A Commentary on "The Educational Role in College Student Housing"

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IN THEIR 1971 ARTICLE, "The Educational Role in College Student Housing," Riker and DeCoster outlined two basic assumptions underlying efforts to infuse educational elements into college residence halls: (1) environment influences behavior, and (2) learning is a total process. They also presented a framework that identifies five objectives for student housing that range from those focused on the construction and renovation of physical facilities to those fostering the growth and development of students. In this article, we place these ideas within their historical context and reflect on the ways in which they have evolved and influenced the housing profession during the past 37 years.

THE ROLE OF STUDENT HOUSING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Integrating the living and learning experiences of students is not a novel concept. During the early centuries of the Common Era (CE), and even before the Common Era (BCE), adults (usually young men) traveled long distances by foot, donkey, or oxcart to "sit at the feet of the masters" or learn from Confucius, Plato, Socrates, and other great philosophers, scientists, artists, clergy, and educational leaders of their time (Lucas, 2006). Once they reached their destinations, many were advised to live with each other and with their teachers, at least in part because it was assumed that the interactions that occurred where they lived would contribute to their learning. Perhaps universities were yet to be created, but the school where Confucius lived with his students in the years BCE had much in common with today's residential college.

Moving forward many centuries to the founding of the colonial colleges in America, we again find students and faculty living together in campus dormitories (Rudolph, 1990). Perhaps the assumption that living and learning experiences were mutually enhancing still held. However, given that most American communities did not have high schools until early in the 20th century, we must bear in...
mind that most students who entered college in earlier years did so immediately after grammar school (eighth grade), when they were about 14 years old. Because students were young adolescents, faculty served \textit{in loco parentis} and their out-of-class duties focused on developing moral character and regulating student behavior. Indeed, in 1869 Harvard's President Eliot stated, “In spite of the familiar picture of the moral dangers which environ the student, there is no place so safe as a good college during the critical passage from boyhood to manhood” (as cited in Rudolph, 1990, p. 88).

According to Rudolph, early American colleges adopted a collegiate model primarily because their founders were graduates of the English residential colleges. He wrote, “Had the first American colleges been the work of Scotchmen or of continental Europeans, perhaps a curriculum, a library, faculty, and students would have been enough” (p. 87). However, because the American population was small and dispersed, it was not possible to adopt the European model in which university students lived on their own in cities. When Harvard was founded in 1636, there were no “cities” to speak of in the colonies. The collegiate model was “at first the only solution to the absence of large concentrations of population” and “by the time the colleges in Philadelphia and New York were under way, the collegiate pattern was not a necessity, for there were cities. But by then what had been a necessity had become a tradition” (Rudolph, 1990, pp. 87-88).

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In the early 1800s increasing numbers of critics of the collegiate model claimed that high concentrations of young men living together, with so little academic work to do and so many vices to distract them, led to moral decay and rebellion. In 1842, Brown's President Wayland ascribed most of the evils of college life … to dormitories: the inappropriateness of the same rules and regulations for students of all ages, the spread of diseases by epidemics, the tendency of students to exercise too little, the exposure of
many young men to the vice and habits of evil leaders, the isolation of the college from the life of the community and of the works, the expenditure of money needed for libraries on living facilities, [and] the imposition on the college of responsibilities it was unable and unprepared to carry out effectively. (Rudolph, 1990, p. 99)

These critics gained influence with the support of increasing numbers of administrators who had studied abroad and experienced the German model of higher education, which required faculty to create and transmit knowledge through research. As the German model became more pronounced in American institutions, faculty devoted more time to research and there emerged new administrative units that assumed responsibility for student life outside of the classroom (Rudolph, 1990). Led initially by deans of men and women, these units became known as student affairs, and one of their responsibilities was to operate student housing.

Until the middle of the 20th century, live-in staff served primarily as building managers and student disciplinarians. Most housing staff had no educational preparation to integrate living and learning experiences or even to work with college students. In fact, many did not have college degrees themselves. As housing systems grew in size and complexity, it became apparent that professionally trained staff were needed in college housing. S. Earl Thompson articulated this need in 1949 at the first National Housing Conference (Transcript, 1949). Participants in this conference and in similar conferences in the next two years led to the formation of the Association of College and University Housing Officers (ACUHO) in 1952 (Frederiksen, 1993).

