WESTMONT RESIDENCE LIFE
PROGRAM ASSESSMENT
REPORT
Fall 1997 -?
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Methodology

At the invitation of Teri Bradford, Associate Dean of Students/Director of Residence Life, a team consisting of Sally Webb, Assistant Professor of Education - Westmont College; John Moore, Head Coach of Men’s Basketball - Westmont College; Skip Trudeau, Associate Dean of Students - Anderson University; and Tim Herrmann, Associate Dean of Students - Taylor University, conducted a review of the Residence Life program at Westmont College. The review consisted of a combination of interviews and focus groups. During these meetings the team sought to gather and analyzed information of relevance to the Westmont Student Life staff. Ultimately, the goal was to provide evaluative data which would help the staff to be more effective in their support of the mission and ministry of Westmont. The review centered on the following questions and program elements:

- What are the institutional perceptions of the Residence Life program and staff?
- How does the Residence Life program reflect, support and contribute to the mission of the institution?
- What role does the residential experience play in a Westmont education?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the Residence Life program?
- How well are student staff members prepared and supported?
- How well are professional staff members prepared and supported?
- Recommendations/opportunities for the future.
- Appropriateness/quality of written materials.

The primary task was to discover common themes, impressions, and information related to the questions listed above. During the campus visit the team met three times to review strategy, to consider emerging themes and issues warranting additional attention, and finally, to formulate conclusions. While conducting the interviews and after subsequent consideration of the information gathered it seemed logical to consider the second and third questions as sub-points of the first. Thus, for the purpose of this report, the information is grouped accordingly.

Institutional Perceptions of The Residence Life Program and Staff

 Needless to say, given the wide variety of people and groups surveyed, there were many different views presented. However, there were definite patterns which emerged. As might be expected, different groups had different perceptions, thus, for the purpose of clarity, the responses are summarized according to the major sub-groups represented.

Students/Alumni

The perceptions of this group can be summarized as extremely positive. With few exceptions they are enthusiastic about their residence life experience. Virtually every student acknowledges the importance of community to the Westmont ethos. Residence halls are the places where they feel
their sense of “connectedness.” However, as might be expected, when questioned about specifics such as purposes, goals, or philosophy they were relatively unenlightened. This is not to say that students have no understanding of program benefits, but rather that this understanding seems to be a result of feelings and experience. There is not an awareness of an intentionally articulated institutional rationale.

The benefits most commonly observed by students generally focus on the feelings of community that result from the residential experience. Many students report that the residence halls provide an environment within which growth is facilitated in both structured and unstructured ways. They view the residential experience as helping them to learn to live and interact with others who are different from themselves. Additionally, students understand the practical need to learn to live in community and see the residence halls as the places where this will happen.

In support of the academic experience, many see the residence halls as places which allow students to test out, discuss and assimilate what is learned in the classroom. Alumni, in particular, view the living environment as a primary place in which the academic experience is tested and integrated. In the minds of students there is a significant, but undefined, relationship between the classroom and the residence hall.

There is a very positive view of both student and professional staff. While there are some concerns noted later in this report, there is tremendous agreement that the staff is a strength. Of particular note is the respect for both the selection process and the performance of the Resident Assistants. Characterizations of this group as the “cream of the crop” are too frequent to record. In addition, there are numerous, specific examples of R.A.s who have given sacrificially of themselves to serve others. Resident Directors are clearly seen as people who are committed to students and who have a desire to be involved in their lives. Frequent comments reflect a very positive, Christlike view of these individuals.

As expected, students also have certain concerns and suggestions for change. While these are significant and substantive the spirit is highly constructive. There was never a sense of “us versus them” communicated. In fact, there seems to be a very healthy level of trust. This is important because it is a key indicator of a positive relationship between students and administrative staff. Among concerns cited is a lack of contact with administration. There is a strong desire on the part of students for this type of contact and a feeling that a greater administrative presence might have an impact on the “after five” atmosphere on campus. Additionally, there is a desire for some Resident Directors to take more initiative in getting to know students. Certain R.D.s are seen as exemplary in this area while others are perceived as taking a more passive approach and waiting for students to come to them.

