped into one interactive package. Addressing this package as a unified venture is one of the strengths of a residentially based academic program, where the various aspects of students' lives can be integrated.

In this context, residence halls on large campuses are interesting places. They are loaded with affect and short on intellectuality. For many students, residence halls represent their safe place, where they can retreat from the challenges of their academic experiences. For many students, this retreat divorces them from the intellectual rigors they find in the academic interactions that characterize many modern classrooms. Surely, students study in their residence halls, and surely, they form study groups to help them master their curricular course material. Although most modern residence halls put a lot of effort into co-curricular activities, most residence halls are not places where students are encouraged to stretch their intellectual capabilities. In observing that campuses address diversity issues mainly through student affairs efforts, Levine (1994) makes this observation about faculty involvement in students' lives outside of the classroom: "The co-curriculum, though rich in diversity programs, lacks intellectual depth, is unconnected with the academic side of higher education, and is largely ignored by the faculty" (p. 341). Although this observation targets co-curricular diversity programming, it can probably also be generalized to faculty's involvement in all of the co-curriculum. Basically, when interacting with undergraduates, faculty tend to focus on classroom activities. Their lack of involvement in other student activities leaves a gaping hole of possible involvement in helping students become liberally educated and in helping students to address their everyday concerns with intellectual tools alongside their affective tools.

The challenge, then, is to work with the affect that runs so strongly in residence halls and manipulate it in a way that accomplishes two tasks: making these settings intellectually safe, and including instruction or programming that inserts an intellectual component into this safe setting.

Students are perfectly adept at constructing community. Most freshmen seek to construct social networks, especially ones in which they are comfortable, and upperclass students are constantly refining their networks. But these networks are most frequently built around social, not academic, concerns. Providing an intellectual component into this social sphere is the beginning of expanding the process of becoming liberally educated into the everyday lives of our students. Residence halls can provide a setting where students may feel safe to take the kinds of chances they need to stimulate their intellectual growth.

Challenge and Support: A Basic Model to Instigate Change

A very basic model for effecting student change involves both challenge and support. Stimulus for change comes from the challenge of confronting and dealing with uncomfortable situations, newness, difference, and so

forth. The challenge is to confront this discomfort in a way that effects change. Change can come in many forms, not all of which are immediately apparent. Among the kinds of changes we hope to see are new attitudes, new ways of thinking, new ways of communicating, new behaviors, and the like.

In a residence hall setting, challenge is all over the place. Without outside interjection, basic challenges to students come in the form of dealing with a large group of peers in a communal-living setting. For many students, for instance, merely dealing with roommates for the first time in their lives is an adjustment. As well, students face the new challenge of dealing with a host of peers' ideas about how one's life should be lived and the differing moral and ethical stances that drive peers' behaviors in the context of living without constant parental supervision. Moreover, of course, dealing with the chaos and noise that pervade residence halls is always an issue. These situations are basic to any university residence hall experience.

In this setting, support comes from staff's ability to mediate interactions and from students' ability to retreat to comfort zones of the known and the familiar. Built into this scenario are mechanisms to help make these situations emotionally and physically safe, and, in most cases, students find sanctuary in their peer communities and in their rooms.

Missing, in most cases, is challenge from the intellectual realm, the insertion of ideas that do not come from what is inherent in peer interactions but that come from the outside. Also missing in most residence halls is staff pressing students to explore, more deeply than students usually would, the newness that they confront in their everyday lives. This is the void that living-learning communities can fill.

Unit One—A Case Study

Unit One Living-Learning Program was established at the University of Illinois as a model for undergraduates to engage in the liberal learning process. It was established by the chancellor with a broad yet vague mandate of exploring the feasibility of an academic program in a residential setting. The leadership of Unit One was given a pretty broad range of possibilities. As Unit One has grown and evolved, it has always kept several objectives on the table: to provide an eclectic offering of courses and non-credit programming; to provide a safe place for students' personal and intellectual growth; to provide a variety of avenues to explore ideas and activities that are new, innovative, and controversial; and to provide a community that values and supports an open exchange of ideas with a cadre of faculty and student affairs staff who encourage and support these goals.