During the 1950s and 1960s, college housing experienced a period of unprecedented growth as higher education expanded to serve two large groups of students. First were the World War II veterans who enrolled in college with financial assistance provided by the G. I. Bill. Then came the large group of "baby boomers" born soon after the war ended. During these two decades, conferences and publications for housing professionals focused primarily on the design, construction, funding, and management of new student housing facilities ranging from family housing apartments for veterans who were married and had children to high-rise residence halls that could house hundreds of students (Unruh, 1995). Once the construction phase was dealt with, housing officers focused their attention on staff and programs that were, or would become, associated with residence life.

In his 1961 book, *Student Personnel Services in Colleges and Universities*, Williamson described the functions of student housing personnel as "securing housing; maintaining standards of hygiene, safety, and behavior in dormitories, fraternities, sororities, and private rooming houses; residential counseling; and stimulating students to participate in governing and administering the dormitories and other residences" (p. 31). Although suggesting that housing has an "educative function" (p. 78), he did not elaborate on the nature of this function. Thus, it appears that housing was perceived primarily as a service unit and that its functions were largely divorced from the academic mission of the institution, or at least divorced from the academic curriculum.
In 1965 Harold C. Riker, then the director of housing at the University of Florida, wrote *College Housing as Learning Centers*, a monograph that was published by the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) in cooperation with ACUHO. In its preface Riker said,

> Living is to be defined as more than a bed and learning as more than a desk; they are part of a total process, a wholeness of student experience on the campus. To contribute favorably and consistently to this experience, the living and learning that go on in student housing have to be stimulated and sustained by planned programs. (p. v)

Although noting that “Housing theory and practice are often light years apart” (p. 47), Riker emphasized that

> The time is at hand when trustees and administrators will recognize out of necessity that housing designed and administered for formal or informal teaching purposes is not a philosophical ideal that is “nice if we can afford it.” It is a requirement produced by changing times and conditions. For those who say that they cannot afford educationally oriented housing, the fact of the matter is that they cannot afford not to have it on the future residential campus. (p. 2)

During the latter half of the 1960s, many housing officers implemented at least some of the recommendations Riker (1965) offered for staff, programs, facilities, funding, and other areas that needed to be addressed in turning residence halls into effective living-learning centers. The educational role of student housing had become a “hot topic” in the profession. Thus, it is not surprising that ACUHO chose (or perhaps solicited) a manuscript focusing on this topic as the first article for the first issue of its journal in 1971. The article was co-authored by Riker and David A. DeCoster, another scholar-practitioner, then the associate director of housing at the University of Georgia. Three years later, DeCoster and Mable (1974) produced another classic book on this topic, *Student Development and Education in College Residence Halls*.

**STUDENT LEARNING AND OTHER OUTCOMES OF THE RESIDENTIAL EXPERIENCE**

Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, the professional literature has been infused with individual studies and research reviews or meta-analyses of hundreds of studies focusing on the impacts of various aspects of housing's programs and facilities on student learning, development, retention, academic achievement, and other outcomes of the residence hall experience. A small sample of books focusing on the educational function of college housing include *Commuting Versus Resident Students* (Chickering, 1975), *Maximizing Educational Opportunities in Residence Halls* (Blimling & Schuh, 1981), *Realizing the Educational Potential of Residence Halls* (Schroeder, Mable, & Associates, 1994), *Educational Programming and Student Learning in College and University Residence Halls* (Schuh, 1999), *The Impact of College on Students* (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969), *What Matters in College?* (Astin, 1993b), and *How College Affects Students* (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). These resources devote
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the entire book, major sections, or chapters to summaries of research on the educational impact of the residential experience. The most recent and most extensive meta-analysis of this research was provided by Pascarella and Terenzini in their most recent volume (2005), which was based on a synthesis of 2,600 studies completed between 1989 and 2002 (p. 10).

