

The Community Action Plan: Adding Intentional Interventions to the Residence Hall Experience

David Rosch

This article describes a new way to structure the activities that take place within the Residence Halls at Syracuse University, called the Community Action Plan (CAP). The Community Action Plan is of interest to residence life practitioners as a new way to focus activities within residence life, as well as to student affairs generalists as an example of innovation. The goals and details of the program will be discussed, as well as avenues to achieve success. The Community Action Plan includes typical residence life activities, such as floor meetings and programming, as well as suggestions on how to build community and achieve multicultural awareness. In addition, the Community Action Plan includes roommate living agreements, floor standards, and the integration of the University's academic mission with residence hall activities. The Community Action Plan is recent; therefore, thorough research has not been completed, but initial results are positive.

Many students complete their college experience stating that the majority of their learning occurred *outside* the classroom (Chickering, 1969). Student development theorists, such as Astin (1996), Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), and Tinto (1987), suggest that student learning is most effective when inclusive of more areas of life that students deem important. The Community Action Plan, implemented at Syracuse University, was designed to better promote holistic student learning by seamlessly infusing learning activities into the residence halls.

Residence life programs must continue to address problems, such as Resident Advisor (RA) retention, vandalism within the residence halls, and the scarcity of academic programming in the residence halls (Schroeder, 1994). In response, Syracuse University has attempted to develop a plan that fundamentally shifts the everyday activities of Residence Life staff within the residence halls from traditional discipline and programming activities to community building.

David Rosch is a Residence Director at Syracuse University, where he has worked since graduating from Colorado State University's SAHE Program in June 1999.

The Office of Residence Life (ORL) at Syracuse University has developed an innovative, structured, and focused syllabus to better direct the student learning that occurs inside the residence halls. This syllabus, entitled “The Community Action Plan (CAP),” has led to the restructuring of how the ORL does business, altering the roles that residence hall staff play, the programming in the residence halls, and fall and winter paraprofessional training. The CAP is important to a variety of student affairs practitioners for its intentional purpose and for its collaboration among offices across the Syracuse University campus.

THE GOALS OF THE COMMUNITY ACTION PLAN

Describing the CAP as a syllabus is intentional. Most institutions attempt to provide their residential students with as many learning opportunities as possible during their time in the residence halls. Students and professionals often offer programs designed either haphazardly or purposefully to provide students with opportunities along a broad, ill-defined, and diffuse spectrum of student wellness. However, Syracuse University deliberately provides its residents with structured and intentional experiences, developed with clear goals and learning outcomes similar to a syllabus for a course. This syllabus includes five goals listed in the order that the ORL believes they exist in the community. Placing these goals in order lends significance to staff and students as they concentrate their resources to meet them. These goals detail the subjects in which the department wishes each student examine and include the areas of personal development, academic development, community development, multicultural awareness, and knowledge concerning alcohol and other drugs. RAs are instructed to make efforts throughout the year to engage their floor or area in activities concerning these goals.

Personal Development

Most current college students intend to learn skills and develop abilities that will help them along their chosen career path (Magolda, 1997), but the ORL believes that residential living should be designed to support students along their journey to find themselves. The goal of personal development is broad and crosses common developmental theories, which detail paths along which students mature including: Chickering's (1969) Seven Vector's, Perry's (1970) stages of Intellectual Development, and Kohlberg's (1973) stages of Moral Development. RAs are directed to engage their floor in ways that stimulate personal development in relation to other learning goals.

Academic Development

Since the emergence of the Student Learning Imperative (ACPA, 1994), institutions across the United States have focused on ways that seamlessly

integrate student academic learning, while rejecting the existence of educational silos. The ORL attempts to accomplish this by placing academic development as the second of the five learning goals. In order to educate students and allow learning to become more seamless, an environment must be created which encompasses personal development and is conducive to academic success. The department hopes to blur the boundaries between learning inside of the classroom and learning outside of the classroom by dialoguing with faculty and fellow students, programming by residence life staff, and collaborating with academic affairs.

Community Development

The ORL realizes that to be successful citizens in the twenty-first century, adults must not only have knowledge of themselves, but also knowledge of how to communicate with others, work in groups (either short-term or long-term), and be part of a team. Under the CAP, residential students participate in activities that primarily create pockets of intentional communities, and then invite residents to be active members of those communities. These efforts are made with the hope that residential students will feel engaged in their communities. Through the support of residence hall staff, these students can learn the skills and abilities necessary to take on healthy roles in groups, often as involved members of their floor or building-wide community.

