

Willamette University's Residential Commons Program *Rehearsal and Improvisation in the Co-Curriculum*

Background

In 1999 Willamette began an assessment of its campus life programs in order to revitalize student life at the University. A series of surveys, focus groups, and a commissioned study of student satisfaction resulted in a series of conclusions about practices and attitudes, including:

- a weak sense of community and collective empowerment;
- a gap between a generally positive appraisal of faculty and academic facilities and the lower ratings given co-curricular life and residential facilities;
- a student view of the administration of their non-academic lives as paternalistic and filled with unneeded regulations;
- a perceived lack of intellectual and cultural vitality and social variety in co-curricular life.

Project

The work of several inclusive committees resulted in a plan for four residential Commons on campus, the plans for which were developed out of further research and site-visits to other campuses with residential Commons programs. The four foundations for the renewal of university life identified by The Collegiate Way - decentralization, faculty leadership, social stability, and genuine diversity - served as cornerstones for our work.

Kaneko Commons, our first newly constructed residential community, opened in fall of 2006. It is organized around developmental principles to encourage student self-authorship and a community standards-based governance system. Similar governance and programming systems are being developed in all residences on campus, and all residence facilities will be renewed and remodeled over the next decade to support graduated housing and active involvement of faculty in the Commons. Features of the Commons Program include:

- a redesigned and highly participatory student governance system;
- student-run judicial boards to adjudicate behavioral issues;
- programming budget for student governance boards;
- Faculty Associates involved in programming;
- graduated housing;
- selection system that encourages students to remain in their Commons.

Questions and Challenges:

- What unique opportunities for student development do college Commons present?
- What problems or barriers are inherent in extending academic development goals to college Commons?
- How can a co-curricular Commons program enhance self-reflection and reflective judgment in ways that are supportive of the curriculum?
- What "best practices" should guide student development in Commons contexts?
- How can developmental goals be assessed in college Commons?

Self-Governance in the Kaneko Commons
How is Kaneko different from other residential communities at Willamette?
January 23, 2008

<i>Kaneko Commons</i>	<i>Other Residential Communities</i>
1. There is no separation between the residence hall government and student staff structure (resident assistants, etc.). All elected officers and student staff members are part of a governing council.	1. Each residential community has a hall government that is separate from the student staff leadership structure. Consequently, each is allowed to run their own programs and events without necessarily consulting the other group.
2. Student staff members are called “community mentors.” They have fewer programmatic responsibilities for the residence hall and are expected to provide a high level of mentoring and support for the residents of their community. Although rule enforcement is a part of their job, they are encouraged to engage the community and the council in solving problems when possible.	2. Student staff members are called “resident assistants.” They have significant programmatic responsibilities for the residence hall, and also are very active in rule enforcement.
3. The chair(s) of the judicial board is a member of the governing council. Judicial board hearings occur in Kaneko.	3. There is no connection between the judicial board and the hall government or resident assistant staff. Judicial board hearings occur outside of the residence hall.
4. As the governing council includes all stakeholders of the building (hall government, student staff, and judicial), the budget is centralized resulting in a single, large account that is managed by the council.	4. The hall government and resident assistants have separate financial accounts for their respective programs and activities. The result is several small accounts that are managed by different parties.
5. The governing council is an active stakeholder in facilities-related decisions.	5. There is no formal mechanism to involve the hall government or student staff members in facilities-related decisions.

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