Their concluding section regarding the effects of student residence (pp. 603-604) indicated the following:

1. Place of residence appears to have little, if any, influence on general cognitive growth or more specific knowledge acquisition. However, students who live on campus (compared to those who live off campus) were more likely to be satisfied with their college experience and to be retained to graduation. Further, "students who live in living-learning settings are more likely, net of other factors, to persist than are similar students in traditional housing arrangements" (p. 604). Pascarella and Terenzini also noted that students who live on campus also make greater gains in several areas of development and experience greater changes regarding specific values and attitudes during their college years.

2. "Residence effects are primarily indirect rather than direct" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 604). For example, students who live on campus interact with peers and faculty and participate in extracurricular activities more often than do students who live off campus, and these interactions and activities are themselves positively associated with many college outcomes, including retention and graduation.

3. Residential effects on student learning and development are greatest in residential environments that are intentionally designed to achieve those effects. For example, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) noted that living on rather than off campus does promote more positive and inclusive racial-ethnic attitudes and openness to diversity . . . The residential impact is strongest in those living settings purposefully structured to encourage students' encounters with people different from themselves and with ideas different from those they currently hold. (p. 603)

Another example involves the effects of residence environments that are intentionally structured to foster interactions between students and faculty or to integrate in-class and out-of-class experiences. Terenzini and Pascarella (1997) reported that residence halls having the greatest effects on student learn-
ing and retention “are typically the result of purposeful, programmatic efforts to integrate students’ intellectual and social lives during college—living-learning centers are not only a neat idea, they actually work!” (p. 178).

REVISITING RIKER AND DECOSTER’S ASSUMPTIONS

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) provided evidence that supports Riker’s (1965) and Riker and DeCoster’s (1971) assumptions that environment influences behavior and that learning is a total process. These premises underlie many theories and practices that support the educational role of contemporary college housing. Our commentary reverses the order in which Riker and DeCoster originally presented their two assumptions in an attempt to show that an understanding of learning as a total process informs our development of environments that not only influence behavior, but foster student learning and development.

Learning Is a Total Process

That students are considered whole persons, that learning involves a multifaceted process extending beyond the purely intellectual domain, and that in-class and out-of-class learning experiences are mutually enhancing have become foundational assumptions in student affairs in general and campus housing in particular. As early as 1945, the American Council on Education emphasized that

Educational effectiveness is dependent upon the normal healthy functioning of the student outside as well as within the classroom. The student, however intelligent, who is physically ill, who is frustrated in his personal and social relationships, who is worried about his finances, who lacks a sense of direction and orientation in his education, and whose housing and study conditions constantly interfere with learning is in no position to give his best to his studies, and to get the most from them. (p. 5)

These outcomes clearly describe Riker and DeCoster’s (1971) learning as a total process, as they incorporate traditional academic learning and skill development with personal commitments, interpersonal dynamics, and community engagement. Clearly, such holistic student learning and development may be fostered in the residential environment.

Many housing officers would add only a hearty “amen!” to the above statement and to the final sentence in the 1968 quotation from the Committee on Higher Education cited by Riker and DeCoster (1971), which reads, “To teach the subject matter and ignore the realities of the student’s life and the social systems of the college is hopelessly naïve” (p. 4). In 1974, Brown essentially turned the tables and
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urged practitioners to consider the following as well:

It is time for student personnel workers to recognize that they too have been dealing with only a part of the student, and it is no more valid for them to expect effectiveness in dealing with the student’s development, independent of his academic life, than it is for the professor to think a student’s personal self does not affect his academic growth. (p. 43)

These statements asserted the integrated nature of student learning and the inseparability of academic and non-academic, or in-class and out-of-class, learning experiences. These assertions were expanded upon in The Student Learning Imperative (American College Personnel Association [ACPA], 1994), Powerful Partnerships (American Association for Higher Education [AAHE], ACPA, & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA], 1998), and Learning Reconsidered (NASPA & ACPA, 2004), along with other influential documents published during the past few years. In perhaps the most recent of these documents, College Learning for the New Global Century, the American Association of Colleges and Universities (2007) identified four critical outcomes of an undergraduate education:

- Personal and social responsibility, including civic knowledge and engagement—local and global, intercultural knowledge and competence, ethical reasoning and action, foundations and skills for lifelong learning; and
- Integrative learning, including synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies. (p. 3)

