

Rethinking Residential Education

Final Report

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I. Introduction and Overview

The Committee on Teaching and Academic Programs was charged this year with making recommendations to the Provost on new initiatives in residential education. More specifically, our focus was on how to better integrate USC academic resources into the undergraduate residential experience. The context of this charge is a major reshaping of undergraduate residential life that will soon take place: with the completion of the USC Village project in 2017, the university will have an additional 2700 beds as well as a new Honors College, and accompanying dining hall, public gathering space, and classroom facilities. This will enable the university to offer on-campus housing to all freshmen and sophomores. It is also an opportunity to redesign residential life across all of USC's residential colleges.

Over the course of the academic year, the committee met with a number of faculty members and administrators with experience and insight concerning residential life at USC.¹ We were also greatly assisted by consulting two recent proposals for rethinking key elements of the student residential experience that have been made by current faculty masters and faculty residents.² Our goal was to define core principles and goals that should guide the redesign of residential education over the next two years, and to identify the key organizational and logistical challenges that will need to be addressed in order to meet these goals.

Based on this inquiry, we recommend an ambitious vision that fulfills the current goal of residential colleges—to provide a venue for belonging and identification early in the student's undergraduate career—but that also pushes beyond these goals. We think that if designed imaginatively, the new thematically based residential college system can link student social life to the broader ideals of the university: to foster critical thinking, engaged citizenship, and creative exploration. The report is organized according to four sections: (1) Overview, (2) Background and Peer comparisons, (3) Core principles, and (4) Key organizational challenges.

¹ We had conversations with: Executive Director of Residential Education, Romando Nash, Faculty Masters Oliver Mayer and Phil Ethington and Faculty Resident David Albertson, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Programs Gene Bickers, Senior Associate Director of Thematic Option Rich Edinger, USC Village Project Manager Willy Marsh, and Associate Provost Robin Romans.

² Faculty Fellows Working Group, "Residential Freshmen Seminars and the Mission of USC Residential Colleges"; and Philip Ethington and Ange-Marie Hancock, "Get Involved! A Proposal for the Establishment of New-North Residential College Academic Years 2015-16 and 2016-17."

II. Background and Peer Comparisons

The USC residential college system has developed fairly recently out of a disparate collection of on-campus housing facilities. Some of these facilities were designed with a residential college model in mind, and others were built as dormitories, and thus do not have designated classroom, public meeting or dining areas. Students typically spend only their first year in the on-campus residential colleges, and often do not develop a particular affiliation or identification with these residences. Of the seven residential colleges, some currently have a thematic rubric (“International” and “Arts and Humanities”) and a strong sense of residential college identity; others function mainly as residence halls. Each has at least one faculty master and some also have resident faculty. Much of the social activity associated with residential life is coordinated by undergraduate residential assistants, and does not have an explicit academic component.

While the on-line description of the USC residential colleges asserts that the system is “based on British and Ivy League models,” it is important to stress that the structural constraints on the USC system mean that it will have to develop its own unique model. These constraints include: the fact that students currently spend only one year in USC housing; the heterogeneity of the residences in terms of size and available facilities; there are currently not any courses or formal academic programs linked to residential colleges; the ratio of faculty to students is such that there are limited opportunities for faculty-student interaction; and the multiple sources of social identity and sites of social activity that are already available to USC undergraduates. Nonetheless, with some imagination it will be possible for the USC residential college system to “integrate a stimulating social setting, cultural activities and academic excellence into a living experience that enriches and teaches,” as its vision declares.³

Given these constraints, we found it helpful to look at other peer institutions for possible models or programmatic initiatives that might better suit the structure of residential life at USC. Based on an initial survey, we focused on three universities that have developed potentially relevant models: Cornell, Northwestern, and UC San Diego. In particular, we note how these institutions address the thematic identity of colleges, the role of faculty masters and residents, curricula linked to the residential colleges, and other events and activities developed by residential colleges.