An area of both concern and enthusiasm is the level of activity in the residence halls. Students give mixed messages concerning their ability to keep focused in the face of so many options. Noise seems problematic but students generally feel that adjusting to the distractions is their responsibility. There is little sense that dorm life and academics are, or should be, related in any
formal sense.

Finally, there is some perception of a lack of consistency in the disciplinary process. Despite the positive impression of R.A.s, there is a clear feeling that some enforce the rules consistently and some do not. There is some level of concern that certain R.A.s did not hold people very accountable or were not evenhanded in their dealing with different individuals.

Faculty and Academic Affairs Administration

The meetings with faculty were among the most enlightening and enjoyable. While individual faculty members hold many different views, they are consistent in their agreement upon the significance of the residential experience in the education of Westmont students. There is a very strong desire for more information from, contact with, and involvement in the residential aspect of their students’ education. While there is some reflection on past tensions, the current attitude is clearly one of respect. There is a sense that the Residence Life staff has influence and insights that could be very valuable to the faculty. At points the faculty communicated almost a sense of mystery surrounding this aspect of campus life. One faculty member commented with a bit of regret that, “from eight to five I rule here, but after five I don’t belong.” Parenthetically, this perception is also communicated by students.

Perhaps the greatest concern reported by the faculty centers on questions of how much is being done to foster maturity and to challenge the intellectual values of students. One person commented, “They are encouraging them to link up with a highschool mentality rather than taking them to a college level of maturity.” There was some concern that the residential experience may inherently contribute to a casual attitude toward learning. There is a feeling that certain elements of the emphasis on community hinder the study atmosphere; that the mentality that fosters pranks and “RFs” is disruptive to the educational endeavor. For instance, several individuals cite examples in which students missed their classes in order to participate in social activities sponsored by residence halls. There is also an awareness that the student culture is not always supportive of those who pursue serious intellectual issues. The energy behind this type of observation may very well be rooted in a lack of confidence that Residence Life has a compelling interest in doing anything to change this. However, faculty are also quick to say that they are probably not doing all they can to link the classroom with the non-classroom experience.

Another, somewhat related, issue which was raised is that group living makes a reflective lifestyle difficult, if not impossible. The constant presence of other students and the emphasis on group activities make it a challenge to find time and space to be alone. There is even some concern that a student desiring time alone might somehow be viewed negatively.

The basis of these concerns is a lack of awareness of the desire of Residence Life to contribute to intellectual excellence. Faculty communicate a lack of understanding of what is happening in Residence Life and what departmental themes and goals are. Despite these concerns the expressed desire to work together is clear and consistent. There is strong confirmation of the idea that the
residential philosophy is one of the strengths of the institution. At times, the energy and ideas which began to surface were almost uncontrollable. Most faculty voice the desire for involvement in the residential experience of their students. There is an expressed appreciation for the fact that, “Deans are very open and want to bring Residence Life and the educational mission of the college together.”

**Student Life Directors**

This group was very helpful in that they have an exceptional understanding of Residence Life, yet are not so connected as to lose objectivity. This group has an extremely positive view of the importance of Residence Life. Among the chief strengths that they observe are modeling, support during crisis, staff experience, maturity and student and professional staff preparation. There is a clear communication of support for and from this program. The importance of the residential experience is seen as so critical that they feel that commuting students should somehow be connected with particular living areas so that they could, in some manner, experience the benefits. They believe that faculty value the out of class experience and want to be involved. They see this as a major opportunity for future Academic Affairs/Student Life collaboration.

Weaknesses mentioned center on the view of resident directors and lack of opportunity for structured contact with them. There is a sense that R.D.s, “are at the bottom of the totem pole administratively” and that this translates into feelings of not being appreciated. This group feels that the Residence Life staff has, perhaps, the best understanding of students and their needs. Thus, increased structured contact with them would be very beneficial. Among the needs that Residence Life is especially geared to address is helping students to become more focused on the world beyond, as opposed to the inward, self-directed focus that is so present in our culture.