These outcomes clearly describe Riker and DeCoster’s (1971) learning as a total process, as they incorporate traditional academic learning and skill development with personal commitments, interpersonal dynamics, and community engagement. Clearly, such holistic student learning and development may be fostered in the residential environment. In Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter, Kuh and Associates (2005) described recent residence hall conditions that are educationally effective. They include (a) human-scale environments housing small groups of students; (b) faculty offices in residences that foster faculty-student interactions; (c) themed living environments that, while not necessarily related to an academic discipline or major, include a course or other academic component shared by the residents; (d) academic and personal support for students; and (e) deliberate efforts to make educational programs (including first year student programs) an integral part of the residential experience. These practices reflect modern interpretations of connecting in- and out-of-class learning and providing opportunities for students to develop as whole people, critical aspects of what Riker and DeCoster (1971) described as foundational aspects of learning as a total process. They also reflect the assumption that environments influence behavior.
Environment Influences Behavior

Environments are very complex entities. Astin (1993a) went so far as to say that "the environment encompasses everything that happens to a student during the course of an education program that might conceivably influence the outcomes under consideration" (p. 81). In Educating by Design: Creating Campus Learning Environments That Work, Strange and Banning (2001) presented four environmental perspectives: the physical environment, the human aggregate (the people in the environment), the organizational/structural environment, and the constructed/perceptual environment. According to Palmer (1996), the residence hall environments consisted of "(a) physical facilities, (b) equipment and furnishings, (c) food services, (d) management procedures, (e) staffing patterns, (f) student codes of conduct and other policies, (g) student activities programming, and (h) all other elements of the total housing program" (p. 1).

Residence hall environments have changed considerably since Riker and DeCoster (1971) published their article 37 years ago. Many of these changes were intended to foster student learning and development, as well as heighten student satisfaction and therefore retention (Strange & Banning, 2001). The third author of this article, who currently serves as a director of housing and has worked in campus housing for more than 25 years, has observed many changes that influence the development of students.

For example, she noted that double rooms and common bathrooms still appeal to some students and are particularly conducive to the social adjustment of first year students. Some institutions have replaced long corridors of double rooms with suites or apartments for upperclass students in an attempt to meet their developmental needs and to enhance their satisfaction. Some campuses have built additional staff apartments for live-in faculty, professional counselors, short-term instructors, speakers, artists, and other guests. Typing rooms have been turned into computer labs, and at least some of the trash barrels have been replaced by recycling bins. Most libraries, formal lounges, and pay phones at the end of the hallway have been eliminated. Also, land-line telephones and hard-wired access to the Internet and cable television from student rooms may soon become obsolete as more and more students use wireless technologies.

Our third author also indicated that many facilities have deteriorated as a result of deferred maintenance. In some cases, significant portions of repair and renovation budgets have been appropriated by other campus entities; in other cases, insufficient funds have been allocated over the years for the types of facility improvements that are needed today, particularly at the purchase and installation stage. For example, replacing older shower heads and windows with newer models that conserve water and energy may save costs over the long run, but their up-front costs may be prohibitive. When institutions are able to build new residence halls or renovate existing structures, they are often creating "green" buildings, reducing energy and water usage and waste products and building with locally sourced, sustainable, and non-toxic materials. Frequently, the initiatives for these projects have come from students, who are increasingly aware of their effects on the environment and its natural re-
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sources. Some residence halls have monitoring systems that allow students and other users to track the energy consumption of the building’s residents, allowing the physical structures to serve educational functions as well.