1. Cornell:⁴

- Cornell’s residential college system includes nine program houses, which serve as undergraduate housing options alongside the other residence halls: “These close-knit communities have a high level of involvement, with regular events, programming, and outreach opportunities, often in collaboration with related academic departments.” They include a house focused on environmentally

³ <https://housing.usc.edu/index.php/residentialcollege/>. The appendix provides details of each of the seven USC residential colleges.

⁴ https://living.sas.cornell.edu/live/community/res_support/facultyinvolvement.cfm

- sustainable practices, a music-themed house which includes a concert stage and a recording studio, an international student and cross-cultural interaction themed house, a house focused on Latino culture, and one that emphasizes the rich and diverse cultures of the African diaspora.
- Academic programs linked to residential life include: Faculty-in-Residence and Faculty Fellows Programs; House Professor-Deans and House Fellows; Dining discussion program; a named visiting professor program; and Professors-at-Large.
 - First-Year Experience: provides orientation to the University and “helps students flourish during their first year on campus.” Encourages intellectual curiosity, cultural exploration and informal interactions with faculty; promotes diversity and inclusiveness; exposes students to services that support academic goals, well-being and life-pursuits; introduces new students’ families to Cornell

2. Northwestern:⁵

- Northwestern has eleven residential ranging in size from 40 to 300 students, some with a single unifying theme and others that are less defined or multi-thematic. Students can affiliate as non-residential members. Themes include: Humanities Residential College, International Studies Residential College, Communications Residential College, Public Affairs Residential College, Fine Arts and Performing Arts Residential College, Science and Engineering Residential College.
- Each residential college is led by a faculty master, a full-time faculty member who advises student leaders, recruits faculty fellows to be affiliated with college, and helps shape intellectual and cultural life of the college. Students routinely dine with fellows and connect with hem at formal and informal events.
- In addition to resident faculty, there are fellows programs for affiliated faculty who are involved in regular non-curricular activities, e.g. “fireside chats,” outings and civic engagement initiatives. Fellows can offer small-credit seminars available exclusively to students at the college and mentor student research assistants through a specially funded program.

3. UC San Diego:⁶

- UCSD’s six residential colleges are designed to provide students with the advantages of a small liberal arts college plus the opportunities and resources of a large research university. Most students who enter UCSD as freshmen will live at their residential colleges for their first two years.
- Each residential college has a thematic identity that is linked to a value-orientation or set of intellectual dispositions. For instance, Thurgood Marshall College emphasizes “informed action through a lifetime of civic engagement”; John Muir College “promotes awareness of environmental issues and is dedicated to the cause of sustainability; and Eleanor Roosevelt College looks to “educate students to work effectively in a rapidly changing world” and encourages students to pursue study abroad opportunities.

⁵ <http://www.northwestern.edu/living/about-us/orai/index.html>

⁶ <http://admissions.ucsd.edu/colleges/about/index.html>

- There are explicit linkages between the curriculum and residential colleges during the freshmen year. Required General Education courses are taken at the individual colleges, and the courses, subject matter and instructors are distinctive to each college.

III. Core recommendations for the redesign of residential education at USC

Based on our conversations with faculty and administrators with experience and insight concerning USC residential life, and our research into the programs of our peer institutions, we have developed a series of core recommendations for rethinking residential education at USC.