**Auxiliary Staff**

Among all of the groups involved, this group perhaps holds the most divergent views. This, added to the fact that not everyone in the group contributed, makes it somewhat more difficult to represent them in this report. There seems to be a good, basic understanding of the role of Residence Life within the institution. They understand it as complementing the educational experience and helping students to learn, grow and develop. As most other groups, they see the commuting experience as inferior to the residential experience. As would be expected, they recognize the importance of providing a safe, comfortable, clean environment for students to live in. In this light, they see the use of triple rooms as very negative and have significant concerns with the condition of some residence halls. While seeming to understand and accept their roles, they also articulate a desire to be a part of the team.

While they consider the current Residence Life staff as the strongest ever, they still have certain frustrations. Among the concerns cited by the group is a need for greater communication with resident directors. In this same vein, there seems to be a sense that resident directors need to take more responsibility for their buildings. Specific frustrations mentioned are that R.D.s rarely call
in work orders, some try to circumvent established procedures, and end of year maintenance requests are typically done very late.

**Student Staff Preparation and Support**

The findings discussed in this section are a result of a review of training materials, interviews with past and present Resident Assistants and general student impressions of R.A. performance. It is quite easy to gather data from the interviews as students are almost universally enthusiastic about this aspect of Residence Life.

The selection process is thorough, informative and objective. This perception is strongly supported by the widespread respect communicated for the students who are chosen. It is actually quite surprising to see how informed students are about the selection process. Multiple students in virtually all interviews made comments about the overall quality of this group and the challenge of being selected.

One of the real strengths of this process is that it is highly instructional, thus, helping candidates to self-select as they progress through it. This is equally important to those who are eventually selected because it helps them to begin thinking realistically about the responsibilities long before entering into them. The comprehensive nature of this selection process makes it highly unlikely that a student will end up in a position for which they are not suited. One student who applied and was not selected was extremely positive about both the process and the results. She felt that just participating in the process was very beneficial to her personal development. Also, after having had the opportunity to see the role in more depth, she was convinced that she was not the right person for the job.

A review of written materials pertaining to preparation shows coverage of an excellent range of topics. Additionally, there is a strong effort to vary delivery and approach in order to keep things interesting. Of particular note is the “elective” approach to fall in-service training. This allows R.A.s to choose the topics that are most pertinent to them at the time. Given some of the inherent problems with training and motivating during this time in the academic calendar, this is a very creative attempt to keep interest and “trainability” at a high level. Comments from R.A.s seem to indicate that this is working well.

The spring focus on leadership and team building is an approach which puts foundational needs in proper perspective. However, it may not fully take advantage of this time of high motivation to introduce R.A.s to some of the more practical aspects of the position. These topics are often received much more enthusiastically before students are actually immersed in their jobs. This is not to suggest that the current training focus should be diminished, but rather that additional time spent covering some of the fall training topics might be well spent. This adjustment would take advantage of a period in which R.A.s are highly teachable and help to introduce additional reality into their typically romanticized views of the position.
Summer training, beginning with preparatory readings and culminating with the August retreat, appears to be well conceived and complete. The summer readings are excellent and provide a wonderful philosophical/theological backdrop for the responsibilities being entered into. The element of accountability provided by the reflection questions is an important component of this assignment. While not necessarily a weakness, it should be noted that the majority of the retreat is geared towards team building and a big picture focus. While this is a correct ordering of instruction, moving from the general (spring and summer) to the specific (fall), it may not be the best way to capitalize on the typical learning curve for students in such positions.

As mentioned earlier, the fall class format is outstanding. It is highly creative and deals with very fitting topics. The R.A.s’ response gives evidence that this has been an effective approach. However, as noted, additional consideration should be given to the scheduling of topics throughout the three periods of training. The fall is generally a time in which R.A.s have a high need for support. It is very important that time be given to allow them to fellowship, share, seek advice and even just relax in a safe environment. If this need is being met in other ways, then this is not an issue. However, if this is not happening, possible changes should be considered.

Noticeably absent from the training process is the use of any form of challenge or initiative type experiences. This is intended as an observation and not a criticism. However, these are excellent tools for teaching problem solving skills, appropriate risk taking and team building. Despite the excellent selection and training process, many R.A.s reported being surprised upon actually assuming their duties. While this is a somewhat universal experience and may be impossible to avoid entirely, it may be worthy of additional attention. Perhaps consider other practical ways in which a sense of reality may be introduced into their experience before they begin their jobs.

