# TRENDS

## Fall 2026



GREAT LAKES ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY HOUSING OFFICERS

*Photo by Josh Rojas, GLACUHO Member*
*Brown County State Park, IN*

# ABOUT TRENDS

*TRENDS* is published twice times a year by Great Lakes Association of College and University Housing Officers (GLACUHO) for members of the association.

**GLACUHO is a non-profit organization that strives to:**

- Better prepare housing officers to meet the diverse and changing needs of those we serve with primary concern for students.
- Contribute to the improvement of dining services, residential life, residential services, and residential facilities provided by housing officers.
- Sponsor activities and services which assist housing officers in the exchange and distribution of information and ideas.
- Support the goals and purposes of the Association of College and University Housing Officers International (ACUHO-I)
- Provide opportunities for the education and professional development of housing officers.
- Advance and communicate professional knowledge and standards in the field of housing.

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# A LOOK INSIDE THIS EDITION OF TRENDS


| | |
|---|---|
| 5 | Spring 2026 Letter From the President |
| 7 | GLACUHO 2026 Conference |
| 9 | Behind the Curtain: How Operations Keeps Res Life Running |
| 14 | Building FERPros: Parent Interactions with FERPA and Tips for RA Training |
| 24 | Contributions to a Community of Care |
| 29 | Knowing, Connecting, Empowering: The Power of Meaningful Relationships |
| 42 | Promoting Community in a Digital Space |
| 46 | Wake Me Up When September Ends: A Guide to Getting Through the First Few Months of the Academic Year |
| 57 | Wayside Residence Hall: Crime Prevention by Environmental Design and Managing Residential Conflict in a Very Special Residence Hall |
| 60 | What's Really in the Air |
| 69 | When Your RAs Aren't OK: How You Can Prepare Your Team to Navigate the Worst |

# LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Greetings, GLACUHO!

There is something special about the Fall each year. At campuses across our region, we have welcomed students back, watched residence halls come alive again, and begun to settle into the rhythm of another academic year. The quiet of summer has given way to the energy of students, staff, programs, meetings, and everything else that makes our work in housing and residence life so meaningful. As we prepare to gather again as an Association in November, I find myself reflecting on just how much possibility exists in a new beginning.

This year, I have been thinking a lot about starting over. Not because what came before was unsuccessful, but because every new beginning gives us an opportunity to ask better questions: What have we learned? What might we do differently? What is possible if we are willing to try something new?

Those questions are at the heart of this year's GLACUHO experience.

In just a few short weeks, we will gather in Lansing, Michigan, for the 2026 GLACUHO Conference. I am incredibly excited to be back in the mitten and to an experience that represents so much of what I love about this Association. Conferences are about professional development, of course—but they are also about connection. They are about the random  conversations between sessions, the unexpected introductions, the moments when someone shares an idea that changes the way you see your work, and the opportunity to remember that none of us are doing this work alone.

I hope you will come to Lansing ready to learn, but also ready to wonder about what is currently being done and what could come next..

This year, my contemporary issue was one that I believe is increasingly important to our profession: data-driven decision making—using assessment to explore, learn, and tell the story of housing and residence life.

Assessment is not simply about surveys, reports, or spreadsheets. It is not something we do at the end of a program because someone tells us we need an assessment plan. Assessment is a leadership conversation.

It asks us to slow down and consider what we are seeing, what our students are telling us, and what our data might teach us about the communities we are creating. It helps us move beyond “This is how we have always done it” toward “What does the evidence tell us, and what should we do next?” Assessment gives us a way to tell our story.

# LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Our work matters. The relationships we build matter. The communities we create matter. The learning that happens in our residence halls matters. But if we cannot articulate that impact—if we cannot tell the story of what we are doing and why it matters—we miss an opportunity to advocate for our students, our teams, and our profession.

I hope this contemporary issue follows you beyond the conference. I hope it encourages you to look differently at the information already around you. I hope it helps make assessment feel less intimidating and more accessible. And I hope it reminds all of us that we do not need to be assessment experts to be curious about our work.

As we gather in Lansing, I hope GLACUHO can be a place where we ask questions together. Because this Association is at its best when we are willing to learn from one another, challenge one another, and create something better together. We do not need to have every answer before we begin. We simply need to be willing to begin.

There is a line I have been carrying with me throughout this year: we should not be afraid to start over. Starting over does not erase the work that came before. Instead, it allows us to carry the lessons forward while giving ourselves permission to imagine something different. That is what I see in GLACUHO.

I see an Association willing to examine its traditions while honoring its history. I see professionals investing in one another. I see emerging leaders finding their voices and experienced leaders making room for those voices to be heard. I see people willing to try, to learn, and—even when things do not go exactly as planned—to fail brilliantly and keep moving forward. That gives me tremendous hope.

As we prepare to come together in Lansing, I invite you to bring your questions, your experiences, your data, your stories, and your hopes for the future of our profession.

Let's learn something new. Let's challenge ourselves. Let's celebrate how far we have come. Let's figure out where we go next. Together.

I cannot wait to see you in Lansing.

With GLACUHO pride,



-Zac Birch
GLACUHO President

Adapt Advocate Advance

GREAT LAKES ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY HOUSING OFFICERS

# GEARING UP FOR

# LANSING

## YOUR GLACUHO PACKING LIST

What to bring and what you'll thank yourself later for!

- *Clothing!*
- *Warm Clothes (Layers for the Convention Center)*
- *Casual Clothing (For socials and relaxation)*
- *Business Clothes (headshots will be available)*
- *Comfortable Shoes*
- Toiletries
- *School Spirit Wear*
- *University Name Tag and Business Cards*
- *Water Bottle*
- *Presenter Necessities (Clicker, HDMI, etc.)*
- *Laptop, iPad or other notetaking devices*
- *Medications or First Aid Supplies*
- *Bookbag/Messenger Bag*
- *Snacks for Traveling*
- *Identifcation & Purchasing or Credit Card*

**VISIT THE GLACUHO CONFERENCE SOCIAL STORIES**

GLACUHO

# EXPLORE LANSING

## LOCAL FOOD

- [ ] Jollof Afro Carribean Lounge
- [ ] Sidecar Slider Bar
- [ ] Bowdie's Chophouse
- [ ] La Cocina Cubana
- [ ] AnQi Sushi Express
- [ ] EnVie Bistro

## NIGHT LIFE

- [ ] The Nuthouse
- [ ] Tin Can
- [ ] American 5th Spirits
- [ ] Lansing Brewing Company
- [ ] Midtown Brewing Company
- [ ] Moriarty's Pub

## SPIRITUAL PLACES

- [ ] St. Mary's Cathedral
- [ ] Trinity Lutheran Church
- [ ] First Presbyterian Church
- [ ] Islamic Center of East Lansing
- [ ] Chabad House of Greater Lansing
- [ ] Oracle's Apothecary

## ENTERTAINMENT

- [ ] Summit Comics and Games
- [ ] Lansing Shuffle
- [ ] Deadtime Stories Books and Gifts
- [ ] Jackson Field
- [ ] Urban Beat Monday Drag Show
- [ ] Reno One North Tuesday Board Game night

## COFFEE RUN

- [ ] Biggby Coffee
- [ ] The Hob Nob
- [ ] Great Harvest Bakery and Cafe
- [ ] New Daily Bagel
- [ ] Strange Matter
- [ ] Soup Spoon Cafe

## SPECIAL TREATS

- [ ] Melting Moments
- [ ] Mexi Treats
- [ ] Cinnamon Lane Bakery
- [ ] Capital City Sweets
- [ ] Sugar Shack
- [ ] Artic Corner

Adapt Advocate Advance

# Behind the Curtain: How Operations Keeps Res Life Running

By: Rachel Bowling, University of Cincinnati &
Tim Griffin, Xavier University

## Introduction

Housing operations form the backbone of the overall residential experience, shaping everything from daily comfort to student success. However, most of this work remains unseen and is carried out by professionals and campus partners whose daily efforts ensure building's safety, functionality, and welcoming atmosphere. This article highlights the hidden labor that supports residential living, including the communication structures that help students and families navigate complex housing processes. It also provides an overview of the various organizational and financial models used across GLACUHO institutions, examines the essential role of student workers, and outlines the contributions of key professional organizations that support practitioners in this field. Finally, the article addresses several common myths about housing operations in order to illustrate the full scope of this work and its direct connection to student development and community well-being. The article concludes with reviewing professional development organizations available to housing staff with a focus on operational needs.

## Hidden Labor

When operations function smoothly, students rarely notice. Research from ACUHO-I consistently shows reliable housing systems, including cleanliness, maintenance responsiveness, functioning technology, and clear communication, are strongly connected to higher levels of student satisfaction and residential retention. However, the professionals who keep these systems running are often invisible to residents and sometimes even to colleagues. This includes not only housing operations teams but also essential campus partners such as housekeeping and maintenance.

Housing operations involve far more than daily tasks. The work includes preventative planning and strategic coordination that ensure buildings remain safe, functional, and supportive environments where students can learn, connect, and build community. Effective operations rely on collaboration across multiple units, and recognizing the shared effort behind these systems is critical to understanding their impact.

Many university housing departments now use a combination of call centers and live chat platforms to support students and families with fast and accessible information. These services allow users to receive answers to questions about assignments, billing, contracts, room changes, and move-in or move-out logistics without needing to visit an office or wait for an email response. Live chat is especially helpful for students who prefer quick, mobile communication while navigating time-sensitive housing processes. The structure of these communication systems varies across institutions. Larger universities often operate dedicated call centers with staff who specialize in housing policies and customer service, and they may extend hours during peak periods. Smaller institutions may rely on housing staff or student employees who answer calls and chats alongside other duties. Regardless of size or structure, these tools provide consistent, timely guidance that reduces confusion and helps students and families feel informed and supported throughout the housing experience.

## ⭐ Types of Housing Systems ⭐

College and university housing operations within the GLACUHO region are structured in several distinct ways, depending on institutional size, governance model, and business approach. The below information attempts to provide a breakdown of the various types of operational models within the region including characteristics and example institutions.

### 1. Unified Housing Operations

In a **unified system**, all residential operations report through one central housing department. This unit typically oversees assignments, facilities coordination, residence life, conduct, and occupancy management under a single leadership structure.

Some defining characteristics of this type of structure include:

- Centralized budget
- Consistent policies and staffing model
- Streamlined decision-making
- Clear accountability structure

Some examples of such institutions within the GLACUHO region include University of Michigan and Grand Valley State University.

## 2. Bifurcated Systems

A **bifurcated system** splits housing responsibilities into two primary units, most commonly:

- Facilities/Operations encompassing such areas as assignments, occupancy management and planning.
- Residence Life/Student Development encompassing such areas as residential education and conduct.

These divisions may report through separate administrative lines (e.g., Auxiliary Operations/Finance vs. Student Affairs). Some defining characteristics of this type of structure include:

- Shared responsibility model
- Potentially separate budgets
- Requires cross-divisional collaboration
- Can improve specialization but increase coordination complexity

Some examples of such institutions within the GLACUHO region include University of Cincinnati and DePaul University.

## 3. Trifurcated Systems

A **trifurcated system** divides housing into three primary areas, often:

- Assignments/Occupancy Management
- Facilities/Operations
- Residence Life

These areas may report through different vice-presidential portfolios, or they may be autonomous units. Characteristics include:

- High degree of specialization
- Complex reporting relationships
- Strong need for governance agreements and memoranda of understanding
- Often found at very large public research institutions

Some examples of such institutions within the GLACUHO region include Bowling Green State University.

## Auxiliary Housing Operations vs. Non-Auxiliary Models

**Auxiliary Housing Operation**

An **auxiliary enterprise** is a self-supporting unit that does not rely on state appropriations or general university funds. Instead, it generates its own revenue, typically through room and board charges, and covers all its costs through its own generation of these funds. Auxiliary models require strong financial forecasting, occupancy management, and bond compliance oversight.

**Non-Auxiliary Models**

Other universities operate housing within the general fund, meaning housing revenues and expenses are integrated into the institution's broader budget. The department may then receive back a portion of these revenues as an operating budget.

Within the GLACUHO region, member institutions encompass all types of operational and financial models. Understanding whether a campus operates unified, bifurcated, trifurcated, auxiliary, or general fund housing is essential for benchmarking, strategic planning, and leadership development in collegiate housing.

## Student Workers and Operational Support

Student employees play an essential role in housing operations, and the structure of these roles varies widely depending on the size and type of institution. Larger universities may employ a broad network of specialized student positions such as Resident Assistants, Desk Assistants, Operations Assistants, and call center staff, along with other roles that support housing and residence life functions. In contrast, smaller institutions may rely on fewer student positions, with the RA role becoming more well-rounded and responsible for a broader range of operational and community-based tasks. Each approach reflects the unique needs and capacity of the institution while demonstrating how critical student workers are to the functioning of university housing.

## Myths

Understanding housing operations requires addressing several common misconceptions. The myth that **operations is only about work orders and not student facing** overlooks the broader impact of operational work. Work orders represent only one part of a much larger system that includes planning, communication, preventative maintenance, and coordinated response. Even when students do not meet the staff preparing rooms or maintaining buildings, they feel the results of that work every day through the comfort, safety, and predictability of their environment. Another myth is that **operations and student development do not overlap,** when in reality they support one another. Students engage more fully and build stronger communities when they live in spaces that feel stable and well cared for.

A further myth is that **operations only reacts to problems and does not plan ahead,** although proactive planning is central to the field. Operations teams complete inspections, perform safety checks, audit inventory, prepare buildings for opening, and coordinate maintenance cycles long before issues arise. It is also a myth that **residence halls function the same way year round,** because operational needs shift significantly with the seasons. Summer conferences require fast transitions, August move in demands extensive preparation, break periods involve adjusted access protocols, and mid semester periods focus on room changes and maintenance cycles. Housing staff consistently adapt workflows to meet the changing needs of each period in the academic year.

