Creating a Universal Residential Experience

Excerpts from the Report of the Undergraduate Residential Experience Committee

2018
The impetus for developing a new residential experience emerged from a desire to enrich student life at Northwestern. The University's leadership began asking big questions, such as: Were there new ways in which living on campus could enhance the overall undergraduate experience? How could the University address current inconsistencies in students' residential experiences? These two streams of thought—one aspirational and one corrective—merge in the single residential model proposed here. With a focus on the first two years, the new residential experience will be the only universal undergraduate experience outside of the brief window of Wildcat Welcome. By facilitating students' transitions so they can thrive at Northwestern, living on campus will become a signature student experience that builds institutional affinity.

In the single residential model, campus will be organized into five “Neighborhoods” in which students living in a cluster of buildings will have access to common facilities, services, programming, support, and more. Due to the anticipated size of these Neighborhoods, smaller “Houses” will exist within them to give students a richer sense of home and community.

Throughout the residential experience, the University will create environments, structures, and spaces that contribute to a sense of belonging and encourage personal development. The University will closely manage Neighborhoods to ensure equity of opportunity in everything from recreational activities to academic support. Navigability of campus resources will be easier for students, who will be better able to perceive Northwestern as an institutional whole, rather than a conglomeration of disconnected parts. Houses will provide greater latitude for student agency in programming and community-building.

Finally, generations of Northwestern reports have noted the lack of acknowledgement for faculty investment in undergraduate life. In 1972, the original University Committee on Residential Colleges described student-faculty engagement as “largely a charity item in a professor’s budget, and must be subtracted from the time and energy available for the rewarded activity of scholarship.” These words still ring true, but the success of the single residential model hinges on appropriate recognition and incentives for faculty contributions to the residential experience.
The Committee’s articulation of their values and goals for the new residential experience can be consolidated into four foundational elements:

**Community**
Since the single residential model will provide the only universal undergraduate experience at Northwestern, all students must have equal opportunities to participate fully, regardless of their school, background, or campus residence. Their communities will serve as a point of student pride, a foundation of identity, and a source of affinity for Northwestern. These communities will also provide students with a feeling of home, and offer safe and comfortable spaces to connect with a diverse group of peers.

**Student Agency**
Students must have agency to shape their own experience. They will continue to have a variety of housing options with increased residential delivery of services and programs, including convenient and accessible options to learn in and near their homes. At the same time, students’ communities will be driven by student-led initiatives, and campus residences will provide ample space and opportunity for fun, relaxation, and reflection.

**Care and Support**
Central to the proposed model is increased and standardized residential delivery of institutional support for students’ academic growth, personal development, and emotional well-being. Students will have access to a network of care and support that can help them thrive at Northwestern. The new residential experience will also foster behaviors necessary for all
students to flourish, such as pursuing unfamiliar opportunities, connecting with others across difference, and reaching out for assistance.

**Academic Linkages**

The Committee developed a flexible framework in which students can combine their academic, co-curricular, and social lives. With optional residence-based courses, sections, and academic support programs, students can learn surrounded by friends and neighbors, thereby mutually enriching academic and residential communities. Creating new opportunities for faculty to engage with students residually will help students and faculty understand one another better, and lead to informal and valuable mentorships.

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**Premises**

*Several key trends and findings influenced development of the foundational elements above. These premises were drawn both from higher education scholarship, as well as from surveys and focus groups.*

**Retention, Graduation Rate, and GPA**

Most scholarship about college students living on campus revolves around retention, persistence to graduation, as well as GPA. While these are important issues, virtually all students who matriculate at Northwestern will ultimately graduate. With little room to improve on these academic metrics, discussions were driven by experiential considerations.

**Transitions**

The two-year residential experience will facilitate students’ social, personal, and academic development as they enter college, and prepare them to live independently when they move off campus.
With a common residential experience, Northwestern will have a clear and consistent message to communicate to incoming students to align their expectations with the opportunities and resources that await them.

