Expanding Campus Housing Options

Increasingly, today's colleges and universities are diversifying their student housing unit-type options. Whereas students once occupied "traditional" dormitory rooms for much of their college tenure, such living conditions are being augmented by — and sometimes replaced with — more varied, spacious and amenity-filled accommodations. This change throughout recent years is due largely to institutions recognizing the value of high-quality and wide-ranging housing options in recruiting and retaining students.

Today's students care deeply about opportunities to establish personal relationships, develop casual "outside-the-classroom" interaction with faculty and peers, take breaks from their academic exertions and accumulate the life-long memories that so often characterize the American university experience. These opportunities are determined as much by the nature of a university's student housing program as by any other element of campus life.

On campuses across the country, a growing number of housing programs are providing alternatives to adapt to the varied needs of different types of students, as well as students' changing needs over the course of their college careers. That is not to say that dorm life is a thing of the past; on the contrary, the freshman dorm experience is a vital ingredient of a student's growth and development. With hall layouts that promote community, as well as resident advisers who offer encouragement and assistance, residence hall living provides a well-timed support structure for students who are still acclimating to their new environs.

As students mature, however, their housing preferences evolve in any of a number of directions. Many will prefer to replace the structure of the residence life system with a social structure established among their peer groups, such as a fraternity, sorority or other affinity-group accommodations. Others will prefer a gradually less structured environment with less supervision, more similar to living independently in the off-campus rental housing market. Some will choose to embrace more fully the benefits available on campus by joining a living-learning community, bridging the gap between education, social life and housing. Living-learning communities are playing an especially important role on larger university campuses — where students could be more easily lost in the crowd — by providing a close-knit social support system and community framework, and mirroring the intimacy found on smaller college campuses.

One of the big challenges for university housing programs is accommodating students in their progression toward greater independence and self-reliance. After freshman year, the traditional one-size-fits-all residence hall containing two-person dorm rooms and a communal bathroom frequently gives way to options that more closely fit the lifestyles of today's students. Many sophomores and juniors trade in dorm living for suite and semi-suite accommodations, where they can attain more independence and enjoy the luxuries of a semi-private bathroom and — in the case of full suites — a semi-private living room. Many seniors and graduate students find themselves further along the road toward autonomy, selecting housing that includes a living room and kitchen, such as a group apartment (living with one or more roommates) or an efficiency apartment (living alone). Meanwhile, married students and students with families are selecting housing options with expanded living areas that are suitable for young children and family gatherings; some units might include both a master bedroom and a junior bedroom, while others might include a private backyard or a semi-private pool/playground accessible only to the apartment complex residents.

There was a time when colleges viewed academic achievement as the only measure of a prospective student's qualifications; similarly, there was a time when prospective students viewed academic offerings as the only measure of a college's worth. But in recent years, an increasing number of colleges have been on the lookout for well-rounded students whose nontraditional achievements — such as a demonstrated commitment to community service — extend beyond the traditional pool of desirable applicants. In the same vein, an increasing number of students are on the lookout for well-rounded universities whose nontraditional offerings — such as a demonstrated commitment to diverse housing unit options — extend beyond the traditional selection between "Dorm Room A" and "Dorm Room B."

Indeed, institutions are paying closer attention to what students are looking for in a college experience. In the process, they are striking the right balance of housing unit-type options and, as a result, they are bolstering their recruitment and retention efforts. CPM

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