## Professional Organizations

Along with ACUHO-I, the diverse range of operational experiences encountered by housing professionals are served by a number of national and international organizations. Some of these organizations include, but are not limited to:

**Association for Student Residential Accommodation (ASRA)**

- **Focus:** An international organization serving the housing and operational needs of those providing housing accommodation abroad.
- **Great For:** Professionals exploring careers or benchmarking from across the pond.
- **Learn More:** ASRA Site

**National Association of College Auxiliary Services (NACAS)**

- **Focus:** Professional trade association that supports the non-academic segment of higher education responsible for generating business through a diverse array of campus services
- **Great For:** Food service, bookstore, operations, transportation, laundry, vending, and other auxiliary services staff
- **Learn More**: NACAS Site

**Association of Higher Education Facilities Professionals (APPA)**

- **Focus:** Focuses on campus facilities, construction, maintenance, and utility management, offering the Institute for Facilities Management and the Leadership Academy.
- **Great For:** Facilities, construction, housekeeping, maintenance, capital planning, and operations staff
- **Learn More:** APPA Site

# Building FERPros: Parent Interactions with FERPA and Tips for RA Training

Lauren Ivankovich, Purdue University
Joe Smith, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Anyone who has worked within housing and residence life has more than likely experienced the challenge of communicating the protections provided through the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) with parents and loved ones. Navigating FERPA in conversations with people who are unfamiliar with the act or its protections might even seem like it is a right of passage in the field of Higher Education. Examples may include wellness checks when a student is not answering their cell phones, but a parent wants to make contact. It may also include sharing information or lack thereof with conduct as well. However, while FERPA may roll off the tongue for many of us, it is not always well received or understood when navigating conversations with those who are unfamiliar with its role in the lives of students.



For those of us in Higher Education, FERPA is a shield for students and a layer of protection for their privacy. To parents, however, it is often viewed as an institutional defense to be used against them. The truth is we aren't attempting to use these protections against parents or loved ones by any means. However, we as Higher Education professionals are required to be knowledgeable of and comfortable with communicating and maintaining the protection of student information through the use of FERPA. When we consider how poor communication of those protections can sound to a parent or loved one, it becomes easier to understand the other side of the FERPA conversation and how it can appear that FERPA is being weaponized. At the end of the day, FERPA should be a tool to support student privacy. It should not act as a barrier to parental concerns or a fuel of frustration.



# “I can’t tell you that,”

is an answer that anyone would be frustrated to receive, regardless of the question or situation. It is also the most common response we provide to student staff to share with parents or guardians when being asked about their students. Primary examples of this often arise during wellness checks for students in relation to mental health concerns, class attendance, inability to contact students, and roommate conflicts. While this is not an exhaustive list of examples, these concerns and others are important to the people that care about our students. We can sometimes forget that families and loved ones are placing significant trust in us when students move into our residence halls. Awareness of this trust is important as we address concerns with seriousness while balancing what we can share with involved parties. This is an area where we can improve student staff response.



Student staff are knowledgeable of FERPA and what they can and cannot share, but without proper tools to effectively communicate with concerned parties outside of the student, FERPA can start to look like the aforementioned weapon of conversation. Providing student staff with specific tools and training to navigate these conversations can empower them to be FERPros that protect student information while navigating concerns.







# Helping Parents Understand FERPA

Parents generally don't take issue with the concept of FERPA itself. When it is explained how FERPA is in place to protect student privacy, many parents are able to recognize the role FERPA plays in protecting their students by safeguarding their information. Frustration often arises when parents become involved in a specific situation, and this law that was a protection for their student is now a barrier to helping their student fix a problem. Guiding the parent to "zoom out" of the situation can help them recognize why FERPA must be followed. They may not be happy about the result, but they may start to understand why a university employee can't share protected information about a student with a parent. So what is it that parents need to know?



FERPA is the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act. Higher education has a lot of abbreviations; being able to name the act and what it protects can provide a better perspective for the parent to grasp its purpose in relation to their student.

What exactly can we do? While we can't give information out about their students, we can provide context for what we do in similar situations. This can include referring students to other campus resources, sharing information about conflict resolution, etc.



Other offices may be able to provide more assistance depending on the situation. A student may be able to complete a FERPA release form for a specific conduct case or for a billing question. For a wellness check, university police may be able to provide more updates.

We care. One challenge of helping parents understand FERPA is that parents often contact us with heightened emotions about a specific situation because they care about their students. We also care about their students, but that is something that can get lost in translation when all they are seeing (or hearing) is that we are now a barrier to helping their child. Assuring a parent that we are also committed to their student's success and wellness can help deescalate the conversation and move towards a resolution.



# Tools for RAs

When we tell RAs that we can't give parents any information, we do a great job of showing RAs how to not break the law. However, by giving more tools to RAs that help them navigate parent interactions, not only can we help RAs feel more comfortable in these situations until a supervisor arrives, but we can empower RAs to more quickly deescalate situations with parents and ultimately create a more positive experience for our students and their families. When interacting with parents, RAs can:

- Validate the parents' concerns. We're not just interacting with a stranger who wants access to protected information. We're speaking with a parent who cares so much about their child that they arrived in person to address issues or to ensure their child's wellbeing. Validating parents' concerns can be a strong first step towards assuring parents that we share the same goal of ensuring their student's safety. Once the parent is reassured, we are better able to work with them to gather information and identify solutions.



- Explain standard protocol. As previously discussed, while staff can't discuss a specific student's situation or circumstances, staff can share what protocols are typically followed in a given situation (depending on department policy). Explaining standard protocol gives parents a better idea of what steps are going to be taken about their child's situation, which can remove unknowns and help the parent feel more at ease.
- Use intentional language. Specific words or phrases to use can be helpful tools for RAs that shape a parent interaction. Something as simple as thanking the parent for their report and letting the parent know that a supervisor has been contacted can help the parent feel at ease knowing that their report has been taken seriously.



Some extent of FERPA training is typically a requirement for most university jobs, including for student positions. However, inconsistent or surface-level training for student staff creates room for error in complex situations. Dedicating time within student staff training to cover various FERPA-related scenarios and specific microskills can lead to better preparedness from student staff and better experiences for residents and their families. Overall, FERPA is a complex topic when working with parents and staff, but with the right skills, tips & training, we can turn our staff into FERPros.





# Contributions to a Community of Care



CAROLINE MURRAY / MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

In higher education, we often think of ourselves as “fixers,” used to having intentional plans in place to respond to complex situations. We routinely lean on standard operating procedures, best practices, and even whole committees dedicated to solving problems that arise on our campuses. Considering ourselves seasoned experts of crisis response, we pride ourselves on being able to offer resolutions that center student care and help our residents persist to graduation. Response is routine to us: we hold duty phones each night awaiting the problems of others, eager to serve and to solve.

***But sometimes, there are situations that truly have no fix.***

In these times, situations that happen hopefully few and far between in our careers, when an entire campus is impacted, we can feel insecure of our impact as singular departments. Especially if the crisis falls outside of our control, we can feel insufficient in giving care that does not completely provide remedy. Sometimes this fear of thinking a responding act of care is too small, unsubstantial when it comes to addressing monumental concern, can prevent us from acting at all.

On February 13, 2023, there was a shooting on my campus at Michigan State University. Three students lost their lives, several more were seriously injured, and the rest of campus lost a sense of security and was forever impacted. As someone who was on campus with students when this happened, there is not a single day that goes by where I do not think about February 13. I remember the immediate response from our team. I remember checking in with my resident assistants throughout the night to ensure they were in a safe place. I remember reconvening the morning after to determine next steps, figuring out who was able to hold a duty phone, arranging schedules so people could rest and recover, and trying to understand what campus operations would look like once classes resumed.

As much as I remember the hurt and the fear experienced, something I will also never forget is how our community stepped up to respond in the days and weeks following the crisis. This is what this article is about: small acts of kindness that resulted in community-wide responses to unthinkable tragedy. With the shooting, no singular department was able to "fix" what had happened. No singular department, team leader, or community member could restore lost feelings of safety or undo the impact of what had occurred that evening. However, what we found was not a response of fixing, but rather a potluck of care, each party bringing whatever they could to the table to feed the community.

***There were countless contributions to this potluck, but as I reflect, these are some that still sit with me:***

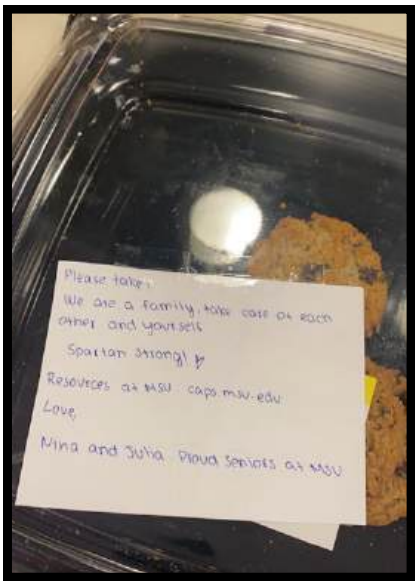
Less than 24 hours after the shooting concluded, the mother of one of my RAs drove up from the west side of the state with miniature bundt cakes, enough for the RA's whole floor of residents and for my staff. The mini-fridge within her RA office was overflowing; a symbol of a parent's care, not just for their own child, but for their child's neighbors and team members.




At the MSU Spartan statue (an iconic campus landmark), I remember standing off to the side and seeing students handing out roses to other students so that everyone present could place something at the feet of the statue, now a makeshift memorial. The shooting lining up with Valentine's Day made for a plethora of flowers so vast that you could not see the feet of the statue for several days. The act of not only bringing flowers, but bringing extra so others could participate, was an act led by students that I will never forget witnessing.



The day following the shooting, my hall got a visit from countless therapy dogs from across the state, and I remember walking into the building's auditorium to see my RA petting the belly of Zeke the Wonderdog, the frisbee-catching MSU icon. Even our four-legged Spartans had something to contribute. I remember hearing that therapy dogs were brought in from other states to respond. I remember seeing dogs around every corner, being hugged by students and bringing comfort and kisses for weeks following the shooting. The idea that someone miles away would drive to my campus because there was a chance a student would feel a little reprieve by seeing their dog shows how a community can come together in unexpected ways. Everyone had something to give.




Two unknown senior students drove to our freshman residence hall and dropped off a massive tray of chocolate chip cookies that directed students to our counseling resources. To this day, I don't know if they had lived in my hall as first-year students, or just wanted to bring comfort to our hall just because they could.

Our sustainability office also found time to bring joy to our community. I walked by a classroom in my hall to see that they had dropped off dirt, recycled teacups and mugs, and little succulents to plant for anyone who needed some cheer. My succulent is long gone, but I still have the cup as a reminder of the small acts of kindness that can contribute to healing. The sustainability office is not likely one that comes to mind when thinking of who should respond to a crisis, but I am stuck on the idea that each team, rather than thinking "this issue is too big for us to tackle" instead thought "what is something we can give?" These small acts of giving combined into a large, campus-wide response that made coming to work that week bearable, and contributed to our processing of that trauma. Someone in that department thought a succulent would make us smile during a challenging time, and took the effort to gather supplies and deliver kindness to our hall.





Finding moments to step away kept me functional that month, and I have immense gratitude for each department that provided those small pockets of peace. One particular moment that comes to mind for me was a visit to our school's dairy farm. Our farm had posted on Facebook that they were doing open hours for anyone who wanted to stop by and pet a cow. They had over 800 visitors that week. Having worked with the farm previously that year for a "Cows in the Courtyard" event, it felt like a friend reaching out to lend a hand. I remember getting to pet baby cows with some of my team members and getting to catch up with some of the student workers who cared for the animals. It was a true moment of rest, where I didn't think about work for a few moments. When tragedy occurs on campus, our first thought usually isn't "I wonder how the dairy farm is going to respond to this." But I'll never forget how every department, regardless of what their role was or how they interacted with students, was giving something to the community to make our days a little brighter.

Local businesses off campus also stepped in to give what they could. The cat cafe where I adopted my ESA offered free time in their cat room for any MSU students. I received pictures from my RA staff of them cuddling with kittens. Several coffee shops opened their doors for students to receive free treats. Other campuses in our state also gave their love. I remember our building getting a box of treats and fidget toys to give our RAs delivered to us by a neighboring college. A small token of care, but the fact that someone at a different campus put in the time and effort to prepare and send the package to us meant the world. It sent a message of "we're thinking of you."

Students returned to classes a week later, and were met with care at all angles. In the wet Michigan spring, there was a day of service where the community lined the pathway of our red cedar river with donations of items from a major grocery store chain and various partners. Students were given tote bags to fill with large jars of peanut butter, boxes of cereal, and other assorted goods. Some argued that the event was treating tragedy responses like Halloween, but the sun was warm for the first time in a week and I affirmed that the students deserved to not worry about groceries. The lawn outside the president's house that day was lined with dogs to embrace. Parents lined the corners of campus with homemade goodie bags of candy and supportive notes. I debated if my lack of student status qualified me for acts of comfort, but as someone else's mom pulled me in for a hug, I realized the decision had been made for me.

As much as I am shaped by the shooting as a student affairs professional, I am also shaped by the compassion that occurred in the weeks that followed. A year later on the anniversary of the shooting, my team helped me in placing mass quantities of donuts, coffee, and fidget toys out in our lobby. I took time from the day to walk around campus. There were flowers again covering the Spartan statue, as well as the sites of the shooting: Berkey Hall and the MSU Union. I continued to see students handing flowers for others to place. At night, campus landmarks and the site of the losses were lit up in green. There was a huge gathering space hosted in the parking lot adjacent to the stadium full of hot cocoa, volunteers, heating tents, and the return of the dogs. There was a spot where people could document memories of February 13 on a piece of paper that is placed in a large plastic container that is now on display in our Union. There were buttons dispersed with a "no media please" emblem so students could be given privacy. Plastic green electric candles were handed out as part of luminary kits to place in the window. In the year that follows, we see less memorialization for the shooting, but the impact of small actions continues.