Housing officers who have a finite number of dollars to spend have many hard choices to make. Effective safety and security systems are paramount, but expensive. Balancing what students need and what students want is not an easy task. For example, cosmetic improvements to the facilities may influence occupancy rates. The plumbing, heating, and electrical systems “behind the walls” may need to be updated, but students may prefer new paint on the wall and new carpeting on the floor. Roof repairs, student room furniture, shower renovations, hot water heaters, cable television connections, equipment for the exercise room, cleaning supplies, dining facilities, kitchen equipment, food costs, trash collection, security cameras, residentially based academic programs, staff training, staff salaries and benefits, staff computers, and all the other items in the housing budget make it necessary for senior housing administrators to engage in the continual process of prioritizing the needs within the “total” housing system, balancing structural needs, student desires, and changes needed to enhance student learning and development. After all, as the student is a whole person and learning is a total process, the residence hall environment as a whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In 1965, Riker noted that because student housing was seen solely as a business enterprise rather than as a setting to foster student learning, some housing systems were composed of “nonsensical combinations of facilities, staff, and activities—each tending to cancel out the effectiveness of the other” (p. 1). We have come a long way since then, thanks largely to the leadership of senior housing officers who coordinate comprehensive housing systems. We still have our fair share of challenges, but the distance between where we are and where we should be is no longer measured in “light years” as indicated by Riker in 1965.

REFLECTING ON THE GENERAL OBJECTIVES FOR COLLEGE STUDENT HOUSING

Since Riker and DeCoste created their five-level model of housing objectives in 1971, housing and residence life organizations have become more complex, largely because of specialization. Without appropriate leadership and coordination, this specialization can become
compartmentalization, yielding competition for resources, lack of appreciation for the work of those in other compartments, and a general operating scheme in which the proverbial left hand does not know what the right hand is doing.

On many campuses, facilities, dining services, residence life, and other housing staff meet regularly and have a shared understanding of student needs and organizational goals. Progressive senior housing officers deliberately attempt to break down silos and cross-train their staff members. This cross-training is critical, as many housing staff have become very focused, particularly in large operations.

Although they are more complex, effective housing systems also operate as integrated systems. On many campuses, facilities, dining services, residence life, and other housing staff meet regularly and have a shared understanding of student needs and organizational goals. Progressive senior housing officers deliberately attempt to break down silos and cross-train their staff members. This cross-training is critical, as many housing staff have become very focused, particularly in large operations.

Specialists in marketing and communications, contracts and assignments, safety and security, maintenance and custodial management, information technology, judicial affairs, programming and activities, budgeting and accounting, nutrition and dining services, academic support, counseling, staff selection and training, multicultural affairs, group advising, and first year experience programs must communicate regularly and work collaboratively to create a total housing system that effectively serves and satisfies its resident students.

The one change we would make to Riker and DeCoster’s (1971) model is to replace the solid lines that imply separations between the five levels of objectives for college housing (see p. 6) with dashed lines indicating fluent movement and open communication between levels. Another change would be to emphasize a student orientation at all levels. We fully acknowledge that staff at Levels 1 and 2 foster the living and learning experiences of students indirectly by providing physical environments conducive to those experiences and that those at Levels 3, 4, and 5 work with students more directly to foster the development of community, responsible citizenship, and an interpersonal environment that is conducive to learning, growth, and development. Readers should note that higher levels do not signify greater importance, but, as in any hierarchical model, lower levels form the foundation upon which the higher levels can be built. In fact, if the tasks associated with lower layers of the hierarchy are not achieved at a satisfactory level, the entire system may collapse. At best, the efforts of those associated with the upper layers would be compromised by a weakened support structure, in contrast to one in which
staff who work primarily with the physical environment contribute to the educational role of student housing. This fact demonstrates the important roles that all staff, including those who work primarily with the physical environment, have in contributing to the educational role of student housing.

In 1974, Brown indicated that there is sufficient evidence already gathered which suggests that we can structure the residence hall environment in ways that facilitate student development and enhance students' educational experiences. We do not know everything nor do we know as much as we would like to know about how to best structure that environment, but I believe we know enough to start or to continue trying—wherever we might be on our own campuses. (p. 52)

The educational role that Riker and DeCoster (1971) recommended for college student housing has developed considerably during the past 37 years. We do not have all the answers to questions of how to support fully students' learning and development in residence halls and how to leverage the resources necessary to do so. We believe that the two premises Riker and DeCoster asserted, that environment influences behavior and that learning is a total process, have been and will continue to be foundational to efforts to enhance the educational value of student housing. We and our resident students owe a debt of gratitude to the researchers who built on their work and to the many housing officers who had the courage to begin and the commitment to continue implementing their ideas on their own campuses.

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