1. *Transforming the undergraduate experience:* Shift the focus of the first two years of undergraduate social life toward on-campus resources, toward the city's cultural and civic life, toward experiences that will shape students' identities in creative and enriching ways. Ideally we will create new avenues for identification and belonging that go beyond existing venues such as the Greek system and athletic teams. One possibility to consider is to move the Greek system rush from the fall to the spring semester to ensure that students are exposed early in their careers to other forms of affiliation.
2. *Thematic rubrics:* Develop thematic rubrics linked to the residential colleges that address major contemporary arenas of interest, appeal to students, and take advantage of USC's unique strengths. Examples of possible themes include: Global perspectives, Arts and culture, Urbanism, Emerging media and technology, Civic engagement, Life sciences and health. Such themes could then structure a range of activities, such as college-linked courses, visiting speakers, performances, and field trips. The themes should be broad enough that resident faculty and students can develop subthemes for a given year.
3. *Residential education should be thematically rather than geographically bounded:* Participation in the activities that are sponsored by each residential college will not be limited to its residents. This means that if students are interested in the themes of other colleges, they are welcome to join in their activities. In this sense the residential colleges will serve as anchors for intellectual and cultural encounters that appeal to students across campus. One possibility to consider is whether the schools (Annenberg, Cinema, Price, Marshall, Roski, etc.) could play a collaborative role in developing residential college academic programming and in providing classroom, meeting and dining spaces.
4. *Residential colleges should serve as hosts to small, lower-division seminars linked to the theme of the college:* We recommend that both resident and non-resident faculty who are affiliated with the colleges teach GE seminars and writing seminars that are linked to the college. These do not necessarily have to be located physically within the college—indeed, not all residential colleges have

classroom space. But students in the colleges may be given preference in registration, and will be encouraged to participate in such a seminar during their time in the college. These courses may also seek to be experimental in form—for instance, to bring students off of campus to experience some dimension of LA and its environs: whether its cultural resources, its political issues, its environmental challenges, its food, etc.

5. *Create a non-resident faculty fellows program*: these faculty members will affiliate with residential colleges whose theme aligns with their research and teaching interests. They will teach courses, interact with students at meals and other special events, and serve as mentors. Non-resident faculty might receive stipends for their service; we might also encourage them to teach collaborative, cross-disciplinary seminars (see above); and/ or integrating their teaching in the college with their research in order to provide undergraduates with exposure to cutting edge research.

IV. Key organizational challenges

In considering these recommendations, the following issues have come up as key organizational and logical challenges that must be addressed:

1. *How to build a sustained identification with the residential college—even one that lasts beyond the year (or two) of the students' on-campus residence?* Might there be optional programming, mentorship, or capstone research projects that will continue to link students to their colleges?
2. *How should the thematic rubrics be created?* Should these be developed by a university-wide committee (such as the new Redesigning Residential Life committee); by faculty masters; by the students; etc. Can these rubrics change over time – and if so, what is the process?
3. *What will be the roles and responsibilities of the faculty in the new residential colleges?* These may include Faculty Masters, Faculty Residents, and non-resident Faculty Fellows. How will they be selected and evaluated? How should residential college faculty be integrated into larger structures of curriculum development and faculty career paths?
4. *What should the governance structure be as faculty members play a larger role in the residential college experience?* Are the existing structure, staff, and procedures of the Residential Education program within the Office of Student Affairs sufficient to accomplish the planning and implementation of the new model, or should the academic dimension be planned and implemented through faculty, rather than Residential Education staff leadership? To whom should resident faculty with an increased responsibility for undergraduate curriculum planning and operations report?

5. *How should the curriculum that is linked to residential colleges be developed?* What role should the General Education office, the Writing Program, and Thematic Option program play? How will courses be selected, and how will students enroll? Will there be preference for students from the college that hosts the course?

6. *How does the physical infrastructure of residential colleges (including the planned USC village) relate to the program's aims?* How, for example, to deal with the fact that many of the residences were designed mainly as dormitories with limited communal space for informal meetings, for classes, for events, and for dining? How should the possibility of a second year of on-campus residence be integrated with the aims of the newly redesigned residential colleges?

Appendix: Residential Colleges at USC

Here is a longer description of the current USC Residential College system, from the university website:⁷

Beginning in the fall of 2012, each USC freshman is welcomed into a Residential College – specially designed programs to give new Trojans a built-in community from the moment they arrive. These Residential Colleges offer an experience far beyond rooming in residence halls. These cohort experiences allow students to meet and learn from others with different interests, backgrounds, academic pursuits and experiences, talents, and goals – people they might not otherwise meet in classes or extracurricular activities.