What I have listed above are just some of the many ways that our community came together to care for one another. I imagine there were many additional acts of care that I did not even get to see. Recently in a team meeting with my RA staff, we discussed the idea of "if you want a village, you need to be a villager." Being a member of a community can mean showing up to give care in whatever way you are able, rather than worrying if what you are bringing is "enough." Contributions to healing do not need to be all-encompassing, they just need to come from a place of care. Did getting to pet a cow resolve the concern of the campus shooting? No, but it made me feel human again for a moment, which helped me continue to show up for my students. To me, it made all the difference, to a point where I remember it three years later. When we sit in anxiety over the responsibility of being a "fixer" we sometimes get in the way of our ability to be a community member. We cannot have a campus that relies on one department to be the sole resolution in a crisis. Rather, I wonder what it would look like if each team could continue see the role that they play in community care and work to center that when it's needed most.

# KNOWING, CONNECTING, EMPOWERING:

## *the power of meaningful relationships*

**Authored by**: Anderson Reeves, *Xavier University*, Maddie Hagg, *Northern Michigan University*, Emmanuel Botchway, *Ball State University* & Oluwadamioloa Ajayi, *Augustana College*

As higher education populations continue to diversify, new thinking models and approaches are needed to ensure a student's successful transition to college. Pittman and Richmond (2008) explain that students experience multiple transitions upon entering higher education. This includes changes in their living situations, negotiating academic environments, developing new friendships and, for younger students at least, adapting to greater independence and responsibility in their academic lives. Many students struggle with the transition to college, experiencing loneliness, distress, academic disengagement, and even depression (Wintre and Bowers, 2007; Gall, Evans and Bellerose, 2000). A student's college experience extends beyond classrooms, assignments, and academic requirements. Students spend a considerable part of their college years interacting with peers, developing relationships, exploring new interests, seeking support, and learning how to navigate unfamiliar environments.

For students who live on campus, many of these experiences occur within residence halls, where students from different backgrounds share spaces and gradually become part of a residential community. The experience of living together, however, involves more than sharing the same building. Students also need opportunities to develop relationships, establish connections, and feel that they are part of a meaningful community. A sense of connection can have implications beyond a students' social experiences. Pedler, Willis, and Nieuwoudt (2022) examined university students' sense of belonging in relation to academic motivation, enjoyment, confidence, engagement, and achievement. Their study of 578 university students found meaningful relationships between students' sense of belonging and several aspects of their academic experience. The findings provide an important perspective for residence life: the relationships and sense of community students develop outside the classroom are an essential part of their broader college experience.

Residence life has traditionally used programming as one way of creating opportunities for these relationships to develop. Social activities, educational programs, community events, and other initiatives bring residents into shared spaces where they can interact with one another. Yet the presence of programs does not necessarily tell us whether relationships are being formed. Saperstein and Nash (2015) describe this concern in their discussion of residence life at Texas Christian University, where the emphasis on completing programming requirements shifted toward a greater focus on relationships with residents. Rather than measuring engagement primarily through the number of programs completed, attention turned toward understanding the students who lived in the community and allowing those relationships to inform how staff engaged them.

This shift changes the starting point of residential engagement. A program-centered approach may begin with deciding what activity to offer residents, while a relationship-centered approach begins with understanding the residents themselves. Student and professional staff learn who students are, identify the people and resources that may support their experiences, and encourage students to become active participants in shaping those experiences. Knowing, Connecting, Empowering (KCE) emerged as a philosophy that organizes residential engagement around this progression (Saperstein & Nash, 2015).

## WHY RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

KCE as it exists today got its start with Dr. Craig Allen, Rachel Anne Hopper, and their team at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, TX. However, the basis on which KCE was developed and refined is composed of research and writings from across the academic spectrum, and successes in civic social reforms. One such initiative that inspired the TCU team sprung from Pastor Mack McCarter and his organization Community Renewal International (CRI); a faith-based non-profit organization founded in 1994 and based in Shreveport, LA.

Shortly before CRI came to be, Shreveport was experiencing a racial justice reckoning following the fatal shooting of William David McKinney, a 20-year-old Black man, by a white teenager. In the face of the anger and frustration that followed this tragedy, Pastor McCarter started knocking on doors in what was, at the time, an area of Shreveport with high crime and poverty rates. Pastor McCarter shared in a segment with CBS Sunday Morning (2020) that he would knock saying, “There’s a group of us that believe if we’ll get to be friends, then we can change this city.” With persistence and intentional presence in the faith community in those neighborhoods, a difference began to emerge: “I saw friendship overcome the fact that we had been strangers and, for sure, overcome fear” (CBS Sunday Morning, 2020). This change is what inspired Pastor McCarter to start CRI, and, in part, what got the attention of the Residence Life team at TCU.

The parallels that exist between the foundations of a neighborhood, town, or city significantly mirror the communities formed in on-campus housing, in a way that got Residence Life at TCU asking, “What kind of world do we need?” The team was challenged to reflect on the people and environments needed to make that world a reality, and discerning how a residence life program can plant the seed.

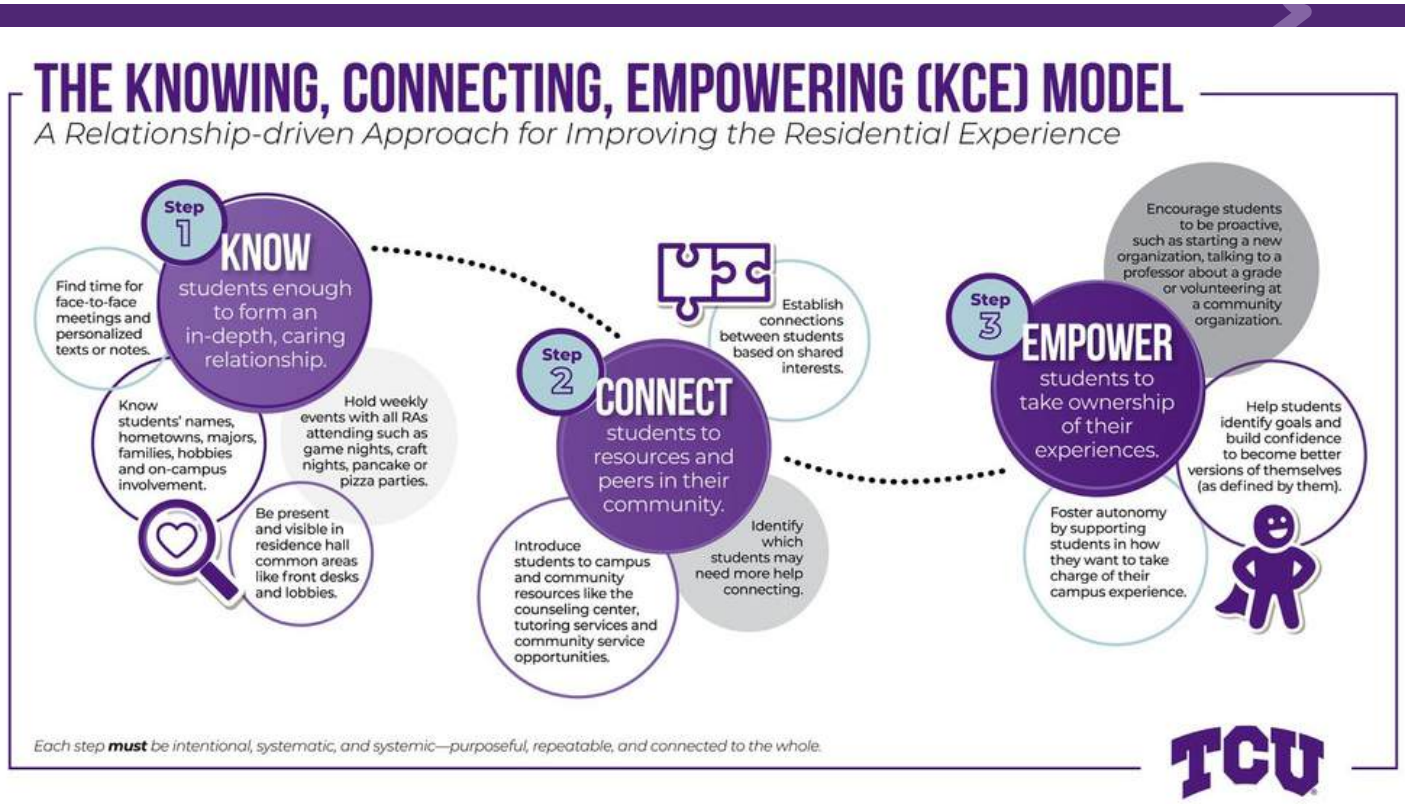
The lens for this reflection was composed of the fundamentals of a village, all of which are underpinned by mutually enhancing relationships. Developmental theories such as that posited by Maslow (1954) show congruence with these eight elements and would identify these needs within the most foundational categories of needs, particularly for safety, connection, and belonging.

Most housing and residence life programs can point to resources and initiatives that are aimed at meeting many of these needs:

- Adequate and safe dwellings for students through well-maintained facilities
- Common values through codes of student conduct
- Leadership through hall council and resident assistant positions

In the past 40 years, however, education has often occupied center stage in housing and residence life in a more pronounced way than others; most notably with the formation of living-learning communities (LLCs). LLCs later made way for the development of residential curriculum models, allowing opportunities for a more direct correlation between living on campus and student success. These swung the programmatic and community building focus toward student learning and have continued to lead much of the field to date.

While many institutions saw positive results from these initiatives, the increasingly prevalent concern for student loneliness has raised calls for stronger campus communities and increased prioritization of peer-to-peer connections (Bay, 2026). Increased mental health and resilience challenges (which are simultaneously important to traditional-aged undergraduate students) compound this loneliness concern and can result in an inability to express when they have needs (Active Minds & TimelyCare, 2024). This combination of developmental and personal wellbeing pressures from today's students has created the perfect opportunity for relationships-first philosophies like KCE to make a meaningful impact.




*The Knowing, Connecting, Empowering Model infographic (Texas Christian University, 2020)*

*KCE moves beyond traditional programming by placing relationships at the center of the residential experience.*

# THE KCE PHILOSOPHY

## KNOWING

Knowing is more than being familiar with a student's name or recognizing them within a community; it involves developing an understanding of the individual student and the experiences, characteristics, and circumstances that shape who they are. Mayer and Marland (1997), in their study of highly effective teachers, found that educators' knowledge of students extended across multiple dimensions, including students' abilities, work habits and attitudes, personalities, previous schooling, family and home backgrounds, behaviors, and peer relationships. Importantly, the teachers viewed this knowledge as critical to their ability to work effectively with students. Hill, Chin, and Blazar (2015) describe knowledge of students as an important domain of educators' professional knowledge and emphasize understanding how students think, including their prior knowledge, likely developmental pathways, and misconceptions.

The KCE model begins with Knowing, which focuses on knowing students enough to form an in-depth, caring relationship (Saperstein & Nash, 2015). Knowing a student at this level extends beyond remembering a name or recognizing a face in the hallway. It involves learning about students' hometowns, majors, families, hobbies, interests, and involvement on campus. These relationships can develop through face-to-face conversations, personalized messages, community activities, and the everyday presence of staff in shared spaces such as residence hall lobbies and front desks. When a staff member remembers a conversation about a student's major, follows up on an upcoming examination, asks about an organization the student recently joined, or notices that the student has not been around, the interaction communicates attention. Over time, seemingly small interactions can help students recognize that someone within their residential community knows who they are,is interested in their experience, and believes they matter to the community.

Schlossberg (1989) describes mattering through five dimensions: attention, importance, ego-extension, dependence, and appreciation. At its center, is the perception that one is noticed and significant to other people. Within a residential community, this distinction matters. A student can be surrounded by hundreds of other residents and still experience a sense of disconnection. Physical presence within a community does not necessarily create the feeling of being known within that community.

Knowing offers a way to close some of that distance. The resident assistant who remembers what a student shared several weeks earlier is doing more than demonstrating a good memory; the interaction can communicate that the previous conversation mattered. The staff member who notices a student's absence from the community communicates that the student's presence has been recognized. Schlossberg's work helps explain the developmental significance behind these ordinary interactions. KCE then gives residence life staff a practical way to make such interactions part of community development. Once staff understand students' interests, experiences, concerns, and goals, they have more information to determine what kinds of relationships, resources, and opportunities may be meaningful to them. Knowing the student makes Connecting more intentional.

## CONNECTING

Engagement and connection are more than involvement or participation; it includes not only what students do but also the feelings and meaning connected to those experiences. Harper and Quaye (2009) explain that engagement involves both activity and sensemaking. Acting without feeling engaged may represent involvement or compliance, while feeling engaged without acting reflects a different experience. This means meaningful student engagement requires students to participate while also developing a personal connection to that participation.

The second component of the KCE model, Connecting, moves the relationship beyond knowing the student toward helping the student develop connections with resources and peers in their community (Saperstein & Nash, 2015). These connections may emerge from shared interests between residents or through introductions to resources such as tutoring services, counseling services, student organizations, and community service opportunities. KCE also asks staff to pay attention to students who may need additional support to become connected to the larger community.