**Universalizing the Residential Colleges**

The Committee heard repeatedly that small groups are essential for forming community. While each of Northwestern’s current residential models offers positive features, survey data showed that the residential colleges contain some of the closest communities, and have attracted broad participation from faculty and staff. Therefore, the Committee determined that the best means of fostering community was to universalize the fundamentals of the residential colleges across all Residential Services buildings, while making changes necessary for this extension.
Learning Across Difference
Numerous studies demonstrate the developmental benefits of friendships with peers from different backgrounds. The Committee agreed on the benefits of populating each Neighborhood with a representative microcosm of the larger undergraduate student body. Other research cautioned that students should not feel isolated in their homes, and must be able to form affinity groups. Achieving the right balance requires additional attention from the institution and further input from students.

Student-Faculty Contact
Interactions between faculty and students in non-evaluative contexts hold significant benefits for both. This engagement leads to a reciprocal humanizing in which students come to see faculty as approachable and view the larger university as an integrated learning environment, while faculty gain new perspectives on students that improve their teaching and mentoring. In the new residential experience, access to such opportunities must be expanded to include every student on campus.

Partnerships
A prominent theme in higher education scholarship is the value of collaborations between academic affairs and student affairs units. As the Housing Master Plan introduces new physical spaces on campus, the residential experience will be a new figurative space for partnership between the Office of the Provost, the undergraduate schools, and the Division of Student Affairs. The success of the single residential model will require all units to adjust how they contribute to undergraduate education and student learning. Northwestern is poised to be a leader in this area.
The Committee recommends a single residential model in which campus is organized into “Neighborhoods” that include clusters of Residential Services buildings and Greek houses. The 700 - 1,100 students in a Neighborhood will have access to common facilities, services, programming, support, traditions, and more. The combination of facilities and population in each Neighborhood will justify and allow for residential delivery of support resources, academic opportunities, and programs. Neighborhoods will provide students with an intermediate layer of care and community between the building in which they live and the entirety of campus. That said, the Committee strongly believes that community is best built at a much smaller level, with 75-150 students as the optimal size. The Committee has used the term “House” to describe these more intimate units, which would be largely independent in terms of identity and programs while linking up to the robust resources of the Neighborhoods in which they are located. Within Houses, students will find a sense of home and trust.
Neighborhood Facilities

Residential students should have access to certain facilities and services near where they live. Each Neighborhood will have a unique distribution of facilities due to its precise mix of renovations and new construction. The Committee recommends that each Neighborhood have the following:

1. **A dining outlet** in which students can have meals as part of their board plan and connect with peers, staff, and faculty.
2. **A collaboration space** in which students can do academic work, develop a business plan, write a play, or simply hang out alone or together.
3. **A fitness room** in which students can exercise in a low-key environment with high-quality equipment and features that allow for various forms of exercise.
4. **A multi-functional space** with moveable furniture that can be reconfigured for social and educational purposes, including equipment to host amateur productions.
5. **Faculty-in-Residence apartments** in which students can interact informally with a live-in faculty member and invited guests.
6. **Classrooms** in which students can opt to enroll in courses or sections and attend academic support programs or meetings.
7. **An operations desk** staffed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, to support students with everything from lockouts to equipment checkout.
8. **A mailroom** in which students can pick up their first-class mail.
9. **An intra-campus shuttle stop** at which students can catch a ride to other Neighborhoods and key campus destinations.
“Neighborhoods will provide students with an intermediate layer of care and community between the building in which they live and the entirety of campus.”
Neighborhood Experiences

Students will come to think of their Neighborhood as an integrative hub for their social and academic lives. Neighborhoods will be large enough for students to continue meeting new people, while at the same time increasing the likelihood that they are always around a critical mass of friendly, familiar faces.

The Committee recommends that the residential experience not be over-programmed. Students need to step away from what the 1988 Task Force on the Undergraduate Experience diagnosed as “an extremely ‘busy’ curriculum” that “creates an intense though not reflective learning experience.” Years later, the 2015 Faculty Task Force on the Undergraduate Academic Experience reported “extreme busy-ness” and the need for “mechanisms by which students and faculty alike can reserve time for meaningful synthesis and shared reflection.” The goal should be a reasonable slate of opportunities and resources that is student-centered and constantly evolving to respond to new conditions.
Activities

Given the anticipated scale of the Neighborhoods, the Committee imagines a range of social, cultural, and extracurricular experiences that could be organized residentially:

- Cultural events, athletic competitions, and tours of various campus facilities could be organized by Neighborhood.

