Westmont College
Residence Life External Review
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External Audit Report

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I. Introduction

Stuart Cleek, Associate Dean for Residence Life at Westmont College, assembled the audit team for an external review of the Residence Life Department at Westmont College. The audit team was sent in advance a purpose description for the review. The review was organized to identify factors and conditions involved in the quality of Residence Life at Westmont College. The review team was asked to produce a description of Residence Life at Westmont College. The goal of the review process was to gather information and make recommendations that would enable Residence Life to more effectively respond to the needs of Westmont students.

The audit team consisted of Angela D'Amour, Director of Campus Life, Westmont College; Mark Nelson, Professor of Philosophy, Westmont College; Richard Mandeville, Associate Dean of Students, Whitworth University; and Jane Hendriksma, Dean of Students for Judicial Affairs, Calvin College.

On Sunday, January 25, 2009, Stuart Cleek conducted a campus tour for Richard Mandeville and Jane Hendriksma. Each residence hall was toured, looking at public areas and several student rooms as available.

Prior to the team's arrival on campus for the audit exercise, Stu Cleek provided the team with a notebook of contextual information regarding Westmont Residence Life including department functions, initiatives, and key responsibilities. The audit team was very impressed with the depth and breadth of the information provided. Team members especially noted the organization of materials and clarity of presentation. Each section opened with an abstract or section summary. The audit notebook contained sections covering college and Student Life overview, Residence Life overview, judicial process, professional staff development, student staff development, programming, housing and facilities, emergency readiness and response, budget and planning, and assessment. The effort put into this notebook by Stu and the Residence Life staff
enabled the review team to arrive with a clear understanding of the key components of the Residence Life program and its context at Westmont College.

On Monday, January 26, 2009 the campus visit continued with the audit team meeting with the following individuals: Jane Higa, Vice President for Student Life; Stu Cleek, Associate Dean of Residence Life; Tim Wilson, Associate Dean of Students; Elena Yee, Director of Intercultural Programs; Ben Patterson, Westmont Campus Pastor; and Dana Alexander, Director of the Office of Life Planning. The audit team met with representatives from the Campus Life Office, Counseling Center, Health Services, Physical Plant, Campus Safety, Intercultural Programs Office, and a faculty focus group. The audit team conducted four evening focus groups with students: residents, ethnic residents, resident assistants, and student organizations.

On Tuesday, January 27, 2009, the audit team met to debrief day one and to focus and prepare for day two. The audit team made some minor adjustments to the planned schedule to allow individual sessions with each resident director. On day two, the audit team met with several administrators: President Bebee via polycom phone conference, and Warren Rogers, Interim Academic Dean and Bill Wright, Associate Provost for Institutional Planning and Research.

The audit team divided up to interview each resident director, one-on-one. The audit team also met with representatives from the Athletics Department including the Athletic Director and several coaches. The audit team spent 2.5 hours developing a preliminary report which outlined key findings. Finally, the audit team met with Jane Higa and Stu Cleek for several hours to present and discuss key findings. There was considerable agreement with Jane and Stu on the central issues the team identified.

II. Major Themes

Westmont College is a strong residential community where students live, develop relationships, learn and grow. Students were consistent in reporting that inclusiveness marks the Westmont community. Faculty housing adjacent to the college campus and the high percentage of upperclassmen living on campus produce a depth and breadth in the Westmont residential experience that is distinctive.
Resident Directors have a strong relational role with residence hall students and with the resident assistants. RDs are visible, respected leaders within the residence hall community. The RA position is sought after and esteemed on campus. The external review team witnessed a sense of camaraderie among the RAs and a pride in their work.

Westmont faculty and staff expressed a high value for and strong support of the residential community. Westmont people exuded joy and compassion and many stated that they loved working at Westmont. People expressed gratitude that everyone worked very hard. Interviewees focused on the value of residence life colleagues and listed their contributions and accomplishments. Interestingly, the team noticed that across the board people were quite hesitant to offer suggestions or critique. In fact, several people mentioned or clarified the confidentiality policy prior to offering critique. One person indicated that critique is not easy explaining that “Westmont is an affirming culture. Grace abounds. While this is great, the grace/truth balance is a real struggle.”