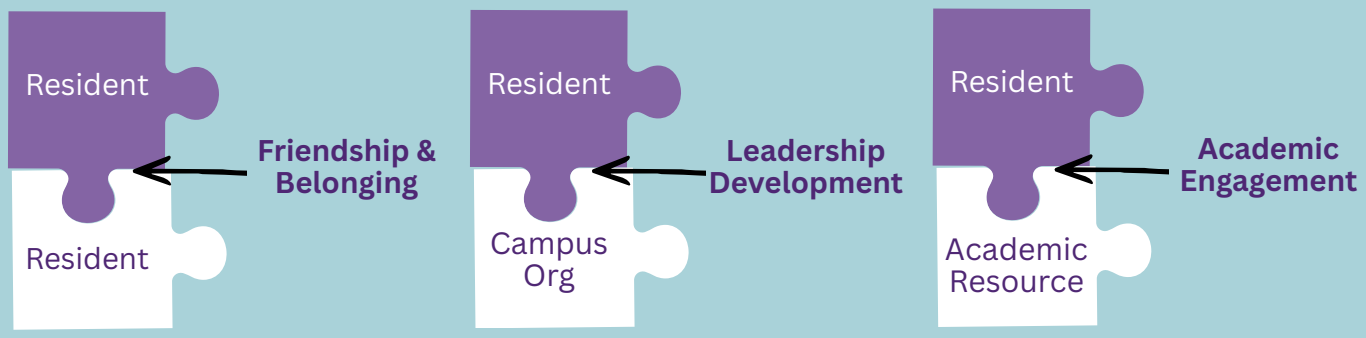
The relationship established through Knowing changes how these connections can occur. A staff member who knows that a resident is struggling academically can make a more meaningful connection to tutoring or academic support. Knowing that another student has an interest in music, service, gaming, athletics, or a particular profession may create an opportunity to introduce that student to another resident with similar interests or to an organization where those interests can be explored. Connecting, in this sense, is not simply giving students information about available resources. It involves recognizing where a connection may fit within an individual student's experience.

The developmental value of these connections can also be understood through Astin's (1984) Theory of Student Involvement, which describes student involvement in terms of the physical and psychological energy students devote to their college experience.

His theory places considerable attention on what students do with the time and energy they invest in academics, relationships, organizations, activities, and other aspects of college life. Greater opportunities for meaningful involvement can provide greater opportunities for student learning and development.

KCE creates pathways into that involvement. A connection to another resident may develop into a friendship. An introduction to a campus organization may eventually become leadership involvement. A referral to an academic resource may help a student become more engaged with their academic work. A conversation about volunteering may introduce a student to a community that becomes important throughout the college experience. The initial connection may appear small, yet it can open the door to a much larger form of involvement.

## PATHWAYS TO INVOLVEMENT




**Using KCE, staff act as facilitators for residents to make connections that lead to further involvement and engagement.**

This is also where KCE differs from relying exclusively on large-scale programming to create community. Connection does not always require an event. Sometimes it begins with one staff member knowing two residents well enough to realize that they share an interest and introducing them to one another. At other times, it may involve recognizing that a student needs a resource and helping the student make the first connection. The emphasis remains on creating connections that make sense for the student rather than expecting every student to become connected through the same experience.

Connections, however, are not intended to leave students dependent on staff to navigate every part of college for them. As students develop relationships, discover resources, and become more involved in their communities, the role of staff begins to shift. Support remains available, but students are increasingly encouraged to determine what they want from their experiences and what actions they are prepared to take. This movement leads to empowerment.

# EMPOWERING

Empowering focuses on supporting students as they "take ownership of their experiences" (Saperstein & Nash, 2015). The KCE model identifies actions such as starting a new organization, speaking with a professor about a grade, and volunteering within the community as examples of what that ownership may look like. Empowerment also involves helping students identify goals and develop the confidence to become better versions of themselves, as defined by the students themselves.

Empowerment does not position residence life staff as the people who determine what every student should become. Students arrive at college with different backgrounds, aspirations, abilities, experiences, and definitions of success. The role of staff gradually becomes one of supporting students as they identify what matters to them, consider their options, make decisions, and learn from those decisions.

This movement toward greater ownership connects with Arthur W. Chickering and Linda Reisser's (1993) psychosocial theory of student development. Among the seven vectors described in their work, moving through autonomy toward interdependence and developing purpose are especially relevant to empowering (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Autonomy and interdependence involve students developing greater capacity to make decisions and function independently while recognizing their relationships and responsibilities to others. Developing purpose involves forming clearer goals, interests, commitments, and directions.

These developmental processes can occur through ordinary situations in residence life. A student may approach a staff member after receiving a grade they believe is unfair. Knowing has already created a relationship in which the student feels comfortable discussing the concern. Connecting may involve helping the student understand available academic resources or identifying the appropriate person with whom to speak. Empowering changes what happens next. Instead of contacting the professor for the student or attempting to solve the situation, the staff member can help the student think through the conversation, consider possible approaches, and develop the confidence to address the concern independently. The same progression can occur at the community level. A resident who notices that students in the building share an interest but have no organization or activity around it may initially bring the idea to a staff member. The staff can help the students explore what would be required to organize it. The student moves from identifying a need to taking action, while the staff member remains a source of guidance and support. The KCE model changes the place from which the work begins. A game night, community dinner, educational program, or conversation at the front desk becomes more meaningful when it is connected to an intentional effort to understand the students who make up the community.

# KCE IN DAILY WORK

Beyond the impact relationship-building has on the general residential experience, it also has a significant impact as a main component of RA training and continuing professional development within KCE. KCE provides structure for how RAs can engage with their residents through knowing, connecting, and empowering students.

KCE can be used as a model for RAs to continually implement relationship-building through their daily interactions with residents and one another. KCE creates the framework for RAs, but the RAs learn in training that it should be daily intentional interactions with students, peers and professional staff members. The importance of providing training to RAs is providing them with opportunities to reflect on how they build relationships, connect residents to resources on and off campus, and empower students to create their own experiences. RA training introduces these principles while providing examples for RAs to practice those interpersonal skills to build those connections. During training, RAs receive expectations from the department, but how can they make those expectations intentional to building those connections with residents? This approach emphasizes that effective relationship-building is a skill that can develop with training, reflection, and experience in the role.

KCE can also serve as a framework for ongoing in-service development and supervision. Professional staff can continually reinforce the KCE framework through staff meetings, one-on-one meetings with supervisors, and professional development opportunities. In-service conversations can encourage RAs to reflect on how they are knowing, connecting with and empowering residents and where they may have opportunities to grow in those areas that are lacking. During one-on-one meetings, some universities utilize mid-semester evaluations to show RAs the areas that they can improve and develop ideas on how to strengthen those skills. This gives RAs ideas on different tactics to create those intentional relationships with residents that work for them. These conversations create opportunities for RAs to “live out” KCE rather than understand it as just a concept.

The principles of KCE can also extend into the recruitment and selection process of RAs and Hall Directors. If universities utilize relationship-building as an essential part in their Housing and Residence Life, then they may consider how candidates demonstrate interpersonal qualities and values in KCE before they enter the RA role. Recruitment and selection processes can explore candidates' ability to build those interpersonal relationships, how they would connect students to resources, and empower others to take advantage of their experience in the university setting. For Hall Directors and other professional staff, this framework can help with the selection of candidates that would be responsible for developing and supervising their RA staff.

Selecting professionals that can model KCE may be important because they set up the framework for their RAs to understand the importance of relationship-building in the residence halls and how they can take that framework to use in their own creative way.

Understanding KCE requires perspectives from both RA and professional staff. RAs use KCE as a framework that provides a direction for them to follow on creating interpersonal connections. On the other hand, professional staff may use KCE as a tool for supervision and staff development. Sometimes, these perspectives might not be identical to each other. Everyone interprets knowing, connecting and empowering differently, but it is important that it relates to the institutional day-to-day expectations. Overall, these areas demonstrate how KCE can extend beyond its use as a framework for resident engagement. When its principles are implemented into recruitment, selection, RA training, in-service development, supervision and daily activities, KCE has the potential to shape not only what RAs do, but how residence life professionals understand their role and impact they have on residents. KCE is more than just a model. It can be used to influence the culture, practices, and development across different universities and give ideas on how to implement a more relationship-building framework in residence life staff.

## GETTING RESIDENT ASSISTANTS BEYOND THE CHECKLIST

Anyone who has supervised or worked closely with resident assistants (RAs) or other student leaders has experienced the push and pull of “reasonable” job expectations. After all, our student leaders are students too, and as such experience many of the same challenges as their peers like those mentioned previously. However, the call to leadership for many students stems from a desire to improve their campus community and the lives of their peers through their support (Erhardt, 2022). That makes having an empowered RA team not only important for those currently serving in the role, but also for the sustained relevance of the position on a campus.

The KCE philosophy encourages a culture of unreasonable hospitality which empowers RAs to take each opportunity to connect with and support their residents, particularly before the resident is in a moment of heightened need. At this point, we need to make an important distinction – unreasonable hospitality does not mean asking RAs to do unreasonable amounts of work, nor does practicing “reasonable accountability” equate to people being treated poorly (Guidara, 2022). Rather, it describes a willingness to move beyond the transactional boundaries of a job description when an opportunity to care for another person presents itself. An RA practicing unreasonable hospitality might notice that a resident has been eating alone in the dining hall and invite them to dinner, remember that a resident's family is going through a difficult time and follow up weeks later, or recognize that a student who has repeatedly missed community events may need an invitation that is more personal than a flyer or program announcement.

None of these actions necessarily appears on an RA's list of expectations. Yet each can be a meaningful expression of the role.

This kind of hospitality requires job expectations that foster personal empowerment. If RAs understand their role primarily as a collection of prescribed responsibilities, they may reasonably conclude that anything outside those responsibilities is someone else's job. Even though that may need to be the case for reasons like training and compliance, empowerment changes that calculus, particularly when it comes to community and relationship building expectations. When student leaders understand the purpose behind their role, possess the skills and resources to act, and are trusted to exercise appropriate judgment, they are more likely to see themselves as contributors to the residential experience rather than simply implementers of a residential program.

In this sense, reasonable empowerment fosters unreasonable hospitality. Reasonable empowerment establishes the boundaries, expectations, training, and support necessary for RAs to serve effectively. Within those boundaries, however, RAs have the freedom to serve and respond to the people in front of them rather than just the tasks they represent. The goal should not be to remove structure entirely, but to create enough structure that student leaders can confidently exercise discretion within it. When RAs are given permission to exercise judgment rather than merely follow instructions, the checklist can become a floor rather than a ceiling.

**“When RAs are given permission to exercise judgment rather than merely follow instructions, the checklist can become a floor rather than a ceiling.”**

Reasonable empowerment, modeled by professional staff, gives RAs the foundation to practice unreasonable hospitality with their residents. The success of KCE and unreasonable hospitality in on-campus housing is deeply reliant on our ability to practice and model them with RAs and colleagues. KCE should be experienced before it is expected. When RAs experience being known, connected, and empowered by the professionals who support them, they are better positioned to understand what those experiences can look and feel like for their residents. In this way, KCE becomes a philosophy that shapes the residential experience and a philosophy for how we develop the people responsible for creating that experience.

**K**nowing

**C**onnecting

**E**mpowering

# MEASURING THE IMPACT OF RELATIONSHIPS

Putting relationships at the center of the residential experience means paying attention to what those relationships make possible for students. Allen's (2025) study of a relationship-based housing model offers a useful example. In interviews with 15 students, relationships with peers and residence life staff shaped how students experienced their residence halls and their sense of belonging. Students described friendships as an important part of what made their residence hall feel like home. They also valued staff who were present, knew their names, knew something about them, and showed that they cared.

The goal is not for staff to become friends with every student. The goal is for students to experience a community in which they are known, valued, and connected. Sometimes that begins with something as simple as a staff member remembering a student's name, following up on a previous conversation or remembering something a student shared. These moments communicate: I see you, I remember you, you matter here. It could mean roommates looking out for one another when something is wrong, students attending a floor dinner and getting to know their neighbors or an RA, recognizing that a student needs more than a quick answer to a lockout or reminder about a policy. These interactions shape whether students feel they have a place and people they can turn to.

**“The goal is not for staff to become friends with every student. The goal is for students to experience a community in which they are known, valued, and connected.”**

Felten and Lambert (2020), drawing on nearly 400 interviews across 29 institutions, found that students benefit from meaningful relationships with peers, faculty, staff, and mentors. Not every relationship becomes a close friendship or a formal mentoring relationship. Sometimes it is a conversation with a staff member, a connection with another student, or a faculty member who takes an interest in a student's experience. Each can become another point of connection as students navigate to college. This has implications for how we think about success in residence life. We can count programs, attendance, conduct incidents, and learning outcomes, but those numbers do not tell us whether students are developing relationships or have people they trust. Allen's (2025) participants repeatedly connected their friendships and relationships in the residence hall with belonging and feeling at home. Those experiences are worth paying attention to alongside the outcomes we already measure.

The responsibility cannot rest with residence life alone. Students experience their institutions through relationships with faculty, advisors, staff, coaches, supervisors, and peers. If relationships matter, then institutions need to think about whether their policies, spaces, and practices make those relationships easier to build. Instead of telling students to get involved, find their people, or ask for help, we can look at whether we have created enough opportunities for them to do those things. Students need places and people through which they can build relationships that help them navigate college.

This may not require a major new initiative. It might mean rethinking the everyday work already happening across campus. An RA who intentionally checks in and has meaningful conversations with residents. An RA who plans programs with activities that encourage students to engage with one another rather than simply attend. A faculty member who uses learning activities that encourage students to connect with their peers during class. An advisor who takes time to ask what a student's experience has been like rather than moving immediately to the next requirement. A campus program that intentionally helps students meet one another instead of simply giving them information. None of these practices are particularly complicated. What matters is that they give students more opportunities to feel seen, find people they can turn to, and see themselves as part of the institution.

The impact can extend beyond the initial relationship. A student who once needed an invitation may eventually be the person extending one. A student who learned where to turn for help may become someone who helps another student navigate the institution. This is where the empowering part of KCE becomes important. The relationship is not an endpoint. It gives students the confidence to take greater ownership of their experience and contribute to the communities they are part of.

**“The relationship is not an endpoint.
It gives students the confidence to take greater ownership
of their experience and contribute to the communities they are part of.”**

A relationship-first approach also changes what we pay attention to when we assess residence life. We should still ask what students learned and how they participated. We should also ask whether they found people they trust, whether they feel that they belong, and whether they are becoming more confident in building community themselves. Some of these outcomes may not appear in a program attendance report or a traditional learning assessment. They may show up when a student asks for help because they know who to go to, when a student finds friends who make campus feel like home, or when a student becomes the person creating the experience for someone else.

