

WT 125 White Paper

Residential Life

Abstract:

Research shows that students who live on campus have a higher rate of graduation, retention, GPA, and a higher rate of campus involvement. In fact, the Center for Applied Economics and Policy Research released a report in which they state, "We find a robust result ... that on average, living on campus increases GPA by between 0.19 to 0.97. That is, the estimate for the degree of improvement to student performance caused by living on campus ranges between one-fifth to one full letter grade," (Araujo, 2010). By living on campus, students are constantly engaged in campus life. From quick access to student services and faculty, to the opportunity to get involved in organizations, attend events, study and interact with peers, students are more likely to utilize services, get involved, and stay engaged.

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Last Edited: December 2017

Introduction:

Research shows that students who live on campus have a higher rate of graduation, retention, GPA, and a higher rate of campus involvement. In fact, the Center for Applied Economics and Policy Research released a report in which they state, "We find a robust result ... that on average, living on campus increases GPA by between 0.19 to 0.97. That is, the estimate for the degree of improvement to student performance caused by living on campus ranges between one-fifth to one full letter grade," (Araujo, 2010). By living on campus, students are constantly engaged in campus life. From quick access to student services and faculty, to the opportunity to get involved in organizations, attend events, study and interact with peers, students are more likely to utilize services, get involved, and stay engaged.

On its own, this fact adequately supports the presence of, investment in, and continued development of residential living experiences at West Texas A&M. This paper will further present the compelling case for this, and also explore the challenges and opportunities of providing this service in a rapidly changing higher education environment.

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Critical questions addressed must include consideration for the benefit to students, the cost, the programs and services provided, and the value added over and above the experience of commuting to campus or living at home.

Background:

West Texas A&M currently operates just over 2,200 residential beds in 11 buildings. A variety of amenities and finishes in the halls allow students to choose a price point, with costs ranging from a low of \$3650 up to \$7390 for the academic year. These rates are about 15% lower than the average cost for residence hall contracts in Texas, according to College for All Texans. The buildings also vary widely in age. Cousins Hall is believed to be the oldest building in Texas continuously used as a university residence hall, and was built in 1920. Founders Hall opened in 2013 and is the newest hall.

West Texas A&M requires new students who have earned less than 60 hours post high school to live on campus. The intent of the requirement is to have students just out of high school live on campus, so that they may benefit from the advantages a residential living experience should provide. Exceptions are provided to local students who live with their parents within a 50 mile radius of campus.

The motivation for owning and operating residence halls is born from a desire to promote and support student success. As will be presented in this paper, the overwhelming evidence supports that living on campus is the absolute best way to attend a university, and the best pathway to success in college. While that is the motivation for both the existence of the halls and the requirement for students to live in them, it is also true that the halls operate fully as an auxiliary operation. Revenue generated by the halls fully funds the operation of the halls, the staff that support them, their maintenance, and any renovations or improvements, including the construction of new buildings. No tuition, fee or state revenue supports the operation of the residence halls. New halls and major renovations are typically financed, and debt service makes up a significant portion of the annual budget. Therefore, maintaining occupancy in the buildings becomes a business necessity for the university, in addition to being a positive factor for student success.

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Impacts:

Student Impact

To fully understand the value of living on campus, it is important to understand the power of engagement or involvement. Alexander Astin is one of the foremost researchers in the value and impact of student engagement, and he gives two theoretical concepts that provide a lens for researchers to study student success over the past forty years. The first is Astin's theory of involvement. The theory states that involvement involves both psychological and physical energy, it is qualitative and quantitative, and it benefits student success directly. In short, students invest mental and physical energy into certain things. Those things have both a quantitative component (time spent doing it), and a qualitative component (the intensity of the experience). When those things revolve around being a student, then the student outcomes are improved. Parents intuitively know that if they want their children to excel in a certain activity, it is important to invest quality time learning about and practicing that activity. The same is true of being a successful student. Spending more time doing things students do tends to lead to more success as a student. They have easier access to study groups, to academic support, are less tempted to skip class, and encounter faculty and fellow students as they make their way through campus life. On the contrary, students who live off campus have to make a special effort to engage in ways that come automatically to students who live on campus. They are forced to spend significant portions of their psychological and physical energy on things that are not related to being a student, and which may prove a distraction for those who may be less disciplined.

Astin's other model for student involvement is the I-E-O model, or Input-Environment-Output model. Input "refers to those personal qualities the student brings initially to the education program." This part of the theory helps compensate for different academic preparedness, or emotional maturity of students who enter college, as well as demographic differences, beliefs and attitudes a student brings with them to college. Environment "refers to the student's actual experiences during the educational program." Environment is what colleges have the most control over, and includes co-curricular involvement, living experience, academic program, and any other experience the student has while enrolled. Output "refers to the 'talents' we are trying to develop in our educational program." We could also say outputs are graduates, GPA, and job placement. Astin's theory suggests that the interaction between what the student brings with him (input) and the environment we provide (environment) produce the outcomes, either desirable or not.