The residence hall facilities are aging and in need of major renovation. The original design across the variety of buildings reflects little intention toward facilitating community for student living space. The lack of ideal public spaces such as study lounges, kitchens and large gathering spaces inhibits interaction between residents, and limits the opportunities for shared programs between academic affairs, other student life departments and residence life. In contrast, the recent renovations to public areas and the student room/closet renovations were clearly the result of thoughtful, intentional planning for optimal community use and atmosphere.

III. Commendations

The audit team commends Stu Cleek’s leadership in Residence Life for the past ten years. The departmental materials, programs, staff and training elicits college-wide respect and provide the foundation for a superlative residence hall community living experience for Westmont students.

Stu’s leadership and accomplishments in Residence Life were widely acknowledged. People mentioned increased RD accountability, improved RA training, administrative systems for working together, strategic leadership
during the fire, impressive manuals, comprehensive RA training, and
innovations such as Faculty Fellows and Imprint.

The audit team discovered that RA training was robust, creative and broadly
respected at the college. RAs are well prepared and well respected by students,
staff and faculty. The team heard numerous positive anecdotes regarding the
work and the character of the RAs. The team was impressed by the Imprint
Program for RA training. Colleagues reported that Imprint was highly creative
and thoroughly organized. RAs noted that Imprint was a highlight of the RA
experience. The leadership time and effort to produce Imprint was noticed by
students and staff.

Team members noted RA selection promotional materials were colorful, creative,
and included professional graphic design. The RD/RA manuals were thorough,
readable, and thoughtfully organized.

Residence Life’s work and reputation has paved the way for a very positive campus
perception of the RD and RA positions. The RA position is much esteemed on campus.
Some of the best student leaders are drawn to the position.

The audit team commends Residence Life for initiating the Faculty Fellows Program.
The strong residential community at Westmont provides a fertile back drop for this
program. As the new program continues to develop, Residence Life could use this as a
template to deepen connections between the curricular and co-curricular learning
activities at the college.

The emergency preparedness planning by Residence Life leadership was tested by the
November 2008 fire at Westmont. Stu’s leadership during the fire was respected and
admired by many. Colleagues mentioned advance planning and also credited Stu’s
personal leadership qualities in the crisis moment. The RDs also deserve commendation
for their quick, effective response to this potentially tragic incident.

The RD and especially the RA role was credited with key dynamic in fostering the
beloved sense of community which stands as the hallmark of the Westmont student
learning experience. Even with aging facilities of problematic configuration, student
reports were overwhelmingly positive regarding the on campus living experience.
Students recognized the fluctuation of public space and the limiting facility
configurations yet perceived this as a positive. Students felt that the limits of and
positives of the buildings combine to create a distinct atmosphere for each complex.
Students identified benefits in choosing an atmosphere that best fits their own needs and
personalities.
IV. Future Challenges

The strong Residence Life program and the defined role of RD and RA positions in fostering the student community experience have led to strong departmental identity. Residence Life enjoys college wide respect and the momentum of a strong tradition. Along with the positives of this, some unintended consequences have emerged. Colleagues within Student Life described an insularity of the department which diminishes collegial collaboration. Residence Life becomes an *island* unto itself. It’s an important *island*, because this *island* produces the beloved sense of belonging for Westmont students. This community developing and deep investing in individual student’s lives can capture all of the RDs’ time and energy.

The separation and insularity of a wonderful *island* experience undermines the college’s goal of seamless learning from classroom to living community. Promoting student learning in a joint, integrated effort with faculty and divisional colleagues will require more fluid boundaries and bridges until the *island’s* isolation is dissolved.

Resident Directors do have unique jobs yet they are a part of a division and a wider college community. The daily and weekly rhythm of the RDs’ schedule needs to reflect their role within a department, a division and a college.