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# Promoting Community in a Digital Space

By The Social Media Sub-Committee of the Communications and Marketing Committee
Jade Driscoll, Michigan State University | Travis Hill, Ferris State | Liz Hornyak, Ohio University | Caitlin Spicer, IU Bloomington | Marwan Wynn Jr., Eastern Michigan University

## "Why should we build a digital community?"



A Microsoft Teams message, a Google Chat, a GroupMe message, a Zoom meeting, and the list goes on. What do all of these things have in common? All of these are digital spaces that are, in this day and age, deeply integrated into our lives as housing professionals and paraprofessionals. We all know the feeling of sending a message in a big work group chat, it can be intimidating and you may not always get a response, maybe just a few thumbs up emojis. Despite this potential lack of reaction and engagement, digital communication has become significantly integrated into the working world. There are multiple strategies we can consider in order to promote digital communication and community within these online spaces, and we will explore those in this article.







What use is a digital space if it is not working to fit the needs of your team? By checking in with your team and seeing what changes or improvements could be made to the digital spaces you currently utilize, and by enacting those changes when possible, you have the potential to increase the engagement of your digital community.

First of all, why should we build a digital community? Well, often, you might not see the people you work with everyday, especially if you work on a big campus. With this in mind, by working to foster a tight knit community, the digital aspects cannot, and should not be ignored. These spaces allow the opportunity to connect, form bonds, ask questions, and more. How can we promote and engage in this?

When working towards fostering a digital community, it is important to “Survey your members regularly” as suggested by Nicola Wynn in a Podia article.



It can also be valuable to develop the in-person and digital community simultaneously. In a post from "Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute", they suggest "Forge in-person and virtual connections". We can take this advice to keep up the connections we make during in-person meetings within our digital space as well. As you would discuss ideas at a table during an in person meeting, start a conversation online about an upcoming event or reach out to a colleague and ask a question. By working together in a physical and virtual space, we can continue to forge connections with our colleagues.

By working to develop digital community, we can make strides towards connecting with those we work with and those in our region!

**Practice in Action**

How do our housing professionals and paraprofessionals on the Social Media Subcommittee work towards developing digital community in their own communities? In our Subcommittee, we have members from across the region and at different universities. See below how we put our practice in action!

Caitlin, Graduate Supervisor, Indiana University Bloomington

In my Microsoft Teams chats with my colleagues and supervisees, I make an effort to write how I talk and show my personality! Don't get me wrong, I still utilize professional language, but I think it is worthwhile and important to show your personality at work. This helps people get to know each other and learn how to best work together. Caitlin's suggestion: Find a silly GIF to include when you're sending a reminder or update!

Marwan, Graduate Hall Director, Eastern Michigan University

For me, promoting digital community is about finding ways to keep people connected and involved, even when we aren't together in person. I use social media and other digital platforms to share things that people can relate to, encourage interaction, and help create a sense of community online.

Liz, Resident Director, Ohio University

For me, Microsoft Teams is more than a place to share information with my staff. It is another space to build community. I use Teams for quick "micro-surveys," ranging from fun pop-culture questions like who will be voted off Dancing with the Stars, to gathering staff input on large-group programming ideas. These low-stakes interactions give staff an easy way to participate and connect beyond their everyday RA responsibilities.

I also use Teams to celebrate my staff in the moment. Whether an RA handled a challenging situation well, accomplished something in or out of the classroom, or is celebrating a birthday, I want to recognize those moments. These small interactions helped turn a digital communication platform into a space where my staff can feel connected, celebrated, and part of a community.

Jade, Central Administration Office Manager, Michigan State University

One way that I try to promote digital community is through using the full range of emoji reactions that Teams, Zoom, etc. give me–you can communicate a lot more than just "thumbs up!" Some of my favorites are the "saluting" face when I want to acknowledge that I read/understand a message telling me to do something, the "party" face when someone is celebrating something, or searching for a random emoji that matches a key word from the message. The reactions can add a little humor to the day, but they're also much more engaging and expressive than the default reactions.

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SHER-RON LAUD, COLUMBUS COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN
KATIE BEEMAN, MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY
DANTE PATTERSON, WESTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY



# WAKE ME UP WHEN SEPTEMBER ENDS: A GUIDE TO GETTING THROUGH THE FIRST FEW MONTHS OF THE ACADEMIC YEAR

## INTRODUCTION

Housing professionals in higher education engage in work that is interpersonal and empathetic. Staff support students as they navigate the transition to independence and adulthood, develop their sense of identity, and learn to interact meaningfully with others. One of the busiest and most strenuous times of the year is during fall move-in. During this time, housing professionals help students with crisis response, conflict management, and homesickness, all while working to create a place that feels like home.

It is during this time that burnout is high and personal well-being is low for all; especially graduate students and entry-level professionals, who are navigating these roles for the first time. Utilizing strategies that promote wellness and preparing for the move-in season can maintain momentum for the fall semester.

## DIMENSIONS OF WELLNESS

Maintaining wellness and increasing self-care practices have been a trending topic over the past five years, but what does it really entail? There are eight dimensions of wellness: emotional, spiritual, physical, social, financial, environmental, intellectual, and occupational (UC Davis Student Health and Counseling Services, n.d.). All dimensions of wellness are important and need attention, but that doesn't mean there needs to be a perfect balance to get it right; it just needs to cater to what works best for the individual. All dimensions are interconnected, which means they may influence each other (Stoewen, 2017). Although striving for health is important, the goal is more about living life fully (Stoewen, 2017).

Emotional wellness surrounds awareness of feelings and responses to interactions with others (UC Davis Student Health and Counseling Services, n.d.). Awareness is the first step to understanding the why behind feelings and our responses to them.

Strategies for fostering emotional wellness include:
(1) quieting the mind and reflecting
(2) sharing thoughts and feelings with trusted people
(3) practicing gratitude
(4) reflecting on mistakes and learning from them
(5) taking care of the body through eating, being active, and sleeping
(6) being kind to oneself
(UC Davis Student Health and Counseling Services, n.d.).

Spiritual wellness helps find purpose and meaning in life through participation in activities that align with personal values and beliefs (Stoewen, 2017).

Strategies include:
(1) meditation or mindful relaxation
(2) practicing acceptance and being curious
(3) religious faith (if it aligns with values)
(4) traveling to experience other cultures
(UC Davis Student Health and Counseling Services, n.d.).

Physical wellness emphasizes how our daily habits and behaviors impact overall health and quality of life in the present and future (UC Davis Student Health and Counseling Services, n.d.).

Impactful habits and behaviors include:
(1) finding time to move the body that increases the heart rate for at least 30 minutes per day
(2) recognizing warning signs for when the body needs a break
(3) maintaining a regular sleep schedule (about 7-9 hours per night for most)
(4) practicing safer sex and getting tested (regularly if sexually active)
(5) fueling the body with foods that make the body feel good
(UC Davis Student Health and Counseling Services, n.d.).






Social wellness focuses on building and maintaining relationships with others that are meaningful and supportive, while creating boundaries that invite communication and trust with respect for others (UC Davis Student Health and Counseling Services, n.d.).

Strategies for social wellness include:
:(1) reflecting on social needs and values
(2) making an effort to keep in touch with support systems
(3) participating in group activities like clubs or organizations
(4) volunteering in the community
(UC Davis Student Health and Counseling Services, n.d.).

Financial wellness showcases the process of successfully managing financial expenses. This can have a large impact on health because of its correlation to stress (Stoewen, 2017).

Some strategies for a successful financial process are:
(1) understanding and having a plan for tackling student loans (if applicable)
(2) starting with small changes that add up over time
(3) utilizing resources such as student/employee discounts
(4) planning ahead and setting budget goals
(5) writing a list before going shopping
(UC Davis Student Health and Counseling Services, n.d.).









Environmental wellness represents an appreciation and understanding of how social, natural, and built environments are interconnected and affect the health and well-being of all, while also having a commitment to change daily habits that help establish a healthy planet (Stoewen, 2017).

These daily habits can be:
(1) picking up trash
(2) spending time outdoors
(3) biking or walking for your commute (if possible)
(4) using reusable and recyclable materials
(5) being mindful of water and electricity usage
(6) shopping secondhand and donating unwanted belongings
(UC Davis Student Health and Counseling Services, n.d.).






Intellectual wellness includes maintaining curiosity, growing intellectually, and expanding skills while exploring ways of sharing knowledge with others (Stoewen, 2017).

Strategies include:
(1) actively listening to others and keeping an open mind
(2) picking up a hobby for fun or to increase your skill set
(3) traveling to gain knowledge and appreciation of other cultures
(4) taking classes, engaging in research, or professional development opportunities
(5) reading for pleasure
(6) learning another language
(UC Davis Student Health and Counseling Services, n.d.).

Lastly, occupational wellness encompasses participating in work that provides personal satisfaction and is consistent with personal values, goals, and lifestyle (Stoewen, 2017). It recognizes the importance of finding enrichment and meaning through vocation (UC Davis Student Health and Counseling Services, n.d.).

Strategies for occupational wellness include
(1) reflecting on where joy and meaning come from in one's life
(2) keeping an open mind
(3) exploring career and volunteer opportunities, as well as, taking advantage of career service resources
(4) practicing open communication and conflict management with colleagues
(5) setting realistic career goals and consistently working towards them
(UC Davis Student Health and Counseling Services, n.d.).

# WHY WELLNESS MATTERS

Graduate students and entry-level housing professionals are highly prone to burnout during the initial stages of their role. As a result, developing strategies for maintaining wellness and mentally preparing for move-in is increasingly important in promoting overall well-being, satisfaction in the role, and retention. In addition, supporting staff well-being lowers the risk of harm to others as a result of burnout, which in turn, models healthy self-care practices to the students they serve. Overall, embedding this work into daily practices will help maintain positive energy throughout the academic year and help maintain momentum for the Fall semester. Change, in regards to wellness practices, becomes much more achievable by being mindful and inserting routines that take advantage of strengths, tendencies, and aptitudes (Stoewen, 2017).

Move-in can be an overwhelming experience for parents, students, and staff, often leading to heightened reactions to a variety of issues. Therefore, graduate students working in Residence Life do best when they approach move-in like a high-intensity leadership day,with one that requires mental structure, emotional boundaries, and intentional calm. Move-in is controlled chaos, not a test of perfection. So, the biggest mental shift facing graduate students is the need to accept that some chaos is normal during peak times of the year and to trust that being messy doesn't mean failure. You can lead through a predictable storm. There are several strategies to combat feeling overwhelmed and to effectively respond to hectic periods.

# SECTION 1: MOVE-IN

First, set priorities before the day starts, focusing on safety, clarity, and presence. This will create space for team support such as keeping a steady flow of traffic, making sure everyone is hydrated in the heat, and assisting with elevator management. Second, be visible, steady, and accessible. While the RAs know their role, they also need clarity on and trust in escalation options, should anything need to be "bumped up". This is critical to address in their training to help them understand they don't have to personally solve every problem. Third, delegation can disperse workload greatly, such as assigning RAs to specific zones they can handle without assistance is beneficial. This may include check-in, auto-traffic, parent questions, and elevator duty. In addition to thorough training, reassure the RAs that supervisors are available to support emotionally or to intervene in times of complex interactions with students or family members. Fourth, strategically schedule self-care breaks throughout the day, not only for your team but for yourself. Move-in events can be physically and mentally draining, so having a plan to combat this fatigue is important. Take breaks every hour, make time for lunch and hydration, engage in slow breathing for a few minutes, take a brisk walk, and get adequate, quality sleep. Overall, your primary job requires steady empathy; move-in can be an emotionally charged time for students and parents. Students may be anxious, overwhelmed, and homesick. Parents may be stressed, controlling, and sentimental. Keep in mind that none of it is about you,it's about their transition. Leaning on your professional network and staying connected with your peers will help you reduce stress and respond to these moments with poise and steady assistance. By deploying these strategies and celebrating daily wins, you can have a successful and positive move-in experience.

# SECTION 2: BOUNDARY SETTING

## BOUNDARIES: WHAT ARE THEY AND WHY ARE THEY NEEDED?

The topic of boundaries is commonplace when working with students in higher education, but what are they in the context of our work? Boundaries can be applied to any type of relationship - friends, partners, co-workers, bosses, or family members - and are multifaceted (Odell, n.d.). They are the stepping stone for building trust, safety, and respect in relationships and can come in the form of emotional, physical, sexual, intellectual, and financial well-being (Odell, n.d.).

Higher education professionals have high rates of stress, fatigue, and burnout due to a high, emotionally demanding workload (Mitchell, 2024). Based on data from the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources, 67% of employees in higher education work over the typical 40-hour workweek, 63% of employees assume tasks that were handled by former employees, and 73% of higher education professionals work longer hours to meet responsibilities of positions that were phased out (Bischel et al., 2022). Findings from NASPA found in 2022 state that 84% of higher education professionals who experience burnout say that it's primarily from stress and crisis management responsibilities (Whitford, 2022). Good boundary setting and enforcement can help support higher education professionals and prevent burnout (Mitchell, 2024). Setting these boundaries early, especially for graduate students and entry-level professionals, can help make enforcing them a little easier down the road (Mitchell, 2024).

## BOUNDARY SETTING STRATEGIES IN THE WORKPLACE

Although setting and enforcing boundaries can be challenging, effective strategies can help new professionals establish and maintain appropriate boundaries early in their careers. Higher education professionals' schedules can vary greatly, depending on the time of year, which is why establishing set work hours is a key boundary that should be set early (Mitchell, 2024). In practice, this may include blocking time for lunch or administrative tasks. Another approach may be blocking Friday afternoons from scheduled meetings (Mitchell, 2024). Moreover, include your work hours in your email signature, which establishes that messages will be returned within 24 - 48 hours instead of immediately (Mitchell, 2024).