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These two theories provide us a compelling story for the power of a residential living experience, in particular, for new students as they learn a new environment and establish habits that will support their ultimate success. A residential living experience is more than a place to live. Live-in staff, and upper class students who serve as peer mentors, provide a robust living-learning experience that brings tutoring into the living quarters, facilitates study groups, and provides easy access to the multitude of support services that are provided on campus. It is difficult to imagine a student living on campus would have an adequate excuse for not being available to meet faculty during office hours or to make time for tutoring. Even students who work, especially if they live on campus, should have adequate time to avail themselves of all a college campus has to offer.

On the contrary, students living off campus face many obstacles in their ability to fully entrench themselves into the life of a student. The physical distance between a student's living arrangements and campus is barrier enough, forcing a student to account for travel time and parking, for example, but also creates demands of its own which are not academic related, such as managing a relationship with a landlord, paying bills, cooking and cleaning, to name a few. To these physical barriers, add the psychological barriers that distance from campus introduces and it is easy to see why off campus students do not perform as well as their on campus counterparts. Tutoring, which was once a walk to a nearby building, requires a much higher level of commitment when faced with a drive, a parking lot, a walk. It suddenly becomes easier to put off meeting with a faculty appointment, or to make a last minute decision to skip a study group.

Assuming that WT is successful executing a residential living plan that is impactful in the ways described above, consistent with the research, the impact on students should be threefold.

- WT students who live on campus should have higher GPA.
- WT students who live on campus should persist to graduation at higher rates.
- WT students should report a higher level of connectedness to the institution upon graduation.

Impacts on Leadership

It is not enough to simply have students live on campus if we wish to impact each of the three metrics that a residential living experience should. Residential living will only become the engine of student success that it should be under a certain set of circumstances. Students living in proximity to each other is a minimum condition to achieve a positive impact.

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Other conditions which should exist include:

The facilities offered must be supportive of student success, with appropriate amenities, and maintained so that they do not negatively impact students.

Over the past few decades, there has been an arms race throughout higher education to provide student amenities as a way to attract students to campus. A quick review of campus living arrangements across the country reveal increasing levels of privacy within the communal living structures, gourmet cooking kitchens, in building workout facilities, and entertainment venues. While some students can afford such amenities, academic leadership would be hard pressed to make the case that such amenities have a direct impact on student success. WT has taken a more measured approach to development of residential living, focusing more on meeting the minimum needs, centralizing amenities, and controlling costs to students.

Amenities which do support student success include reliable high speed internet access; academic spaces that support group work, tutoring, and private study; and comfortable quarters that allow a student to properly rest. Other amenities, such as cooking and workout facilities, can be reasonably provided and do support a student's overall wellbeing, but can be done in a cost effective manner by centralizing the facilities. Students should also expect facilities to be in working order, and for maintenance needs to be addressed efficiently.

WT, by and large, provides the necessary amenities described above. Improvements to wireless internet have been occurring regularly, and must continue to keep pace with student demands. Maintenance is provided through our outsourced contract with SSC, and that relationship requires constant attention to keep service levels at an acceptable level. More academic support space for in hall tutoring and group study is a need within the current facilities footprint.

The residential living staff must actively promote, facilitate the community, and social environments so that they promote positive student outcomes.

A critical component of a residential living operation is the staff. Staff, both professional and student, provide a support and safety network around students, while facilitating community building that is supportive to academic success. Staff are trained to get to know students so that they can recognize warning signs, and to create programs that encourage students to interact with each other.

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Staff are equipped to directly intervene with students in certain situations, and trained to call in support or refer students to various services on campus as appropriate.

Programming within the halls should be intentionally focused on things that support students. Resident Advisors can be the catalysts for students forming study groups, can encourage students to take part in the entirety of the campus living experience, and can remove barriers for students having a difficult time transitioning to campus life.

The benefit of living on campus must be clearly articulated, and must be recognized by students and parents as worth the cost.

A compelling case can be made for the value and advantages of living on campus. Students and parents are savvy consumers, and competition exists for students to live off campus. A simple math equation can compare monthly rent payments in a local apartment or rent home, possibly split between several roommates, and almost certainly a sticker price that “beats” the cost of on campus living can be found. WT must be successful in controlling the cost of the housing and meal plan operation to maintain a price plus value added that clearly beats the choice to live off campus. It is incumbent upon WT to clearly articulate that value added so that occupancy can be maintained with students who wish to live on campus. WT must not only communicate the value so that students select the on campus living experience, but WT must deliver the experience and drive the outcomes that it promises.