Support for the individuals in these roles seems to be strong. There is appropriate structural support (i.e. meetings, training, contact with leadership and attention to basic needs). In addition, generally speaking, there is strong support for individual R.A.s. They report that community is well developed within the group which allows them to help or seek help from other members of the student staff. Former R.A.s report that many of their most significant Westmont relationships are with other R.A.s. Almost universally, R.A.s feel that they receive tremendous support from their resident directors. It is not unusual to hear that, “he/she would drop anything if I needed help.” It is not an overstatement to say that for many, this relationship is among the chief benefits of the job. There is no doubt that this is a wonderful opportunity for a mentoring type relationship and that in many cases this opportunity is realized. It is noteworthy that not every R.A. feels this way. However, in these rare cases there seems to be unusual or extenuating circumstances.

There is an expressed desire for more contact with “upper level, Student Life administration.” Appreciation was expressed for the contact and support received from Teri Bradford. However, there is a desire indicated for increased interaction as well as similar contact with other Student Life Deans. This desire seems to stem from both personal interest in contact as well as a feeling that this would help them to better represent these people to the students with whom they work.
A final item that must be noted is a faculty perception that R.A.s are unable to maintain the same level of academic excellence while serving in the position. This seems to be a widely held view which should be addressed through existing training and support vehicles. Additionally, it may be helpful to look for ways to communicate to faculty that this is of concern to the Residence Life staff.

**Professional Staff Preparation and Support**

Perhaps of all the areas analyzed in this review, this is the most significant to the accomplishment of the purposes of Residence Life. The staff is the foundation upon which the program must be built. It is reasonable to assume that given the clear institutional valuing of the residential experience the performance of this staff will determine the success or failure of the program.

The training schedule and agenda appear to be very appropriate for an experienced staff. The beginning of the year focus on team building, review of philosophy and goal setting is fitting for a staff with few new members. The resultant goal statements, titled Residence Life Beginnings, are impressive and demonstrate enthusiasm and vision.

Structured vehicles for communication and support consist of weekly staff meetings and weekly individual supervisory meetings. This is a very adequate arrangement and exceeds what occurs at most institutions. This is an excellent attempt to link a staff whose duties and geography often separate.

Conversation with this staff indicate that they are committed to their positions, have high regard for one another and a desire to work closely as a team. Additionally, they express a desire for a more hands on supervisory approach. In this area there is a certain amount of tension and some level of disagreement among the staff. There are also some feelings among this group that they (their roles) are not as highly valued as they should be on the campus. This sense, whether accurate or not, plays a significant role in the comments that follow and in determining future supervisory direction. The following comments should be recognized as representative, but not unanimous.

There is a tension between the expressed appreciation for autonomy and the interest in closer supervision. The desire seems to focus on a greater supervisory connection with their “world.” There is general agreement that this would enhance supervisory support. Specific needs expressed fall within five areas; a desire for more practical training; more coordination/direction for programming; a more meaningful form of evaluation; encouragement/support for greater professional development; and more administrative contact with students. Additional details are discussed below.

**Practical Training:** There is the desire for autonomy in running their own halls as well as the somewhat conflicting interest in more specific help with details and day to day operational issues.
One R.D. observed, "We lack close supervision, day to day aspects are unknown to our supervisor, more support is needed." Closely followed by, "We like the freedom, it gives us ownership. Sometimes we are resistant and it makes it hard for our supervisor." While this is a paradox, it is indicative of a need for more interaction, brainstorming and open discussion of operational issues. This would enhance communication, allow for idea sharing and non-threatening, informal supervisory feedback. While this is a theme which emerged, there is significant dissent and a recognition by all that this is a difficult balance to achieve.

Programming Coordination/Direction: There is a need for a more systematic approach to programming. This might include shared themes, a team approach to planning and perhaps more time spent developing new ideas and strategies. The absence of a clearly articulated curriculum or theme for Residence Life programming contributes to this issue.