An effective strategy for avoiding burnout is utilizing vacation time appropriately (Mitchell, 2024). To prepare for time away, inform colleagues and supervisors ahead of time, include proxies on preparation steps, and create an out of office response for the duration of the vacation. In addition, you may need to proactively adjust deadlines, delegate tasks, and schedule reminders for upcoming assignments. These steps will ensure coverage while you're away and also support a true disconnection from work. Use vacation time as often as possible, plan ahead for longer vacations, and use comp days if the position provides them (Mitchell, 2024).

As simple as it may be, saying "no" is an important skill in developing professional boundaries, especially when feeling overwhelmed, uncomfortable, or when asked to do something that is not within the scope of your position (Mitchell, 2024). Of course, saying no is not always possible, however, by maintaining open communication with involved parties and clearly stating that you may not be able to complete a task will help cultivate understanding and better team dynamics (Mitchell, 2024). For example, if a scheduling conflict occurs, state your lack of availability but offer some alternatives. It's also important to be confident when saying no to a request and stick to it (Mitchell, 2024). A proactive approach to boundary setting might also include having candid conversations with colleagues and supervisors who can help communicate what everyone is willing/able or not willing/able to do, setting a precedent for the remainder of the collaborative work (Mitchell, 2024).

To help these conversations be successful, consider the following:
(1) prepare in advance for conversations about boundaries (try writing points down)
(2) remain respectful and professional throughout the conversation
(3) document the conversation and send a follow-up email summarizing the discussion
(4) engage in regular check-ins with team members to ensure that tasks are within department, job, and personal expectations and if so, are being completed in a timely manner. (Mitchell, 2024).

This will ultimately model a healthy approach to work-life balance for other team members. And while these strategies may not result in immediate improvements in personal stress or workplace culture, over time, they can have a long-lasting impact on feelings of burnout.

# SECTION 3: FIRST COUPLE OF MONTHS

## THE ISSUE FOLLOWING MOVE-IN

Planning and executing staff training and move-in requires a substantial amount of work that is often immediately followed by the demands of fall semester -crisis calls, emergency response, supervision of staff, and roommate conflicts. Without much recovery time after move-in, how can staff maintain sufficient energy during the school year to support a vibrant and safe community for its student residents?





## ALWAYS ON

The live-in staff position is designed to oversee student staff and to help with emergencies in the residence halls, requiring these staff members to remain both emotionally and physically available past the typical 9-5 workday. These roles involve constant exposure to expectations with limited opportunities for detachment or recovery (Ploughe, 2026). In addition, it is difficult to separate work from home when staff work in close proximity to where they live. While staff apartments are home, it can be difficult to psychologically leave their workplace at the end of the day.

To further explain, even while "at home", staff can hear hall activity such as students running around or loud conversations from lobbies. Moreover, staff encounter residents when traveling to and from campus or are contacted because it's known they live on campus. While we try hard to set boundaries that counteract these moments, when they happen, the lines between home and work are blurred, creating the feeling that a live-in staff member must respond to every instance and be visible at all times (Ploughe, 2026.)

## INTENTIONAL RECOVERY

Intentional recovery is heavily tied to the dimensions of wellness. Residence life professionals need to consider how they can use the eight dimensions of wellness to assess proper self-care. Physical wellness is something that's obvious, but often overlooked during move-in. Long days, inconsistent nights, followed by a sudden transition to regular operations can tax the physical well-being of staff. We need to prioritize getting enough sleep, staying hydrated through hot days, and paying attention to physical symptoms during move-in. The idea is that you can't borrow energy from your body without paying yourself back.

Residence life professionals absorb a lot of emotions from students, as many are processing a multitude of transition experiences, such as homesickness to full-blown crisis and distress. In the professional setting, it can be difficult to feel as if you're allowed to express emotions at work, and as a result, we end up suppressing what we feel, which can be harmful to overall well-being. To support emotional wellness, we should encourage our staff to identify emotions appropriately instead of suppressing them. In turn, this will assist professional staff with coaching their student staff on how to process emotional situations or recognize compassion fatigue.

Residence life is all about connection; we are constantly in a social environment. Relationships are so important, but when we're surrounded by students and those we supervise, isolation can be a concern. To combat this, we should encourage staff to maintain friendships outside the residence halls by creating social experiences outside our role. Just because we're around people all day doesn't mean we're socially connected.

Another area of wellness important to consider is the environmental wellness for residence life staff. This could also be defined as the space one enters and leaves. Live-in professionals may live inside their workplace, which can make the environment more complicated. For example, it can be easy for staff to fall into patterns at home, such as checking work emails after hours or taking "small work" home to wrap up from their day. To foster healthy separation between work and home, encourage staff to keep their work out of the apartment and model this same behavior.

The next area is intellectual wellness, meaning to learn and maintain knowledge. It's easy to fall into a pattern of monotonous action when the semester begins. Between meetings, emails, duty, and paperwork, tasks can all start to blur together. To achieve intellectual wellness, we have to engage our curiosity and learn outside of our professional environments. Examples of intellectual wellness include reading, professional development, discussing ideas with colleagues, or developing creative projects.

Live-in staff often work more than their listed hours without considering if this is best for themselves. Occupational wellness means having a healthy relationship with your work. We should encourage our staff to reflect on their workload regularly by asking themselves questions like: Is the work sustainable? Have I established clear boundaries with residents and other staff? Am I maintaining work during business hours? And most importantly, am I finding meaning in the work I do?

Spiritual wellness doesn't always have to mean religion, but instead it's about being intentionally grounded. Residence life professionals are always guiding their residents and student leaders toward identity, making, and meaning, but we need to be able to give ourselves the same opportunities.

The last dimension to consider is financial wellness. The beginning of the year may bring different patterns of stress, which could involve buying takeout because of having low energy, needing professional attire, or maybe spending as a coping mechanism. Financial wellness could include reviewing a budget after move-in and building emergency savings where possible.





# CONCLUSION

## SUSTAINABILITY IS A PART OF THE JOB

Move-in is possibly the most demanding part of any residence life job. Chaotic and stressful days lead to unpredictable nights. But once students are moved into the halls, our job is not done yet. We must reframe what a successful move-in looks like for our leadership team. For starters, we should not be looking at move-in like "we survived". Graduate students and entry-level professionals need to be aware of the habits that are developed during periods of high stress and recognize that constant exhaustion should not be the norm while working in residence life.

The eight dimensions of wellness shouldn't be something we preach but never practice. There are meaningful and intentional ways to become more proactive in the journey to self-care. Professionals need to prepare both physically and mentally for what move-in will bring. Boundaries also need to be set as soon as work begins in order to prevent burnout. But most importantly, setting boundaries with yourself will make you appreciate your job while continuing to work harder.

The truth is that the live-in position can be detrimental to your health if you choose to not to take care of yourself. Professionals may not be able to separate themselves from their workplace, but we have to realize that being in that live-in position doesn't mean you must always be available at every moment. Residence life staff spend countless hours preparing buildings, training their staff, and welcoming their communities for opening. We need to have this same mindset when preparing for the work that follows move-in.

In conclusion, self-care isn't the key to ensuring a successful move-in experience. It's about building a system of sustainability by incorporating wellness practices into our daily lives, which allows for adequate recovery time after move-in in order to maintain endurance and wellness for the remainder of the year.










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# WAYSIDE RESIDENCE HALL: CRIME PREVENTION BY ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN AND MANAGING RESIDENTIAL CONFLICT IN A VERY SPECIAL RESIDENCE HALL

## By Alyssa Frizzo, Illinois State University

Louis Sachar wrote a series of children's books about "Wayside School," an elementary school that was accidentally built on its side with thirty classrooms stacked on top of each other (Sachar, 2019). As a Residence Hall Coordinator in a similarly structured building — Watterson Towers, a 28-story, 2800-bed residence hall — there are some unique challenges. It is, after all, the tallest building between Chicago and Saint Louis and one of the tallest residence halls in the world. In a building this unique, "best practices" are not always applicable. How do you determine which preventative measures are effective in actually keeping students safe?

The biggest of these challenges from a residence life perspective is the sheer volume of foot traffic through a small number of entrances. Watterson has two ground-level entrances on the southeast side of the building and two lobby-level entrances on the northwest side of the building. These entrances are only half a floor apart and surprisingly close to one another. This means that up to 2,800 residents, more than forty staff members, and assorted guests are all entering through the same doors, using the same elevators, and having high levels of contact with one another. It also means that the doors at these four entrances rarely have the opportunity to close.

How do you enforce access restrictions in a building like this? When the fire alarm goes off, how do you manage an elevator line with more than one thousand people in it? When conflict inevitably occurs, how do you keep residents separated and deescalated? Is the cost of trying (in time, effort, and wages) worth the end result?

Shariati & Guerette (2019) explores how crime prevention through environmental design affects a residential student's perception of their safety and thus their capacity for learning. When a student feels safe, they have an increased ability to participate in academic experiences. Crime prevention by environmental design can look like electronic access at residence hall entrances, security cameras in public and semi-public spaces, and building design that allows residents to surveil each other in open spaces. In Watterson Towers, crime prevention by environmental design also looks like key and ID checks at every entrance during "limited access" hours — typically 12am-6am every day, with additional checks during fire alarm reentry or on peak weekend evenings.

Staff-led key checks are very visible and certainly contribute to a student's perception of the safety features of their residence hall. They are also very expensive, with a minimum of one student staff member per entrance and additional staff to escort students to the front desk for identity verification and guest check-ins. It is very difficult to track the true effectiveness of a prevention-based system. You can track how many guests were checked in between 12am and 6am, but you don't know how many of those students would have complied with the guest registration process regardless or how many residential students chose not to bring a guest back to their residence hall or chose not to return themselves in order to avoid the checkpoint at the door. Do students simply plan ahead to skirt these checks, making sure to bring their no-trespassed guests back to the building before midnight?

When the fire alarm goes off, are students more likely to bring their keys and ID with them knowing they will go through a key and ID check before they can reenter the building? Or do they choose to take a walk during the fire alarm, returning after the conclusion of key checks? How do you determine which preventative efforts are worth the time and money when it is so difficult to measure effectiveness?

The first step is considering which existing features of your building are most effective at crime prevention by environmental design: security cameras, electronic access, how many locked doors a student needs to go through before they reach their room. Next, consider which existing features of your building are least effective at crime prevention by environmental design: areas without camera coverage, students' ability to reach their room without encountering another person, and areas with high levels of concealment.

Certain crime prevention by environmental design features are simpler to implement than others. It can be a massive and financially draining undertaking to add electronic access or security camera coverage to an older residence hall where these features are not already present. In Watterson Towers, there are no cameras in the four 28-story stairwells and there also isn't the proper wiring in place to add cameras to the stairwells.

While adding cameras to the stairwells is a worthy long-term effort, in the shorter term it is beneficial to focus on more achievable goals. For example, a well-maintained residence hall "enables residents to develop attachments" and encourages students to protect the quality of their living environment (Shariati & Guerette, 2019).

In proper residence life fashion, hosting planned events in the residence halls is another method of crime prevention by environmental design. This programming serves as an alternative to activities like alcohol consumption which can lead to conflict between students or make violent crime more likely as "students' lifestyles and routine activities, such as their relationship behaviors and alcohol drinking habits, are important determinants of their victimization" (Shariati & Guerette, 2019). It also demonstrates the presence of residence life staff and gathers students in public spaces where violent crime is "less desirable for offenders" (Shariati & Guerette, 2019).

A strong community building focus among resident assistants and student staff members also promotes a sense of belonging and care for the other members of the residential community. Students who feel accepted by their community and who believe that other residents care about them are less likely to take actions that will negatively impact their community. You can't always change the limitations of the residential environment you work in, but you must not forget that residence life is a people-driven process. Pair crime prevention by environmental design practices with the community building work that you do best. Initial relationship construction with residence hall peers "can shape the ways students engage with the institution, as well as their ultimate educational success" (Smith, 2018) and these strong relationships paired with support from residence hall staff give residents low-conflict, low-violence ways to develop personally and socially.