Transfer Students

Transfer students often choose not to live on campus. However, as college going models change, and more and more students are opting for a 2 year college experience at a lower cost to begin their academic career, a case can be made that those students would and should consider living on campus, using their last two years, rather than the first, as their “fully immersive” college experience. To facilitate and attract those students, WT must reconsider the way it assigns students to halls so that communities of transfer students and upper class students can have a living experience that is different from those transitioning directly from high school. Transfer buildings, junior and senior halls, and programs targeted at those students can create a value for them that is appropriate for their academic and maturity level.

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Living/Learning Communities

A best practice in the programming area of residential living is a concept called living/learning communities. Models for the program typically involve linking a set of classes together, and having students in those courses share a living space. For example, a group of 20-30 students might share three classes together that freshmen would typically take. They all live in the same wing of a particular residence hall, with an upper-class peer leader also living and serving as a peer mentor for the group of students. Often, a seminar course is included and a faculty member would serve as a faculty mentor for the group, and would lead the seminar.

Attempts have been made in the past at WT to implement living/learning communities, with low success due to a variety of factors that make the formal structure described difficult. Students may wish to participate, but some may want lower priced halls, while others want the more costly halls. Students are bringing more and more dual credit, making it difficult to find enough students who need all the linked courses. However, the concept of living together with students who share academic interests is achievable with some creative approaches and less rigid rules about the structure of the program. For example, having a number of small communities with students who share a particular major would likely position students together who will share similar classes. Loose affiliations, bolstered by intentional efforts to create study groups and tutoring that meet the needs of the students in the halls, should allow students to obtain the benefits of the living learning communities while maintaining the flexibility needed to assign students to various halls, and for them to take courses that meet their needs.

Further, communities could be developed around any number of interests that might bind students together in a supportive and positive environment. Wings, suites, floors, or even entire halls could be dedicated to transfer students, students interested in leadership, students who want to practice healthy lifestyles or diets, or even students who have similar career aspirations could all be supported through a nimble and flexible themed housing program.

Recommendations/Suggested Next Steps:

WT has an already existing residential program that is meeting the minimum needs of students. However, as the student body changes, WT needs to consider a number of adjustments to achieve what the program aims to achieve, and that is to drive student success.

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WT has invested a significant amount of money in the past 3 years to infrastructure in the residence halls (pipes and roofs) to extend the life of the halls that exist. WT is also investing in a major renovation of Jarrett, and has undergone cosmetic improvements in several other halls. A master facilities plan exists which encourages WT to retain most of the residence halls currently in existence and to extend their lives with continued renovation projects. The guiding principle for facilities planning in the future needs to be renovation of current facilities which should allow WT to meet the expectations of students while keeping costs down.

The investments needed should focus on adding space to support learning communities which should be developed more intensely over the upcoming years. Other improvements should address the desire for privacy within the halls, specifically the bathrooms. Most of WT's facilities have shared bathroom facilities, which cannot be changed. However, the renovation in Jarrett is converting the shared bathrooms into groupings of private bath suites in one portion of each wing. This format provides the privacy students desire, while also getting them out of their room and interacting with fellow students.

Residential Living should work towards themed housing and living learning communities as described in this paper to maximize the academic impact of campus living. This work will require collaborations with academics and with the First Year Experience office, but should yield positive results for participating students.

Residential Living should consider partnerships with other campus units to find ways to leverage the campus living experience. Examples include on campus employment and internships, tutoring, dining services and recreational sports. These services serve residential students, but they may not fully be taking advantage of the opportunity to engage students who live on campus. For example, Rec Sports probably has more residential students utilizing the facility and programs due to the convenience and proximity to campus. But could more be done to bring wellness and recreational programs directly to the halls? Could campus employment be made more available to residential students? Could dining find new innovative ways to meet residential student needs outside the traditional cafeteria and retail operations? Each avenue should be explored.

Conclusion:

WT's current policy requires students to live on campus until they have earned 60 hours of academic credit post high school (which eliminated dual credit hours.) The policy is

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motivated by the understanding that living on campus is good for students, but is also driven by the need for occupancy to pay the debt service on the operation. WT should be guided by a philosophy that we can attract and retain enough students who desire to live on campus because of the amenities, support, and conveniences we provide so that we could relax the requirement. We should have students living on campus who want to live on campus, and we should have enough of them that we can operate the business side of the operation.

WT can achieve this goal by careful planning with its facilities operation, with attention paid to programming that supports academic success, and by the fostering of an environment that encourages student interaction with each other and the greater campus community. When this message is clearly communicated with the benefits, and as we continue to be careful about the costs, residential living will thrive.

References/Works Cited:

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