The aging facilities need extensive renovations. Students noted heating and plumbing issues and slow repair response. The halls are worn and tired. Residence Life will need to continue to advocate to the cabinet to ensure that the college prioritizes funding the revitalization of the residence halls.

Residence hall programming is well received by students. As the team explored programming, we found that social programming dominated the efforts. Educational programs were rare despite the organization of the programming calendar and requirements. Residence hall staff reported that program requirements vary from hall to hall. While educational programming needs improvement and expansion, both Student Life colleagues and faculty expressed a strong desire to partner with RDs’ in educational programming efforts, but were not aware of how to initiate collegial programming efforts with RDs’ or the Residence Life office.

Faculty expressed an interest in more structured opportunities to be involved in residence hall communities. They suggested Residence Life offer honorariums for faculty
presentations or involvement. Faculty noted that faculty evaluation process no longer specifically rewards outside of classroom contributions. Some noted that the faculty fellows program asked much more than reasonable based on the current compensation.

Alcohol education emerged as a concern area. Administration, faculty and coaches longed for a more open discussion regarding alcohol issues. Unidentified or unspoken barriers to this discussion seem to exist. Residence Life and Student Life could initiate this discussion and find broad based willingness, even eagerness to join the conversation. Many faculty noted the lack of open dialogue or training for faculty and staff on alcohol issues that affect college students. There was widespread agreement that alcohol problems are on the forefront and need to be discussed openly and focused efforts initiated across campus. Westmont people want to ask hard questions and new questions regarding the use and abuse of alcohol by students.

The discipline system was a significant concern for students, staff and administrators. Everyone on campus seemed to be aware to some extent of a major behavioral incident that occurred last spring. The general impression was that the consequences were not sufficient for the behavior or were inconsistently applied. All of the interviewed groups mentioned that the emphasis was on grace versus truth. People at Westmont desire to work together to find that delicate balance of showing grace and speaking the truth into students lives. Students need the opportunity for accountability and corrective action even if it means negative consequences.

Students also mentioned the need to improve setting standards and holding students accountable. Students gave accounts of inconsistencies in enforcement and sanctioning among RDs’. Students expressed frustration that more serious drug and alcohol offenses are overlooked because RDs’ do not follow-up. Students recalled hearings that occurred 45-60 days after an open house violation. Students related situations where others were inconvenienced when there was no accountability. Students voiced strong support to continue the open hours policy and community life standards. A few students were troubled that some students got away with so much. One person told of scenarios where students gave convincing apologies to staff but never changed their behavior. Students suggested a “three strikes and you’re out” rule, citing other colleges with such policies. Students thought violations of the same or similar policies should receive the same sanction. Students suggested that standard sanctions be published as part of the Community Life Statement.

The short-term suspension practice received widespread critique. Many saw major philosophical problems with the concept and difficult issues in implementation of this sanction. Some of the concerns were: the implementation is difficult for RDs’ who are asked on very short notice to make off-campus accommodations for students; faculty don’t know the details of what happened and don’t see a clear connection between the violation and the students’ class absence; and off campus hosts who cannot be made aware of the details of the incident that caused a student to be staying in their homes; it is more like a vacation or an adventure than a sanction.
The audit team heard that Student Life “bends over backward” to keep students at Westmont. Many commented that Westmont is great on grace and suggested that it is important not to miss out on the truth piece. People noted, with some exasperation, that it is virtually impossible to be kicked out of Westmont. Concern was raised that students need the opportunity for ownership of choices and mistakes. Questions surfaced regarding the structure and staffing of current Student Life committee hearings and the appeal process. People observed that the discipline committee seems to take an inordinate amount of time perhaps because of internal struggle to sanction students or due to a perception that fairness requires a long process.

V. Recommendations

The audit team offered some suggestions to continue developing the already thriving Westmont Residence Life Program. The first two recommendations seem to us the most important and the most daunting. We recommend pacing the implementation of any recommendations so that you can continue to sustain the excellent existing program.