What’s more, some of the university’s most respected faculty members and their families live with the students in these Residential Colleges, taking personal interest in the academic careers of the students within their college. In addition to providing intellectual leadership, these faculty members coordinate and host academic and non-academic extracurricular activities with faculty, guests, and visiting scholars. These events include programs developed in-house at USC as well as in collaboration with other campus units and organizations throughout Southern California. Example activities that are held throughout the school year include seminars, concerts, lectures, poetry readings, recitals, theatrical productions, scientific experiments, reading groups, field trips, and other recreational, cultural and artistic events.

Because USC’s Residential Colleges combine the personal attention, support, and family-like atmosphere of a small college with the extensive resources of a major research university, they are precisely the kind of program that sets USC apart as exceptional.

USC’s Residential Colleges also foster the success of students during their time at the university: increasing aesthetic, cultural, and intellectual values in students as well as gains in independence, tolerance, empathy, and interpersonal skills. Residential Colleges are also the ideal forum for the blossoming of friendships, professional associations, and most enduring relationships.

Here are the online descriptions of each of our residential colleges:

1. Arts and Humanities Residential College at Parkside: One faculty master, Two resident faculty

- Description: In addition to its special interest floors dedicated to music, the visual arts and architecture, the Arts & Humanities Residential College gives students from all academic backgrounds the opportunity to express themselves in these

⁷ <https://village.usc.edu/residential-colleges-2/>

fields. Designed to create a space where students and faculty can form a strong scholarly community centered on the arts and humanities, the Arts & Humanities Residential College at Parkside connects students with the cultural offerings of the campus and Los Angeles area.

2. International Residential College at Parkside: One faculty master, three resident faculty

- Description: The International Residential College at Parkside—encompassing the International Residential College (suites) and Parkside Apartments—serves as a campus focal point for dialogue about global issues. Living at Parkside will allow you to participate in intellectual, cultural and social exchanges with people who have a wide range of backgrounds and interests, in one of the most attractive locations on campus. The International Residential College hosts visiting scholars and renowned international figures who give lectures and speak informally with students.

3. New Residential College: One faculty master

- Description: New College is noted for its vibrant atmosphere and strong personal and academic support network. The residential college fosters a community of friends by offering programs that draw upon the cultural resources of both USC and Los Angeles and encourage students to learn and interact with one another. Every Tuesday evening, the community gathers for a special dinner, often featuring musical entertainment or a distinguished university guest, and on weekends, New offers opportunities for students to attend concerts, plays, films and sports events.

4. North Residential College: One faculty master

- Description: A hub of freshman life, close to libraries, dining facilities and the McCarthy Quad, North is a popular location for students new to USC. The residential college strives to integrate a dynamic social setting with academic excellence. One vital tradition is the weekly Master's Night Dinner, a special community meal with a casual atmosphere (and good desserts). Residents talk politics and philosophy with senior faculty members, interact with special guest speakers, enjoy live music or just relax with friends.

5. South Area Residential College: One faculty master, three faculty residents

- Description: The new residential college comprises four traditional residence halls: Marks Hall, Trojan Hall, Pardee Tower and Marks Tower. Residents attend Master's Night dinners in the EVK dining hall, participate in special events and benefit from programming emphasizing personal growth and leadership.

6. University Residential College at Birnkrant: One faculty master

- Description: For Trustee, Presidential and Mork Family Scholars, as well as other select freshmen awarded honors upon admission to USC, the University Residential College offers a vibrant and enhanced living and learning experience. This program is designed to inspire students to reach their full potential as agents of global change, through faculty interaction, diverse programming, and opportunities to experience Los Angeles.

7. West Area Residential College (Fluor Tower and Webb Tower): two faculty masters

- Description: Opening as residential college in the fall of 2012, Webb and Fluor Towers are a part of the West Area group of residential colleges. The live-in Faculty Masters will create a lively community that encourages the exploration of intercultural issues via participation in the West Area Diversity Month and creates a variety of living-learning opportunities for residents.