Multicultural Awareness

Multicultural awareness is essential for students to be successful members of the global community. The global community is closely related to community development in that interpersonal relationships are stressed, but with student diversity used as a focus. Students should recognize and celebrate interpersonal differences, as well as possess the ability to interact and develop relationships with people from different cultures who have different value foundations. The term “multicultural” in this context encompasses a broad spectrum of meanings, similar to the usage of “academic development” mentioned earlier. In this learning goal, residential students are exposed to and actively explore issues related to race, gender, class, ability, sexual orientation, and religion. While most programs incorporate at least one of these topics, the ORL believes learning about

multiculturalism is broader than the other six learning goals and should include a myriad of ways to express difference. The ORL continues to build stronger bridges with those in academia while fulfilling the goal of academic development and strengthens the connections with the Office of Multicultural Affairs while constructing the goal of multicultural awareness.

Knowledge about Alcohol and Other Drugs

Many institutions have problems related to alcohol and drug abuse; Syracuse University is no exception. Therefore, all residential students are exposed to

alcohol-related education. Education in this sense does not necessarily equate to classroom-style learning, but is structured, dialogue-based programming in which residents are asked to examine their own intentions related to alcohol use, the positive and negative effects of peer pressure, and the effects of alcohol and drugs on academic and social development. The ORL staff constructed many of the specifics of this goal in partnership with the Substance Abuse Prevention and Health Enhancement (SAPHE) Office, another office in the Division of Student Affairs, an additional example of how partnerships between the ORL and other important campus offices can strengthen.

CONTEXTS OF THE COMMUNITY ACTION PLAN

Motivating students to achieve the CAP's goals begins with residence hall professional staff, and most importantly, the Resident Advisors. Therefore, six "contexts" of the CAP have been developed to help RAs structure their time with their residents, thus increasing their effectiveness in reaching the five learning goals. These six contexts include Individual Interactions, Living Agreements, Floor Meetings, Floor Programming, Floor Standards, and Hall-wide Programming. Many of these contexts overlap, but each context requires that the RAs spend time on their floors or in their areas. This ensures that all residential students are being reached effectively and holistically.

Individual Interaction

This context deals with the informal time each RA spends with his or her residents. This context is most effective when used in conjunction with the other five contexts, serving to reinforce the learning that takes place in the community environment. For example, if at a Floor Meeting, a discussion took place concerning gay rights, the RA is encouraged through the Community Action Plan to follow up with a resident who appeared visibly uncomfortable. While this may occur even without a CAP structure, RAs are instructed about the importance of individual

interactions and how those interactions can effect their residents. In this manner, the RA is better able to become an educator and change agent on their floor or in their area. Without the benefit of CAP, the work that an RA accomplishes in his or her area by simply having individual relationships with residents could be discounted or allowed to happen in a haphazard way. Adding structure to this context allows for ease in training RAs and recognition for those RAs that are skilled in this area.

Living Agreements

Living Agreements are written contracts between roommates or suitemates, pertaining to not only the five main goals, but also the issues regarding how they will succeed in the roommate/suitemate relationship. Topics roommates

typically agree to in the written contracts include: cleanliness, noise issues, gossip on the floor, and academic environment. Each roommate/suitemate group constructs these Living Agreements with the help of their RA two weeks into the academic year. Residents have the chance to interact for two weeks before compromising on agreements concerning quiet times in the room, how to handle gossip, and how to support each member's academic efforts. The Living Agreements are completed with the help of an RA and are filed centrally. They are often referred to in times of roommate/suitemate conflict and are used as a source of information for the RA describing how to effectively motivate particular residents via the CAP.

Floor Meetings

The RA on each floor also facilitates Floor Meetings. It is expected that each RA facilitate one floor meeting every week to build community on their floor and construct an arena to discuss floor problems, standards, and programs. Further, it is expected that each RA spend time marketing the importance of Floor Meetings to his or her residents, planning an agenda that touches on all or part of the goals of the CAP, and practicing their facilitation skills. While Floor Meetings are not mandatory for residents to attend, RAs stress the importance of being an active and concerned member of one's community, and encourage residents to be consistent participants. While each RA brings a unique facilitation style to the meetings, the department expects that each RA attempts to accomplish the unified goals of the department. Without these expectations, an RA may believe a Floor Meeting filled with quick announcements and reminders meets the department's expectations. With clearly delineated expectations, RAs have a better idea of how to become a successful facilitator of Floor Meetings.