1. Plan a college wide discussion on student alcohol use/abuse.

Phase One:
Appoint a task force which includes faculty, staff, coaches and students.
Utilize a national survey to determine campus climate and issues regarding alcohol.
Begin a campus wide discussion of the results.

Phase Two:
Recommend, approve and implement a multi-faceted alcohol education and intervention program that addresses existing issues and supports student learning and success.

2. Audit the discipline process.
Phase One: Audit the process with a college wide committee of faculty, students, and staff.

Phase Two: Identify issues and explore best practices.

Phase Three: Implement changes.

The audit team did offer a variety of specific recommendations regarding student discipline:

*Consider sending Stu and/or Audrey to the Student Conduct Hearing Administration training course held annually in June at the Gehring Academy.

*Consider having Stu and/or Audrey attend the February annual ASJA (now ASCA) conference.

*Review conduct policies and community life agreement using the Model Code by John Lowry.

*Create standard sanctions for common offenses. Publish standard sanctions. Require RDs to utilize standard sanctions.

*Create a disciplinary hearing board with faculty, staff, and student representatives. Have Audrey or Stu serve as non-voting convener and trainer of the hearing board.

*Create an appeals committee comprised of faculty, staff and students. Jane Higa could serve as nonvoting chair of the committee.

*Implement a gradation of sanctions such as: Warning Probation, Personal Probation, Disciplinary Probation, and Suspension (for one semester or one year). Tie the loss of athletic participation and ineligibility to travel on off campus programs to the levels of probation.

*Develop and utilize a fine system which is published. Use fine money for programming and creative educational efforts.

*Discontinue the use of short-term suspensions.
3. **Weave Residence Life into the tapestry of Student Life Division and the College.**

The shadow side of a muscular Residence Life program can be departmental insularity and a weakening of collegial connections within the Student Life Division and the college. Make 2009-2010 the year of building bridges and seeing the big picture. In collaboration with one director of another student life department, devise a plan for each Resident Director to plan and implement one educational program annually so that each department in Student Life is paired with one Resident Director.

Add an educational session with Intercultural Programs staff during RA training. Look for topics for other Student Life Staff to present in RA training.

Form “Action Teams” comprised of RDs’ and mid level Student Life staff to focus on divisional projects or entrepreneurial efforts. Expect that everyone in the division participates in one project each year.

4. **Continue to develop the RD role.**

Clarify and highlight professional expectations of RDs. Monitor compliance with performance evaluations. Develop written expectations for dress code, email turnaround, and phone call response time. RDs’ peripheral vision needs to expand so that they are contributing and collaborating within the division and college.

Develop mechanisms to regularly introduce RDs to faculty and coaches.

Returning RDs need to shoulder some departmental responsibility through centralized annual assignments.

Assign summer projects to RDs that allow them to lead or contribute to important departmental initiatives.
Formalize RD professional development and involve the RDs in producing an annual professional development plan.

Utilize Faculty Lunch Forums, professional conferences, professional articles or book reading discussions. Organize opportunities for your RDs to interact with the RDs at other institutions near your campus, known for quality and professionalism. This might include a one day shared in-service, or an overnight trip visiting two or three campuses to walk through facilities and interact with RDs and student staff from the other institutions.

5. **Increase educational programming efforts.**

Educational programming structure exists and needs to be implemented more consistently in each building. Appoint an RD team to evaluate and maximize connections to Westmont's academic curriculum. Encourage RDs to involve faculty and divisional colleagues.

Have each RA think about a professor or two whom they know to be good presenters. Assign each RA the task of inviting one faculty member to give a program in their hall. You may want to coordinate this so that popular faculty are not deluged with requests. Consider recognizing faculty for their presentation or participation with a gift card or honorarium to thank them for the extra effort.

6. **Fully integrate the mission statement and programming calendar so that they are known and utilized by department members.**

Design a training activity for RDs and RAs to commit the departmental mission statement to memory. Revisit the mission statement at regular intervals during each academic year. Engage the department in developing annual learning outcomes for residence hall students.