- Relationships could be established between Neighborhoods and Evanston city wards or school districts to facilitate students' engagement in the local community and the development of Neighborhood-based philanthropy projects.

- Neighborhood-based events could provide students with easier opportunities to participate in campus-wide events or programs. For example, a One Book One Northwestern event in a Neighborhood venue would link students' residential experiences to this signature university series.

- Neighborhood-based traditions and ceremonies would link students' residential experience to notable phases in their college careers. Such affinity could be maintained at homecoming with alumni receptions in Neighborhoods.
Of course, Neighborhood boundaries will be permeable when appropriate, including opportunities for interaction both beyond and between Neighborhoods.

Support

If awareness and first contacts occur residentially, students will be more likely to engage with centralized resources based on referral or by self-motivation and direction. Some possibilities for support and learning include:

- Residence-based instruction to provide more conveniently located classes and sections that make it easier for students to form study groups with peers who live nearby. Such instruction would neither be mandatory for a Neighborhood’s residents nor closed to residents of other Neighborhoods.

- Academic support to ensure that all students have the resources necessary to pursue their intended plan of study. Campus partnerships will make academic support available at different times of day, in different locations, and in different formats.

- Routine drop-in hours and outreach by support units to offer students a first step toward seeking assistance. While these units do their often-sensitive work in central offices, students uncertain about accessing their services may benefit from meeting a representative or attending a workshop hosted in Neighborhood spaces.
Dining
With a dining hall in each Neighborhood, the Committee recommends increased access so students can come together over meals for socializing, meeting, working together, and connecting with staff and faculty. More portable and flexible meal plans may be required to meet these goals around dining, which should be central to building community.

Neighborhood Leadership

Staff and Faculty Leadership
Each Neighborhood will be animated by a visible and accessible leadership team. Fortunately, positions currently exist that can be adapted for the proposed model. The Residence Director is a live-in Residential Life professional who oversees Resident Assistants, manages the larger community and individual wellness.
of residents, and coordinates with the Dean of Students. The Committee also sees the Faculty-in-Residence role as essential, as it will establish linkages between students’ residential experience and their overall undergraduate education. Both the Faculty-in-Residence and the Residence Director are key positions for fostering community, as well as for presenting the University as an integrated whole. Faculty-in-Residence offer not only academic but also social programming, just as the Residence Directors promote learning in addition to personal development.

The Committee reached consensus in favor of another leadership role. Best described as a “University Resource Adviser” (URA), this person (or people) would be a residentially-based first point of contact for students who need assistance identifying campus-wide resources. They would perform essential triage functions, especially after hours when students may be most in need of an informed staff member. The Committee does not recommend that they be part of the academic advising systems of the undergraduate schools. Instead, the URA would coordinate residential delivery of various elements of institutional support, such as tutoring in the Neighborhood.

Each Neighborhood leadership team will need support from a larger group including non-residential faculty and staff. Student staffing would increase community-oriented employment opportunities, something that could carry special appeal for juniors and seniors living off campus who want to stay immersed in the life of the Neighborhood.

**Student Leadership**

**Student Governance**

The Committee recognizes the need for students to have ownership over and responsibility for their own communities. Consensus was reached on several issues pertaining to student governance:
“... students’ residential experience will likely become more integrated with their sense of their overall undergraduate education.”
• The single residential model will require unification of the two umbrella organizations for student governance (the Residence Hall Association and the Residential College Board) to preserve the best attributes of each.

• The ability of student leaders to have positive impacts on the students they represent is in no small way linked to the budgets they manage. The Committee affirms the importance of ample funding for student-led programming and community-building initiatives.

• There will be benefits to creating a student governing body for residential students to enable coordination among Neighborhood governments as well as the Associated Student Government.