More than 80 percent of Unit One students tend to be freshmen and sophomores (who tend to be a representative sample of enrollment in the university's colleges and majors), so we incorporate into our mission an attempt to jump-start students on their way toward making good use of the university and its resources.

When I describe Unit One to prospective students, I frequently describe the program in two different ways: the list and the demeanor. The list is an outline of our activities and facilities—our guarantees (for example, we guarantee credit courses, music lessons, guests-in-residence, and facilities). But the demeanor of the hall is central to most students' experiences and is the backbone of the program's success. The community that is recreated by each year's students provides the fluidity of interaction and openness of communication that allows Unit One's mission to be actualized.

Unit One's Operating Structure

At the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, the housing division is the primary sponsor of residential learning communities, but the provost's office plays a very integrated role. With this level of support and freedom, I have been able to be extremely flexible and opportunistic in making use of campus resources.

We have figured out a way to integrate the faculty and student affairs models that I previously described in order to make best use of faculty and student affairs staffs. We ask faculty to do what faculty do best with undergraduates: teach. We then ask student affairs staff to do what they expect to do: support the academic mission of the institution. Finally, we ask faculty and student affairs staff to collaborate when appropriate situations arise. Students respond most reliably to faculty expertise in the classroom, and faculty's role in promoting students' intellectual development demands an ongoing and reliable commitment over time by students. In Unit One, we then extend the classroom into the students' noncurricular lives.

The academic affairs-student affairs dichotomy has never been a problem at Unit One. Rather than designing programs that necessarily ask for real-time collaboration, the housing staff and the faculty each make use of the contributions to the environment that the other makes: faculty teach students who live in an environment that encourages students to exchange ideas in a free and open setting; consequently, housing staff get to conduct discussions with students who have issues of an academic nature in the context of affective and personal developmental issues.

Sometimes we get lucky and intentionally design programs integrating academic teaching and student affairs programming collaboration. A good example of this liberal learning potential revolved around a field trip of about forty-five students to see the musical, *Miss Saigon*, in Chicago. Prior to the trip, a Unit One political science instructor who teaches a course on the Vietnam War presented a program and film to explain the context of the musical. Once in Chicago, another Unit One instructor with a specialty in opera production arranged for a backstage tour, and the trip coordinator arranged for the students to eat at a Vietnamese restaurant after the performance. Even helping the bus driver recover from several wrong turns was educational.

Since the residence hall is the place where the basis of all of this action occurs, and since academic staff are, in a sense, visitors in this setting, the main responsibility falls in the lap of the residence hall and living-learning center core staff to maintain an environment that supports the intervention of academic staff. Rather than seeing academic staff as interlopers, this academic staff is best viewed as close and welcome family members who have keys to the house, their own guest rooms, and unrestricted refrigerator privileges.

With this access to the setting, instructors have several routes to creating interaction with their students: small class size; seminar-style classrooms; instructor office space; faculty meal passes to facilitate eating with students; budgets to support out-of-class ventures; honoraria to thank instructors for extra work; and more.

With their extra funds, instructors are encouraged to hold extra class meetings to facilitate review of material, film showings that complement in-class discussions, field trips both on and off campus, meals at international restaurants, inviting students to instructors' homes, and so on. Moreover, at times instructors open their course activities (such as film showings or field trips) to all members of the living-learning community.

A critical feature, probably the most important, is students' own feeling of entitlement. Students as well as staff always have the ability to create programming that addresses the issues that interest them. At Unit One, students can readily form student groups that have long-term agendas and regular meetings, and students can also program one-time events that address specific topics. From student initiatives and from student groups, students have developed programming ranging from chess to a weekly film forum called Couch Potatoes, from ceramics exploration to Small Town America, a group that takes field trips to visit small midwestern towns. All of these involve Unit One staff and faculty.