Require RDs and RAs to utilize the programming calendar and submit monthly program reports tied to a stipend for extra floor funds. Recognize excellence in educational programming with an annual award or cash prize.
Find a creative and memorable way to communicate Imprint goals and learning outcomes so a majority of RAs can articulate these at the end of first semester. Everyone’s talking about Imprint, so it’s a great vehicle to broadcast how Residence Life promotes student learning.

7. **Explore the integration of class years (freshmen, sophomores, juniors, seniors) within the residence halls.**

The impetus behind this suggestion came mainly from faculty and those that long for students to receive mentoring from upperclassman.

> Starter just moved to all Fresh

8. **Establish a schedule for the renovation of residence halls.**

Residence Life will need to advocate for a share of the college’s budget or capital funding priorities. The department can lead the effort to establish a schedule for the renovation of Residence Halls.

**VI. Conclusion**

Westmont College Residence Life Department planned an external audit review process in January 2009. Stu Cleek, Associate Dean for Residence Life invited Angela D’Amour, Director of Campus Life, Westmont College; Jane Hendriksma, Dean of Students for Judicial Affairs, Calvin College; Richard Mandeville, Associate Dean of Students, Whitworth University; and Mark Nelson, Professor of Philosophy, Westmont College to serve as the audit team. Westmont provided background and contextual information for the review team to read prior to the audit campus visit. The team spent two days meeting with students, staff, faculty and administrators at Westmont to gather information, evaluate the department, and make recommendations to the department as they continue to serve the Westmont community.

The team found that the residential living community of Westmont College is vibrant. RDs play a key role in establishing this community by investing deeply in relationships with students. The RA position is esteemed and valued by the entire campus community. RA training is robust and creative. Student report high satisfaction with their residence hall experiences even though the facilities
are aging and in need of major renovation. Recent projects which renovated student rooms and public space were commended by the team.

The leadership of residence life is highly respected across campus. The department materials, programs, staff and training activities provide the foundation for a superlative community living experience for Westmont students. Colleagues were impressed by the faculty fellows program and the RA Imprint training program.

The Emergency preparedness planning by Residence Life leadership was tested by the November 2008 fire at Westmont. Stu’s leadership during the fire and the RDs quick response were important in addressing this potentially tragic experience.

Residence Life enjoys college wide respect and the momentum of a strong appreciated tradition. Some unintended consequences have emerged. Colleagues in Student Life described an insularity which diminishes collegial collaboration. This tendency to insularity also undermines the college’s goal of seamless learning from the classroom to the living community. The audit team challenges Residence Life to adjust in the future by promoting student learning in joint integrated efforts with faculty and divisional colleagues. The team urges residence life to expand existing social programming efforts to include creative effective educational programming.

Community and relationship development captures most of the RDs’ time and energy. Resident Directors do have unique jobs yet they are part of a division and a wider college community. The daily and weekly rhythm of the RDs’ schedule needs to reflect their role within a department, a division and a college.

The facilities need extensive renovations. The halls are worn and tired. The configuration of the public space inhibits optimal use for student community living. Given the current economic climate, residence life will need to compete on the college agenda for funds to revitalize the buildings.

The Westmont community wants to discuss student alcohol use and abuse and campus issues related to it. Westmont people also would like to explore some innovations to the college disciplinary system. People are eager to engage together in these difficult topics in order to strengthen students learning and growing opportunities.
The team offered some suggestions to continue developing the already thriving Westmont Residence Life program. The team recommends pacing the implementation of changes so that residence life can sustain the excellent existing program.

The team recommendations are:

1. Plan a college wide discussion on student alcohol use and abuse.
2. Audit the discipline process.
3. Integrate Residence Life more fully into the Student Life Division and the College.
4. Continue to develop the RD role.
5. Increase educational programming efforts.
6. Fully integrate the mission statement and programming calendar so that they are known and utilized by department members.
7. Explore the integration of class years within the residence halls.
8. Establish a schedule to renovate the residence halls.

Residence Life is already a strong and vibrant department. These efforts to evaluate, reflect and plan for the future will ensure that Residence Life will continue to promote student learning in the residential living communities.