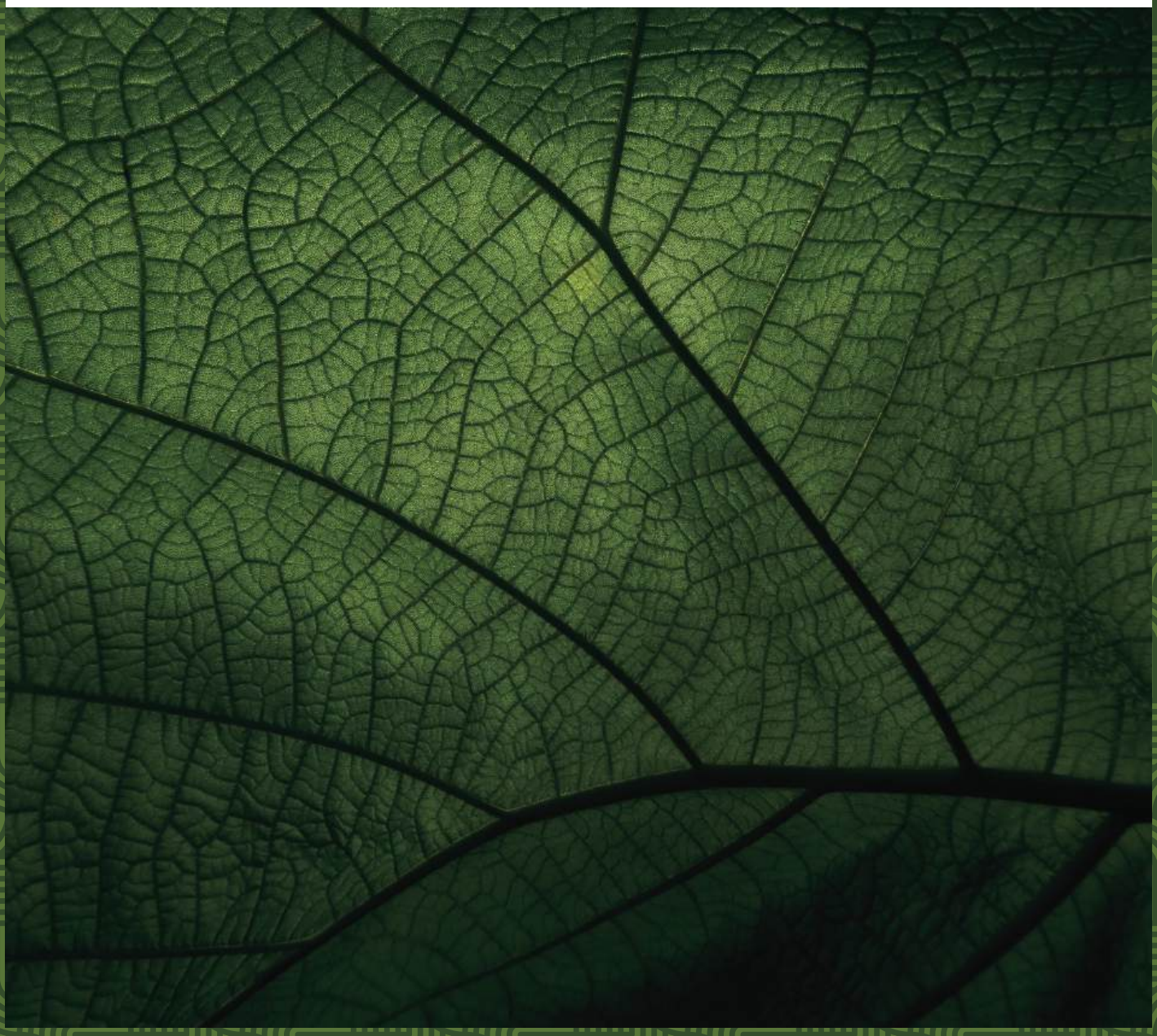
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# WHAT'S REALLY IN THE AIR?

*Rethinking Indoor Air Quality Complaints in Great Lakes Region Residence Halls*

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## The Call Every Facilities Manager Knows

It starts the same way almost every time. A work order comes in — "Mold in my room." Or a parent email at 11 p.m. describing black spots, persistent congestion, and an insistence that a remediation team be dispatched immediately. You respond, you investigate, you measure, you find… nothing. No mold. No elevated moisture. Perfectly normal building materials doing exactly what they were designed to do.

Over the course of my career managing facilities in MSU's residence halls, I have responded to indoor air quality (IAQ) complaints in the hundreds. And in that entire span, actual mold growing inside a residence hall room has occurred exactly once — and it was in a room with drywall construction, not in the plaster-constructed buildings that make up the majority of our historic housing stock.

That pattern begs a question we should be asking more openly across the GLACUHO region: if mold is not the cause, what is? And why do students feel sick?

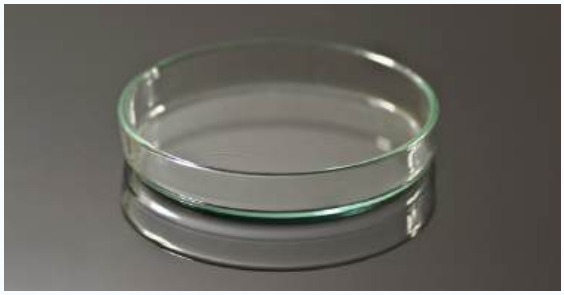
The answer, it turns out, is more interesting — and more actionable — than a mold problem.

## The Great Lakes Context: A Region that Breeds Misunderstanding

The Great Lakes region presents a uniquely challenging environment for housing facilities professionals. Michigan, Ohio, and Indiana sit in one of the most biodiverse fungal and pollen zones in North America. From late summer through the first hard freeze, outdoor ambient mold spore counts can be extraordinarily high. Ragweed, tree pollen, Cladosporium, Aspergillus, and Penicillium species are all abundant in the outdoor air of our campuses.

When students open windows — which they do, constantly, and which building operations often encourage or even depend on upon cooling in residence halls that lack central air conditioning — that ambient spore load enters the room. It settles on surfaces. It gets stirred up by foot traffic and HVAC airflow. It appears on the petri dish of an over-the-counter mold test kit.

This is important context, because over-the-counter consumer mold test kits are designed to detect mold spores — and mold spores exist everywhere in our region's atmosphere. A positive result from one of these kits does not mean your residence hall room has a mold problem. It means your residence hall room has air in it.



**ON CONSUMER MOLD TEST KITS**

EPA guidance is clear on two points relevant here: there are no federal exposure-based standards for indoor mold spores, and sampling should be performed only by trained professionals using methods recognized by organizations such as the AIHA or ACGIH. Consumer settle-plate (petri-dish) kits meet neither condition. Because mold spores are naturally present in both indoor and outdoor air everywhere, a positive result is close to guaranteed and carries no actionable meaning without a professionally designed baseline comparison.

*– Adapted from U.S. Environmental Protection Agency mold & moisture guidance*

The EPA and the CDC have both consistently stated that there are no federal exposure-based standards for indoor mold spore counts. Without a reference standard, a number means nothing. Yet these consumer kits produce alarming-looking reports with scientific-sounding species names, and concerned families interpret them as confirmation of a serious health hazard.

From a facilities professional's standpoint, this creates a challenging communication environment. Our job is not to dismiss student concerns — those concerns are real, and the symptoms are real. Our job is to find the real cause.

## Steam Heat & The Myth of Humidified Air

Here is where the conversation gets genuinely surprising, even to experienced facilities professionals.

Many of the older residence halls in the Great Lakes region — and at Michigan State University, the most recent residence hall was built in the late 1960s — using steam or hot water radiator heating systems. Among students and their families, the word "steam" conjures images of humidified, moist air. It sounds like the heat should be comfortable, even tropical. The reality is precisely the opposite.

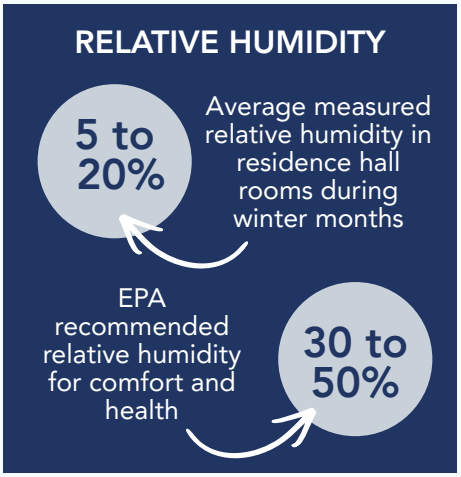
Steam and hot water radiator systems work by circulating heated water or steam through pipes and radiators. The heat transfers into the room via radiation and convection. The process adds no moisture to the air. In fact, outside air is introduced into the building, passed through filtration (in many buildings, MERV-13 filters), and heated by passing it over hot coils or radiators. This is functionally identical to a gas forced-air furnace in a home — and anyone who has lived in a house with gas forced air knows how dry those systems make the air in winter.



Beginning this winter, our facilities team made it standard practice to bring a psychrometer — a humidity measurement instrument — to every indoor air quality call. We rebranded these internally from "mold calls" to "IAQ calls," which better reflects what we are investigating. The results have been eye-opening.

Measured relative humidity in residence hall rooms during winter months has ranged from approximately 5% to 20%. The EPA recommends maintaining indoor relative humidity between 30% and 50% for comfort and health. ASHRAE guidance points to a similar lower bound, though the source is often misstated: ASHRAE Standard 55 does not set a minimum humidity level for thermal comfort. Rather, the ASHRAE Handbook notes that the 30–60% range provides the best conditions for human occupancy, and that low relative humidity dries the mucous membranes of the nose and throat and is linked to the increased respiratory complaints seen in winter.

Many students, however, arrive from homes with a whole-house humidifier integrated into the forced-air system, which keeps humidity in a more comfortable 30–50% range. (A home without humidification can run just as dry as the residence halls described here — the operative variable is whether moisture is actively added, not the heating method itself.)




Students arriving from a humidified home are stepping from an environment their bodies have adapted to — 30–50% humidity — into a residence hall environment sitting at 10–15% humidity. That is a physiologically significant change.

## What Low Humidity Actually Does to the Body

The connection between low indoor humidity and respiratory symptoms is well-established in the medical and public health literature, yet it rarely enters the facilities management conversation. Understanding this connection is essential to accurately diagnosing what students are experiencing.

### *MUCOSAL MEMBRANE DRYING*

The nasal passages, throat, and lower airways are lined with mucous membranes that function as the body's first line of defense against airborne pathogens, allergens, and particulates. These membranes trap bacteria, viruses, dust, pollen, and mold spores before they can enter the lungs.

When relative humidity drops below 30%, these membranes dry out. Their ability to trap and clear particulates is significantly diminished. Cilia — the tiny hair-like structures that sweep debris out of the airways — slow down or stop functioning effectively in dry air. The result is increased vulnerability to respiratory infection and a heightened reaction to allergens that would normally be cleared before causing symptoms.

**RESEARCH CONTEXT**

In a controlled study, mice exposed to low relative humidity (10–20%) showed impaired mucociliary clearance, weakened innate antiviral defenses, and reduced ability to repair airway tissue compared with animals kept at 50% humidity — leaving them measurably more susceptible to influenza. The authors identify low ambient humidity as a driver of the seasonal winter increase in respiratory disease.

*– Summarizing Kudo et al., Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS), 2019*

### *INCREASED INFECTIOUS DISEASE TRANSMISSION*

Multiple peer-reviewed studies have documented a relationship between low indoor humidity and increased transmission of respiratory viruses, including influenza. Research published in PLOS ONE found that maintaining indoor relative humidity above 40% significantly reduced the infectivity of influenza virus in airborne droplets released by simulated coughs. Similarly, studies of school and dormitory environments have identified low humidity as a contributing factor in elevated illness rates during winter months.

Put plainly: a student whose mucous membranes are dried out by a 10% humidity environment is more susceptible to every virus circulating in their residence hall. The sickness they experience may have nothing to do with mold and everything to do with the dryness of the air.

### *SYMPTOM OVERLAP WITH MOLD EXPOSURE*

Here is where the diagnostic picture becomes complicated for students, parents, and even healthcare providers: the symptoms of low-humidity respiratory stress and the symptoms commonly attributed to mold exposure are nearly identical. Both can produce persistent nasal congestion, postnasal drip, coughing, irritated eyes, sore throat, and fatigue.

When a student leaves campus for a weekend at home — where humidity is 40% — and their symptoms resolve, they reasonably conclude the residence hall is making them sick. They are correct. They are just often wrong about the mechanism.

## Building Materials and the Mold Misconception

Another critical piece of context for the GLACUHO region, particularly relevant to institutions with older housing stock: building materials matter greatly to mold's ability to colonize a space.

Modern drywall (gypsum board with paper facing) is a well-documented substrate for mold growth. The paper facing provides organic material that mold can consume; the gypsum retains moisture effectively. In buildings with drywall construction and any moisture intrusion, mold remediation is a genuine and serious concern.

However, many older Great Lakes region residence halls — including virtually all of MSU's housing stock — were constructed with lime-based plaster over masonry or metal lath. This is a fundamentally different material. Lime plaster has a high pH (typically between 12 and 13 during the curing process, settling to around 8–9 after carbonation), which creates an alkaline environment that is actively hostile to mold growth. The material is also non-porous compared to drywall paper, providing no organic food source for mold.

In practical terms, this means that in a lime plaster building, absent a significant water intrusion event — a roof leak, a plumbing failure, sustained condensation on a cold surface — mold colonization inside the room is extremely unlikely regardless of what a petri dish left open on the windowsill might grow after 48 hours of collecting ambient outdoor spores.

**KEY PRINCIPLE FOR PEER INSTITUTIONS**

Before responding to mold complaints, facilities teams should document the construction materials in the building. A lime plaster building and a drywall building require different investigative protocols and present very different risk profiles.

## The Dust Variable: An Underacknowledged IAQ Factor

There is a third factor worth naming explicitly, because it surfaces in nearly every IAQ investigation in occupied student rooms: dust.

Students, particularly those living independently for the first time, often underestimate the role of regular cleaning in maintaining indoor air quality. Dust accumulates rapidly in occupied spaces — on horizontal surfaces, in carpet fibers, under beds and furniture, and in HVAC filter registers. Dust in residence halls contains a mixture of human skin cells, textile fibers, tracked-in outdoor particulates (including pollen and mold spores from the Great Lakes outdoor environment), dust mite allergens, and general debris.

When disturbed — by foot traffic, air currents from window openings, or the HVAC system cycling on — this settled dust becomes airborne. Combined with desiccated mucous membranes from low humidity, even a moderate dust load can produce significant respiratory symptoms in susceptible individuals.

Facilities staff who conduct IAQ assessments should note the general cleanliness of the space, not as a judgment of the resident, but as a diagnostic data point. A room with significant dust accumulation under furniture or around HVAC vents tells us something meaningful about one likely contributor to the resident's symptoms.

**KEY PRINCIPLE**

Facilities staff should make note of general cleanliness in the space during IAQ calls as a diagnostic data point.

## The Air Conditioning Exception: When the Unit is the Problem

The framework described in this article — low humidity, ambient outdoor spores, building materials — applies most directly to residence halls heated by steam or hot water radiators. Institutions that have installed window or through-wall air conditioning units face an added and distinct IAQ risk that deserves separate consideration.

Unlike steam radiators, which introduce no moisture into the room, room air conditioning units actively move humid air across cold coils, creating condensate. Drain pans, coil surfaces, and internal filters that are not regularly cleaned or properly draining can become genuine sites of mold growth — not ambient spore accumulation, but active colonization on a wet, organic surface inside the room.