The content, both academically and programmatically, is eclectic because we do not have a decided curricular bent. We feel that the process of intellectual interchange is at least as important, if not more important, than the content. Unit One has, however, paid special attention to the arts and issues of social concern, both in courses and in non-credit programming, because these two areas appeal universally to our students, regardless of major, and because students engage in these areas very readily. What grows from these efforts is a group of staff who all contribute to students' personal and intellectual growth in a setting where all staff members can contribute what they do best and what they are trained to do. The result is a vibrant community where ideas flow in classes and in planned programming and in the everyday conversations among students.

Unit One's model is to create our version of a small, liberal arts community where all members buy into the basic notion that lively discourse is an important feature of education, where all members see value in participating in this community, and where all members contribute to this community in

ways consistent with their vision of the community. But community members are not asked to take a singularly agreed-upon route toward our ultimate goal of promoting lively intellectual interchange, and with this freedom of integrating various styles of approaching the process of education, diverse ideas and educational strategies thrive.

What Students and Faculty Report

At Unit One we solicit semesterly feedback from our faculty, and we have been formally evaluated many times. Some of the richest data have come from instructor interviews and from student focus groups (Grayson, 2003). In Grayson's study, instructors and students discuss the strength of the community as one of the central features of Unit One.

A summary of instructor comments from Grayson's draft of this study includes the following:

- (a) Students in living and learning communities have a high level of commitment toward learning. They are eager to engage in open discussion and are full of questions. They are active learners.
- (b) Students are rich in their academic backgrounds, interests, ethnicities and cultures.
- (c) Smaller class sizes offer many benefits in terms of student engagement, learning and teaching effectiveness.
- (d) Living and learning communities have higher levels of community spirit.
- (e) Students feel comfortable in their communities and easily make friends with other students.
- (f) Students and faculty feel comfortable with each other and have quality interactions.
- (g) Living and learning communities foster critical thinking and problem solving through innovative and creative teaching strategies. [Grayson, 2003, p. 13]

One faculty member, who also supervised teaching assistants, pointed out several major differences between teaching at Unit One and at the university at large:

Really knowing your students, having lunch with students, knowing their names, knowing what they want and [what] their personal and professional goals are, establishing meaningful relationships with students, more opportunities to guide or suggest other classes or courses, ability to develop comfortable relationships.

. . . [Unit One] protects the notion of a liberal arts community where teachers and students can engage in meaningful dialogue and reap benefits of intellectual, personal, and professional growth. . . . The larger University context does not easily allow for or promote opportunities for meaningful and

comfortable relationships with students to be established or nurtured. [Grayson, 2003, pp. 14–29]

Other faculty comments include the following:

“The community aspect is certainly part of it.”

“I lectured on civil rights to a mixed, diverse group and I couldn’t shut them up. Unit One builds a sense of community.”

“The interaction with the students is better than I have experienced elsewhere so far. They are ready to discuss, interrupt me to ask questions, and also indicate issues they wish to know more about. We always have discussions and everyone talks.”

“[Students are] engaged in discussion with openness and candor.”

The comfort level is high. “. . . a much higher level of engagement with its students. . . .”

“Students at Unit One know each other and feel comfortable in sharing ideas and are very willing to engage in discussion. . . . Students speak up and are not afraid to ask questions. . . . Student engagement, interactive classrooms and open dialogue allow for the exchange of ideas and critical thinking.”

“By students’ living together, classes congeal faster. Students are together already so they are more likely to do things together . . . care for one another more. . . . They are not overly polite in discussion . . . they take care of details, share material with other kids who miss class.” [Grayson, 2003, pp. 14–29]

In other evaluations, instructors who teach two sections of the same course, one at Unit One and one “on campus,” frequently comment that the test scores of both sections are usually comparable but that the level of intellectual engagement found in Unit One sections is usually much greater.