Resident Assistants
As live-in representatives of Residential Services, Resident Assistants (RAs) are an important link between students and the University’s support resources. RAs play many roles including building community, developing programming, overseeing community standards, and more. The roles played by RAs at Northwestern will evolve as the single residential model introduces the structures of Neighborhoods and Houses for support, socializing, and community.

Neighborhood Liaisons
The Committee recommends that various campus units have liaisons in each Neighborhood to bring their expertise into the residential experience and connect students with their units. Liaisons will be recognized as Neighborhood resources and residents’ first point of contact for a unit.
The following are just a few illustrations of how liaison relationships could function:

- A liaison from the Center for Civic Engagement or Leadership Development & Community Engagement could cultivate a Neighborhood’s relationship with an Evanston or Chicago organization. Residents could choose different volunteer commitments and even link participation to a credit-bearing service-learning course based in the Neighborhood.

- A liaison from Campus Inclusion & Community could organize Neighborhood cohorts in the Sustained Dialogue program, which would simultaneously build and mutually reinforce connections. In the wake of campus or national events, the liaison could also serve as a resource or convener of a Neighborhood discussion.

- A liaison from the Department of Athletics and Recreation might arrange Neighborhood outings to Northwestern sporting events (with attention to those involving residents), organize events to introduce residents to recreational facilities, and promote participation in intramural sports by Neighborhood teams. This liaison could also serve as an additional residence-based resource for student-athletes.
Houses

Houses within Neighborhoods

The concept of Houses is essential to the single residential model. Recognizing the scale of Neighborhoods, the Committee concluded they were not ideal contexts in which most students would naturally find a sense of home, close friendships, and a deep sense of belonging. Houses will be small circles of trust that feel like smaller houses nestled within larger Neighborhoods.

In each Neighborhood, smaller Residential Services buildings and Greek houses will be standalone Houses, while larger buildings will be divided into two or more Houses. Thus, Houses will be more intimate groupings defined in part by spaces accessible only to residents. At the same time, Houses will be connected to the Neighborhood via use of spaces and participation in activities.

Houses should be driven by residents with support (at least in Residential Services buildings) from a small number of faculty, staff, and graduate students. The Committee recommends latitude for experimentation to develop unique programs and traditions. For example, student governance within one House could resemble an elected executive board from today's residential colleges, while in another House it might be a smaller group of students working in less formal, collaborative relationships with the faculty or staff leadership.

The Influence of the Residential College Program on Houses

Houses in Residential Services buildings represent the universalization of the fundamentals of the residential college program. These Houses will have affiliated faculty, graduate students, and/or staff to guide and participate in programming facilitated by a small cohort of students. The role of House “Head” would be akin to Faculty Chairs in the current residential colleges. Most House Heads would be live-out roles, but each Faculty-in-Residence
would be the Head of a House in addition to their Neighborhood role. These faculty or staff members would help set the tone and vision for Houses. Faculty-in-Residence and the other House Heads in each Neighborhood would also form a collegial network to collaborate on programs and develop ties across academic specialties.

The House Head would be supported by an “Associate Head,” a graduate student who can support the mentoring of the general population of residents and assist with facilitation of programming.

The Committee also acknowledges a need to adapt the traditional role of fellows (formerly “Faculty Associates”) to meet the goals of the new residential experience. The Committee discussed new models of faculty and staff involvement but did not reach consensus on specifics. The University must determine appropriate compensation both as an incentive for faculty and staff, and as a tangible manifestation of institutional priorities that include students’ personal and intellectual development.

Another topic was themes, which have been a characteristic of Northwestern’s residential colleges. The Committee generally agreed that themes etched in stone were a limiting factor when it comes to student and faculty interest. Though the 1968 Community of Scholars (commonly referred to as the Hagstrum Report) recommended establishment of thematic residential colleges, it warned that “a theme might become exclusive, narrow, faddish, pretentious, snobbish.” The Committee therefore discussed the introduction of informal “interest groups” within each House through which residents could connect around shared interests from cinema to social justice without defining
their House experience by a single theme. Every year, House Heads and student leaders would decide on interest groups for the year ahead and develop plans to bring these groups to life. If a particular interest group continues to generate enthusiasm in the House it could be reaffirmed in perpetuity, while those that no longer command attention and participation can be replaced.
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Faculty or staff members who share a passion that aligns with an interest group could be recruited similarly to fellows in the residential colleges, providing common ground between students and affiliates. Casual interest groups would thus carry the spirit of the current system into the single residential model. Each House would also develop traditions that transcend the topics of interest groups; these are hallmarks even in today’s themed residential colleges. The Committee sees value in encouraging interest groups that are flexible, inclusive, and reaffirmed regularly.