Floor Programming

A variety of residential higher education institutions emphasize Floor Programming. Many of these institutions teach a variation of the Wellness Wheel. At Syracuse University, each RA is required to facilitate activities that incorporate the five learning goals of the CAP throughout the year. There is no minimum number of programs that an RA is required to reach by a given deadline. The ORL realizes that adding four of the remaining five contexts to the plate of an RA is significant in terms of the time commitments of the job. If RAs are encouraged to prioritize their academics, they should be given realistic expectations concerning the amount of time they should be spending on their job. Furthermore, if RAs demonstrate effectiveness in the other five contexts, the need for Floor Programming diminishes considerably. If RAs are effective

in the other contexts, each resident will already feel part of their floor community, have a personal relationship with their RA, and be exposed to a number of experiences which will help them reach the goals of the CAP.

Floor Standards

Each floor/area has open discussions throughout the year concerning how residents will interact with each other, which helps them develop Floor Standards. These Standards do not come from the RA (or any authority figure in the residence hall), but from consensual decisions made by the residents themselves, reflecting their own values. The RA on the floor/area facilitates the floor discussions during which Floor Standards are created. Standards often change throughout the year, as residents become more comfortable with one another. Standards at the beginning of the year often involve rules, such as quiet hours and cleanliness. As the year progresses, standards set by the residents often are expanded to include such things as how birthdays and good grades are celebrated on the floor and how Floor Programming can be accomplished with resident involvement.

Hall-Wide Programming

RAs are asked not to engage in this context of Hall-wide Programming because it would take them away from the scope of their role in their area. The responsibility for Hall-wide Programming generally falls to each hall's Community Council, which consists of popularly elected leaders within each hall, and acts as a hall government for their hall or area. The CAP relieves the responsibility of Hall-wide Programming from an RA's plate by allowing them to spend more time and energy in their own areas without the concern for constructing a building-wide community. Further, this initiative allows students who are not RAs to have the opportunity to learn leadership skills while addressing necessary goals within their buildings and areas.

Summary

Relating the six contexts to the five learning goals of the Community Action Plan can be daunting even to the most experienced RA. However, the ORL has set guidelines to help RAs structure their efforts across the contexts and the learning goals. Each RA-sponsored activity that works to further the CAP should include some amount of dialogue and interaction for the participants. Participants are influenced by their peers when they are given the opportunity to share their beliefs and values. Kohlberg (1973) stated that many college students are in a developmental stage where the statements and actions of their colleagues, friends, and associates greatly affect their own thoughts, decisions, values, and experiences. Encouraging students to speak about their own thoughts, feelings, and decision-making processes encourages students to learn from each other, including the structured curriculum of the CAP as part of their conversations.

Five grids were created for the CAP which correspond to each of the five learning goals (see Appendix for Academic Development Grid). The rows

describe the six contexts and the columns describe the overall learning goal. At each intersection of column and row, there is a particular question that an RA can ask students that would spur dialogue. The question is followed by a related activity that would accomplish the same purpose.

What has been traditional within residence life programs must be changed before the CAP could be implemented effectively. These changes have affected RA training, supervision of RAs, advising Community Council, and the intent and structure of RA staff meetings. Other changes have also occurred.

LIMITATIONS

The Fall 2000 semester is the first semester that the plan has been in full implementation. Therefore, research pointing to its successes and failures does not exist. However, initial evaluations have been positive (T.E. Ellett, personal communication, October 5, 2000). The department has seen a marked increase in the number of students who are active in their living communities. Participation in the Residence Hall Association and in Community Councils has increased. Collaboration between the ORL and other departments across campus has been more consistent. While rigorous research to determine the effectiveness of the Community Action Plan has not been released, indications such as informal student feedback and anecdotal research conducted by the author throughout the Fall 2000 semester point to its early success (S. St. Onge, personal communication, October 9, 2000). While the Community Action Plan may not be applicable to all residence life programs, it will hopefully stimulate innovation.

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