Evaluation: There is a clear desire for a more meaningful, consistent approach to performance evaluations. There is a frustration with the Human Resources department for a real or perceived problem of continually changing the evaluation format. Additionally, there is some sentiment that their supervisor is not aware enough of what they do on a day to day basis to provide objective evaluation. A related issue is the feeling that sometimes information that is self-disclosed is used in an adverse manner. This, whether real or perceived, has contributed to an atmosphere in which a degree of trust is lacking.

Professional Development: There is an interest in greater challenge to become professionally involved. When pursuing this it appeared that this is something of an issue of professional maturity. The staff was made aware of opportunities and were generally granted the resources to pursue these opportunities. Thus, it seemed that what was really being requested was for there to be more supervisory pressure to actually become involved. While there may be a need for greater accountability and encouragement, the responsibility to participate in professional development activities rests primarily with the supervisee.

Administrative/Student Contact: Once again an interest in more administrative presence in the residence halls was expressed. This seems to come out of a positive desire for administrators to move into, and thus, better understand the student culture. This also relates to a sense that R.D.s are undervalued within the institution and that, at least in part, this is because faculty and administration do not really understand what they are doing. Finally, there is also something of a sense that if their supervisors saw what they did up close they would have a greater basis for meaningful praise and criticism.

While difficult to discern, it seems that many of these concerns are related to issues of communication and trust. However, to read the last several paragraphs and conclude that this is a completely negative relationship would clearly be inaccurate. These are intended to be descriptions of specific concerns and one should be cautious in generalizing from them. The R.D.s describe their staff dynamics as positive and as characterized by trust respect and interdependence.
Appropriateness of Written Materials

A general impression is that materials are helpful and well written. The Residence Life Philosophy, job descriptions, training and selection materials are particularly strong. These are well written, complete and representative of the emphasis of the department. Given the changing nature of such documents, it would be healthy to conduct an internal review of these items every several years in order to assess readability, accuracy, usefulness and appropriateness.

A very general and perhaps expected criticism is that to the uninitiated it is a bit difficult to understand the organization of the materials provided. In specific reference to the R.A. Manual, the biggest weakness is that it does not contain an index or table of contents. With this improvement it is an excellent “working document” and should be provided for the R.A.s each year. While there may be content needing revision it is important to get this valuable resource in the hands of the R.A.s. They need a ready reference available at all times.

An additional observation is that, depending on use, it may be worthwhile to look at this document with an eye to removing all but the most essential information. This type of document tends to be removed from the shelf only when needed. Thus, by including only “nuts and bolts” type information it is likely to become more usable. Perhaps even consider developing a second piece that focuses on philosophy, vision, etc. to be used during training, meetings and for other similar applications. The mixing of these two purposes may tend to detract from both.

There were occasional “typos” and spelling errors which are certainly typical of such working documents. However, any such item potentially sends an unwanted message regarding excellence and attention to detail, thus, should be avoided. Any such distraction would be unfortunate given the high quality of composition generally demonstrated.

Program Strengths, Weaknesses and Recommendations

This type of an accounting of strengths and weaknesses has the inherent fault that it is largely based on what participants report. Thus, if part of the group focuses on a given issue there is a tendency for the entire group to be drawn in the same direction. Additionally, many of the items which emerge are the issues which tend to be most visible. Thus, it is possible that less visible but more significant topics do not receive appropriate attention. In an effort to combat these possibilities the team worked diligently to follow-up significant comments and to steer groups back to the core questions being considered.

Strengths

- Every level of the institution surveyed embraces the value of the Residence Life experience and understands the important role it plays in the Westmont ethos. There is a strong, practical understanding of the benefits of the residential experience.
• Students are clearly positive about their residential experience and see the residence halls as primary points of connection with the community.

• Students and alumni see the residence halls as places where they are/were able to discuss, test out, and assimilate what is/was learned in the classroom. This informal role in the educational process is seen as very significant.

• There is generally a very positive institutional view of Residence Life leadership and the Residence Life staff.

• The R.A. selection process is excellent and there is strong recognition of this among all areas of the campus community. Additionally there is strong support and respect for R.A. job performance.