When an IAQ call involves a room with a window or through-wall AC unit, the investigative protocol should include a visual inspection of the unit itself: the filter, the coil face, and the drain pan. A musty odor that is localized near the unit, rather than distributed throughout the room,

rather than distributed throughout the room, is a meaningful diagnostic signal. These cases call for cleaning or unit replacement rather than the humidity and communication-focused response that addresses most winter IAQ complaints.

Preventive maintenance scheduling for AC units — annual coil cleaning, filter replacement, and drain pan inspection — is among the most cost-effective investments an institution can make in IAQ management for buildings with this equipment.

## A Framework for IAQ Investigations: Lessons from the Field

Based on field experience and literature, the following framework has proven effective in our investigations. It is intended to be systematic, transparent with residents and families, and to build trust through evidence rather than dismissal.

### *STEP ONE: RENAME THE CALL*

Internally reframing "mold calls" as "IAQ calls" is not mere wordsmithing. It signals to facilities staff — and eventually to residents — that you are investigating the air quality comprehensively, not simply looking for visible mold to clean. This framing allows you to address the actual problem even when it is not mold.

### *STEP TWO: MEASURE BEFORE CONCLUDING*

Bring a psychrometer (hygrometer) to every IAQ call. Measure and document relative humidity. Measure and document surface moisture with a pin or pinless moisture meter. Document wall and ceiling areas of concern. These readings create an objective record that supports your conclusions and demonstrates to residents and families that a rigorous assessment was done.

### *STEP THREE: CONTEXTUALIZE THE FINDINGS*

When findings are within normal ranges, explain clearly what those ranges mean and why the building systems produce them. Residents from the Southwest, from temperate climates, or from well-humidified homes are genuinely experiencing a physiologically significant change in their environment. Validating that experience while correcting the misconception about its cause is far more effective than simply saying "we found no mold."

### *STEP FOUR: OFFER ACTIONABLE GUIDANCE*

Personal humidifiers are widely available for $20–30 and are effective at raising humidity in a single-occupancy or double-occupancy room to comfortable levels. This is a practical, low-cost solution that addresses the actual problem. Offering this guidance — along with information about the health benefits of maintaining 40–60% relative humidity — turns an IAQ call into a positive resident interaction.

## A Framework for IAQ Investigations: Lessons from the Field Continued

***STEP FIVE: DEFINE WHO RESPONDS – AND AT WHAT LEVEL***

Effective IAQ management requires knowing in advance which staff are authorized to conduct assessments, communicate findings to residents, and escalate when warranted. Leaving this undefined creates inconsistency and exposes institutions to risk.

A workable best practice, and one that reflects sound protocol in larger housing operations: require that a supervisor or facilities manager — not maintenance staff working alone — either lead or accompany the initial response to any IAQ complaint that involves a potential mold concern. Maintenance staff are skilled at the technical investigation, but the communication dimension of an IAQ call requires someone with the authority and training to interpret findings, speak credibly with concerned residents or families, and make real-time decisions about escalation. Sending a single technician to a room and having them report back before anyone communicates with the resident creates a gap in the response that erodes trust.

Institutions should document their response protocol clearly — who responds, at what staffing level, under what conditions a supervisor is required on-site versus available by phone, and when the campus environmental health and safety office or occupational safety team enters the picture. For facilities operations that have not formalized this, an IAQ complaint protocol is a low-cost, high-value document to have in place before the first call of the season arrives.

## Implications for GLACUHO Member Institutions

The dynamics described in this article are not unique to Michigan State University. They are inherent to the Great Lakes region's climate, to the age of our housing stock, and to the transition students undergo when they move from home into institutional living.

For institutions with older buildings utilizing steam or hot water heat — common across the region — winter IAQ complaints will continue to be a steady feature of the facilities workload. The question is whether we respond reactively to each complaint as an isolated potential mold event, or whether we develop proactive protocols that address the underlying environmental conditions.

Some practical implications for peer institutions to consider:

- Invest in simple humidity monitoring. Basic digital hygrometers cost under $20 each and can provide ongoing visibility into room conditions. Loaner units for IAQ investigations, or even permanent placement in representative rooms, can inform operational decisions.
- Review your MERV filter ratings against your actual HVAC design. MERV-13 filters capture a broad range of particulates, but filter efficacy depends on air velocity and proper installation. Filter bypass around edges is common in systems and significantly reduces effectiveness.

Continued practical implications for peer institutions to consider:

- Update resident communications. Pre-move-in materials and your institution's mold/IAQ web resources should address the low-humidity phenomenon directly. Students from humid climates or well-humidified homes benefit from knowing what to expect.
- Consider a standard IAQ toolkit for facilities staff. A psychrometer, a pin-type moisture meter, and a simple documentation form constitute a basic IAQ investigation kit that costs under $150 per team and produces defensible, documented findings.
- Train staff on the resident communication dimension of IAQ calls. The technical investigation is only part of the work. How staff explain their findings — with empathy, clarity, and specificity — determines whether residents and families feel heard and reassured or dismissed.

## Conclusion: Reframing the Conversation

The mold complaint is not going away. As long as students have access to consumer test kits, as long as outdoor spore counts in the Great Lakes region remain high, and as long as steam-heated residence halls operate at 10% relative humidity in January, facilities professionals will receive these calls.

What we can change is how we understand and respond to them. The goal of this article is not to suggest that mold concerns should be dismissed — genuine mold problems exist, require prompt remediation, and represent a real health risk. The goal is to argue that the far more common scenario — a student experiencing respiratory symptoms in a dry, older building surrounded by the ambient spore-rich air of the Great Lakes region — deserves its own diagnostic framework, its own communication strategy, and its own set of practical solutions.

When we get that right, we serve students better. We also protect our institutions from the reputational and operational burden of treating every IAQ complaint as a potential crisis.
The air in our residence halls is telling us something. Let's make sure we are listening.



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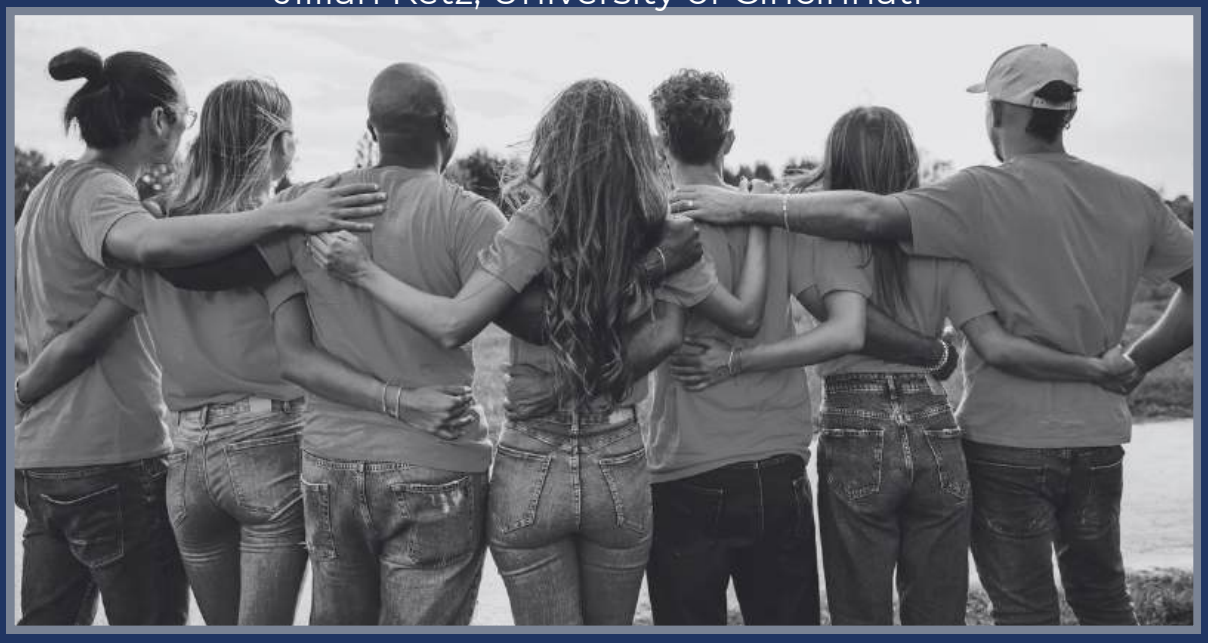
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# When Your RAs Aren't OK:

## How You Can Prepare Your Team to Navigate the Worst

Jillian Ketz, University of Cincinnati



Trigger warning: Discussion of Suicide, Stalking, and Mental Health Hospitalization

### The Apex

It's October. You are in your first semester of your first ever full-time role. You're also navigating a jump from supervising 5 resident advisors to a team of 19— and a graduate assistant, despite having just been one yourself not even 6 months ago. Free time is hard to come by, as is time to take care of yourself. There have been some tough incidents to handle already. Nothing you and your team haven't been able to handle, but you are scared that one more difficult night will make everything (and everyone) fall apart. It's a precarious balance of keeping morale high while embracing the challenges around your team. At the end of the month, you start to feel like there is maybe a light at the end of the tunnel.

Then, November hits.

In the early hours of November 1st, a resident of your community returned to his room after celebrating Halloween night to find one of his roommates was dead. He had hung himself from an exposed pipe on the ceiling. There had been no signs he was struggling. Six of your RAs responded to the scene, and all six of them saw the body. You were serving on call, but you had been responding to several fistfights on the other side of campus, so your coworker, your supervisor, and your director looped you in when you woke up. The following few days were a blur of drafting communications, meeting with your team, and working with your counseling office for extra support.

A week later, one of your RAs leaves the role to take a medical withdrawal due to complications from a car crash she was in that summer. Not even a week after that, another RA reveals that she's being stalked by a former friend. The stalker had started knocking on the doors of the RA's residents. And finally, another RA, one of the kindest and gentlest students you have ever had, has a full psychosis episode in your building. Some of your team tries to help the night before with no success, and you find him in your office the next morning speaking incoherently, scribbling in all three of his languages at once, and digging through your things. He is escorted out by the police, crying and handcuffed for his own safety, and remains hospitalized for weeks.



## The Aftermath

That vignette was my reality in Fall 2025: a series of once-in-a-career events happening back-to-back. By the time Thanksgiving break arrived, I was exhausted, and so was my team. While I was navigating admin tasks and follow-up, they were covering additional shifts and taking on more residents who needed support. They had every right to be angry and upset. But, to my surprise, they weren't. They showed up to staff meetings every week just as positive as they were at the start of the year, and I never once had to ask for volunteers to cover the extra work because they had either already volunteered themselves or asked how they could help.

Their clear commitment to our mission of supporting residents and one another has me in awe to this day. The remnants of my team were joining the group chats of floors who had lost their RAs to be available for those residents, and they were requesting additional budget to put on extravagant winter closing events on the impacted floors to ensure the residents didn't feel forgotten. They were creating elaborate webs of duty shift swaps, so no one was taking on more work than anyone else. My RAs were even staying late after staff meetings to hang out and get food as a team (which is even more impressive when you learn staff meetings run from 9:00pm-10:30pm on Wednesday nights on our campus). I recall sitting with my supervisor at the end of the semester to recount my disbelief at how well they had handled everything, and she gave me the much-needed reminder that this was made possible by the intentional work I had done at the start of the year to create that environment for them. As I reflect today, almost a year later, I can pinpoint exactly what set my team up for success: expectation setting, positivity, and continuous bonding.

# The Systems That Helped Us Push Through

## Setting Expectations and Sticking to Them

Like every residence life professional does, I set firm expectations with my team early and gave them the space to give feedback and create their own. Last year, those expectations were more important than ever as a brand-new full-time professional entering a space where the predecessor was not well-liked. To combat this, I stressed the importance of embracing the new year, showing grace, openness, and honesty. The fresh start was exactly what we needed as a team. When they saw my dedication to building trust and connections with them, they reciprocated that, both with me and each other. When I gave them space to have emotions and bad days, they returned the favor when I needed it. This strong foundation made mutual respect and a willingness to step up second nature to them, and that became the backbone of our community's ability to function and thrive through adversity.



## Fostering a Culture of Positivity



Residence life, especially its live-on roles, can be heavy and emotionally taxing. To maintain the mental health of a live-on team, prioritizing positivity and humor is essential to being successful during difficult patches. I set the expectation for having fun with my team while establishing my expectations for communication, deadlines, and respect. This showed my staff early that optimism is something that is valued in our team's culture, and that being light-hearted is encouraged when appropriate. Our motto quickly became "embrace the suck", which further set the expectation that there will be positivity and light when things are hard. An article by Sommer et al. (2015) affirms this, explaining that “in a crisis situation, transformational leadership behaviors are associated with higher levels of positive affect and lower levels of negative affect among team members, which in turn relate to higher resilience”. Transformational leadership is defined by motivation and growth; two things that are associated with the presence of optimism. If optimism builds resilience, then prioritizing joy will make a difference when it matters most.

## Bonding, Bonding, Bonding



In my journey to understand my leadership philosophy, I have found that authenticity is one of my most important values in how I practice leadership. When creating a team culture, I find it unfair to expect openness from my students without returning that favor to them. This is why I prioritize frequent and continuous staff bonding, both formally and informally. Mitchell et al. (2024) write that "team openness is a critical antecedent to team resilience", as camaraderie and trust are foundational to effective teamwork. In addition to semesterly team bonding events, we practice openness and connection every day through a group space dedicated to sharing jokes and memes, and by taking time to share our high points and low points every week during our staff meetings. Intentionally incorporating team bonding into the requirements of the role helps students build emotional intelligence and empathy, benefiting their residents and one another, and encourages individuals to rely on one another. They become more likely to "share the load", capitalizing on the resilience of the whole team rather than just one member.



## The TL; DR

Team resilience is just as reliant on the culture created by leaders as it is the dispositions of individual members. Studies show that focusing on optimism, motivation, openness, and consistent expectations directly correlate with improvements in resilience. By incorporating those values into our supervision of student staff using practices as small as sending a meme or simply checking in, we can better equip them to handle the crises that can come with serving residents.



## Resources


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