Students’ responses in focus groups complement the faculty’s observations. In Grayson (2003), a summary of students’ responses includes the following:

- (a) Learning takes place in the entire community. It extends outside of the classroom.
- (b) Making connections is easier and one feels more comfortable with other students.
- (c) Smaller classrooms offer multiple benefits.
- (d) Faculty and instructors are more engaging, more thoughtful and fun.
- (e) Living and learning communities offer a variety of benefits not available in other residential halls. [Grayson, 2003, p. 17]

In these focus groups, students commented that their learning carries over outside the classroom; that taking classes with people they know makes it easier to approach each other; that knowing classmates makes the

class more comfortable; that collaboration outside of class is common; students experience more respect for classmates who are hallmates; personal relationships between classmates and with instructors make classes more comfortable and open; teachers have respect for students and that dynamic carries over; when students get to know their faculty well, faculty expect more, and they know what they can expect from students; in Unit One, learning is not just about scores, but about participation and involvement and thinking and questioning.

When queried about having conversations across lines of difference, students first identified difference in more dimensions than the standard race-gender-ethnicity boundaries. They saw all nature of difference worthy of noting:

- “Everyone . . . has opinions . . . some students are to the right and others to the left and they clash. This is good because we enlighten each other.”
- “Everyone has different views and much to offer. All the students here are willing to learn and willing to share.”
- “The idea of respect is a big part of Allen Hall . . . in your classroom, in your room, or in the hallway. I can fall asleep any time of the day [because the noise level is kept at a respectful level].” [Grayson, 2003, p. 21]

When queried about the uniqueness of Unit One and Allen Hall, students offered the following:

- “The small school feeling. To have a unique experience with faculty.”
- “Eases the transition from high school to college.”
- “You go to Allen Hall, not to a room number. Allen Hall is your identity and it feels good.”
- “It (Allen Hall) gives you an identity.”
- “It is important for freshmen to have a community; a place that is home and Allen provides that. I cannot emphasize the importance of this.” [Grayson, 2003, p. 23]

Unit One Student Identity

One theme that has repeated itself over Unit One’s existence is students’ identification as campus outsiders (Horwitz, 1989). In fact, for many years we were the outsiders in the minds of much of the campus administration. Not until the campus was called to task to show innovation in undergraduate education did Unit One fall into mainstream campus favor. Now, with residential learning communities experiencing a national growth spurt, we have become a model for others. Although an outside threat can never be maintained as the force that coalesces a community, I think that Unit One students’ being consistently identified as outsiders serves the same function.

Unit One students have always been labeled, both by themselves and by the undergraduate campus culture. Over time, they have been the hippies, the campus radicals, the Goths, the alternative lifestyleers, the geeks, and more, all of which have been outsider labels. We have never done a political spectrum survey, but, contrary to campus perceptions, I'd bet that our population is actually pretty representative of campus norms on many attitude variables. However, the fact that these students live in a setting that values openness allows them to speak their minds, and their ideas and topics of discussion don't always fall within the boundaries of what other students see as normal.

I'm always drawn to Luna Lovegood, a character in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (J. K. Rowling's 2003 book) who is viewed as a weirdo and an outsider until her special abilities are finally noticed. When my daughter went off to college, my main piece of advice (after suggesting she get to know her professors, of course) was to get to know the Luna Lovegoods of her campus. Getting to know new, and maybe even seemingly strange people and to expose oneself to new ideas is one of the strengths of Unit One. The openness of the environment appears to be one of the underlying features of Unit One that our graduating seniors focused on. This feature reminds me of a statement made in 1952 by Adlai E. Stevenson, former Governor of Illinois: "My definition of a free society is a society where it is safe to be unpopular." (<http://www.quotegarden.com/freedom.html>). For me, this thought translates into fostering a setting where students feel free to speak their minds without fear of recrimination, even if they voice unpopular sentiments. In this vein, for instance, students take great pride in holding forums that address the conflicting views of evangelical Christians and atheists. Here, discussions of the kinds of opposing views that permeate these students' everyday lives can be held without acrimony or divisiveness.

In May 2004, we invited all of our graduating seniors to dinner. Most had been living in apartments for the previous two years. About fifty stopped by. We asked them to comment on how Unit One fulfilled its promise of providing a liberal education: critical thinking; self understanding; diversity; testing their points of view; ethical, moral, and intellectual development. The following comments on that subject are from these students:

"The strangest people can fit in and feel comfortable. . . . Being with 'weird' people is good."