• The R.A. training process is creative and complete. Particularly noteworthy is the fall training process.

• The faculty view the Residence Life staff as “very competent people” and are very interested in more interaction and collaboration with this group.

• There is strong support for and valuing of Residence Life by the rest of the Student Life staff.

• Written materials are generally suitable for their intended purposes.

Weaknesses/Recommendations

• There is a lack of faculty/administrative presence on the campus after five o’clock. It would be highly beneficial to work to create programs and incentives to create more evening contact.

• There is a perception of a lack of contact with upper level Student Life staff. The desire for such contact is very positive and indicative of a healthy view of these people. Increased contact will help to foster a greater sense of identification with the leadership and a greater sense of community.

• While R.D.s are generally seen as interested in involvement with students, some would benefit by taking more initiative in getting to know students. R.D.s must plan their “strategies” for student contact. This is an important area to be assessed during evaluations.

• While viewed positively, there is a perceived lack of consistency in the disciplinary
process within the residence halls. R.A.s and R.D.s must be helped to understand the importance of this to the sense of "justness" in the community. This can be addressed in training and should be discussed regularly to assess progress.

- While most students do not complain, there does seem to be a problem with noise levels, and prank type activities within the residence halls.

- The faculty needs to be made more aware of the goals, themes and purposes of Residence Life. Additionally, it must be made clear to the faculty that the Residence Life staff desires to foster maturity and challenge the intellectual values of students.

- The faculty must be helped to understand that the academic performance of Resident Assistants is important to the Residence Life Staff. This is well communicated throughout the training materials, however, more attention may need to be given to helping R.A.s to make this a real priority as they order their day to day activities.

- There is a lack of structured contact between resident directors and the rest of the Student Life staff. As an integral part of the Student Life staff, it would be very beneficial for them to be included in all Student Life staff meetings.

- There is a need for increased contact and communication between maintenance and the Residence Life staff. Additionally, R.D.s need to demonstrate more of a sense of ownership for their individual facilities.

- There are some negative Residence Life staff dynamics which need to be addressed. This should become an immediate priority as it is taking attention away from the important tasks and opportunities at hand. Issues which should be openly discussed by the staff are supervisory style, most effective ways for giving and receiving feedback and special needs/concerns of individual staff members. Additionally, attention should be given to supervisor/supervisee expectations, what is reasonable and what is the most effective way of dealing with conflict. Finally, ongoing vehicles of communication should be established so that inevitable problems, conflicts and style issues can be dealt with quickly and naturally before they become disruptive.

- Veteran staff members have strengths and experiences which are not being fully utilized. Without diminishing the primary role of the R.D. consider ways to use experienced staff members in special roles, particularly in the training of new staff. This will contribute to departmental effectiveness as well as individual professional development. Staff longevity is clearly a strength, however, it carries with it certain dangers including complacency, resistance to change and a lack of openness to supervision. These dangers must be recognized, addressed and avoided.

- In a related vein, there seems to be some inconsistency in the workload of Resident
Directors. Consideration should be given to giving directors in small halls additional responsibilities within Student Life. While perfect equity is impossible and should not be a goal, a greater degree of uniformity would be beneficial.

- There is a need for a more effective, mutually agreeable form of annual evaluation.

- The program would benefit from a more focused theme and systematic approach to educational programming. A theme communicates purpose and helps community members to better grasp just what it is that you are trying to “teach.” It is a little like a speaker opening with, “I would like to make the following three points.” It helps the listener to frame and organize the information that comes later.

- While not within the scope of this evaluation it seems important to note that some residence halls and furnishings need attention. This will not only make them more pleasant places to live but helps to communicate the importance of a “civilized” environment. This can have a significant impact on the culture within the residence halls.

When decision made by TB + ADD, how communicated to RA’s

Conclusion

While there are many suggestions for change discussed in this review it would be a mistake to assume that weaknesses outweigh the strengths of this program. This is a very strong program with solid leadership. It has and will continue to have a very significant impact on the lives and the educational experience of Westmont students. Promotional materials promise prospective students that, “[they] will be member[s] of a vibrant, enthusiastic campus community.” It is the assessment of this team that this is a promise kept.

TWH:nw