While it will be important to encourage affiliates of any House to participate actively and regularly, these faculty and staff should not be required to take on responsibilities for facilitation of an interest group. Many fellows contribute meaningfully to the life of their residential college even though their participation is episodic. Pathways for this type of affiliation should be preserved.

Greek Houses

The House concept developed, in part, as a way to imagine the integration of Greek houses into Neighborhoods. Greek house affairs are characterized by considerable autonomy. The foundation of equity of opportunity requires that second-year students living in Greek houses not only have access to the Neighborhood resources associated with the single residential model, but also feel that they are fully a part of it.

House Facilities

Houses must have their own spaces. Smaller Residential Services buildings and Greek houses that lack sufficient space for Neighborhood-wide facilities would be free-standing Houses. All of the common spaces in these buildings will be private to residents of the House; Neighborhood residents who live in other buildings will not have access. In larger Residential Services buildings, Houses could be defined as the entire building, or a single building could
be divided into multiple Houses to stay within the recommended range of 75-150. Beyond access, Houses and their spaces should be defined by markers like flags, logos, or insignia to create a sense of identity.

**Continuity of Traditions**

Many of Northwestern’s residential colleges have developed traditions that continue to be a source of pride and enjoyment for students and affiliated faculty and staff. The Committee appreciates the value of these traditions and recommends ensuring that they transition seamlessly into the single residential model. The Committee also discussed the importance of creating conditions conducive to the organic emergence of new traditions, especially in newly-established Houses. While pre-existing traditions should be supported, fledgling Houses must likewise be supported as they create new identities through traditions.

**Residency**

**Neighborhood Residency**

Students should be expected to stay in the same Neighborhood for their first and second years as they fulfill the residency requirement. There should be a committee that considers deviations from this general expectation, including changing Neighborhoods to move into a Greek house. By living in the same Neighborhood for two years, students will experience continuity of resources and traditions. Students should also have the option of continuity within their House.
Housing Assignments

Students’ housing preferences could be accounted for through an algorithm that accounts for various preferences and distinguishes between essential priorities and general preferences. Roommate matching preferences could also be built in to facilitate pairing students with similar schedules and habits. This could be the most equitable means of accounting for the greatest possible range of students’ preferences, and could be adjusted to reflect new priorities and institutional circumstances.

The Committee agreed that opportunities to learn across difference are invaluable, which is a leading reason to populate the Neighborhoods so as to maximize students’ exposure to peers from different backgrounds and with different interests. At the same time, no student should feel alone or isolated in their home. One approach entails establishing Neighborhoods as representative microcosms of the larger student population. Within Neighborhoods, students could then indicate preferences for assignments to buildings and/or Houses that contain particular facilities or a critical mass of students to build affinity groups and informal support networks.
With the establishment of the two-year residency requirement, the University must work toward greater consistency of cost across students’ housing options so that these options are equally open to all. The Committee thus recommends that students should no longer vote on social dues that affect fellow students’ cost of living.

In addition, the Committee recommends student participation in the residential experience not require payment on a per activity basis, as is often the case today. A residential student activity fee will be necessary, but this fee will not be a new cost; rather, it will consolidate a range of existing charges. The Committee does not want to see less money supporting students’ residential experience; the priority is to calculate a fee that is both transparent and covered as part of the cost of attendance.

Topics for Further Consideration

There is much more discussion required to move toward implementation of the new residential experience, which will require new partnerships, new roles, and new processes touching units within the Division of Student Affairs and under the Office of the Provost. The final section of the full Report of the Undergraduate Residential Experience Committee highlights some areas for further dialogue and planning.
Neighborhood-based traditions and ceremonies would provide students with local opportunities to mark notable phases in their college careers.