"We are known as 'weird'—but we're the ones who open themselves freely, think outside the box, and recognize that 'normal' can be 'average.'"

"A place like Allen Hall is intellectually stimulating to me, largely because the culture of openness fostered a great many diverse friendships that helped to grow me as a person."

"[I was] free to express my ideas and opinions. . . ."

Students who move into Allen Hall from other halls frequently cite the difference between Unit One-Allen Hall and other residence halls on campus. One senior reflected:

“The difference between my original residence hall and Allen Hall was drastic. The Unit One environment brought people together . . . and encouraged candid and insightful discussions about pertinent and useful topics. I feel as though I had a chance to develop further as an aware individual, more so than I would elsewhere on this often closed-minded and stifling campus.”

This student wasn’t aware of the paradigm of the academic affairs-student affairs dichotomy, but she did observe: “Allen’s strength lies in the fact that it fosters all aspects of life. Instead of focusing on [credit] hour accumulation, the focus is placed on the total quality of life.”

Conclusion

Small, liberal arts colleges have the ability to craft a mission that all members of the faculty and staff buy into and that students recognize as the guiding principle underlying their undergraduate education. Very frequently, the philosophy underlying these principles involves providing these students with a liberal education. By their nature, large Research-I universities are fractionated. No single principle unites the faculty, staff, and student body to guide them in a specific educational direction. For those members of this community who strive to experience a liberal education, residential learning communities can be constructed to approximate the setting of a small, liberal arts college. In these settings, students can get a level of intellectual intensity in their everyday lives, both in and out of the classroom, that integrates their academic and personal development.

Unit One offers a model residential learning community with the mission of nurturing a liberal education for lower-division undergraduates on a large, Research-I campus. The success of Unit One comes from students’ buying into the concept that intellectual growth and the lively exchange of ideas are important. But it also comes from the staff members, who foster a community that welcomes the addition of intellectual challenge and who fuel this community with ideas and activities that challenge students to confront the dissonance that these new ideas place into their lives. Fostering community involves conveying an attitude that this community values intellectual engagement. Fostering community involves incorporating concepts like support, acceptance of difference, the value of lively discourse, and willingness to introduce new ideas into the classroom, into non-credit programming, and into the social structure of students’ everyday lives in the residence hall. These concepts are readily modeled in the classroom and in purposefully structured non-credit programming. They are also readily modeled in the way staff help students negotiate their everyday relationships. With a little bit of luck, these concepts then become incorporated into

the students' long-term community traditions and passed down through student generations.

Fueling this kind of community involves staff's insertion of ideas and challenges that fall outside most students' normal experiences. Students are good at recycling what they know, but they need help to push into the unknown. When students experience new ideas and challenges within the context of a supportive academic community that encourages engagement, they grow. It could be that simple!

References

- Grayson, T. E. "Evaluation of Living and Learning Communities, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign." Unpublished paper. Urbana: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Office of the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, 2003.
- Grinnell College. *Academic Planning for First-Year Students: A Guide to the Liberal Arts at Grinnell College, 2004–2005*. Grinnell, Iowa: Grinnell College, 2004.
- Horwitz, H. L. "The Changing Student Culture: A Retrospective." *Educational Record*, 1989, 70, 24–29.
- Kuh, G. D. (ed.). *Understanding Student Affairs Organizations*. New Directions for Student Services, no. 23. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1983.
- Levine, A. "Diversity on Campus." In Levine, A. (ed.), *Higher Learning in America: 1980–2000*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1994.
- Light, R. J. *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Weingartner, R. H. *Fitting Form to Function: A Primer on the Organization of Academic Institutions*. Phoenix: The Oryx Press/The American Council on Education, 1996.

HOWARD K. SCHEIN is director of Unit One Living-Learning Program and an adjunct associate professor of higher education in the Department of Educational Organization and Leadership at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.