

STUDENT HOUSING

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Northwestern's Master Plan

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Northwestern University's Dr. Paul Riel tells us about the university's new comprehensive master plan, which will upgrade housing at the private college.

Student Housing Business recently spoke with Dr. Paul Riel, executive director of residential services at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. Northwestern recently created a 10-year master plan for housing with help from Brailsford & Dunlavey that will help redefine housing on the university's campus. The plan calls for a total investment in housing of \$465 million. Riel's department, which falls under the student affairs division at Northwestern, has an annual budget of \$70 million and includes program areas such as student life, facilities construction and others. Northwestern's current enrollment includes about 8,000 full-time undergraduate students and 8,000 full-time graduate students.

SHB: Can you give us an overview of housing at Northwestern University?

Riel: We are considered a residential campus, centered in Evanston, Illinois. Northwestern has a strong academic presence, and we attract a high profile student population. On the residential side, we house more than 95 percent of the freshman class. There is not a housing requirement but the first year students tend to migrate on-campus right away. We house about 60 percent of sophomore students, 20 percent of juniors and 10 percent of seniors. There is no requirement to live on-campus, but we pull a lot of students from the Midwest. We also manage a graduate/family housing component that has a population of around 700 in two high-rise buildings. One building is dedicated to graduate students at Kellogg, our business school, and the other married and family housing for our research students doing doctoral work. We have a fraternity and sorority presence on our campus of about 900 beds. Our Greek life is very integrated into the campus — it is difficult to tell what is housing and what is Greek.

SHB: What was your background before Northwestern?

Riel: I have spent my entire career in student housing. I started off in the early 1980s at the University of Florida in grad school as a hall director. I had been an RA in college. Housing just stuck with me. While at the University of Florida, I had the opportunity to work with Jim Grimm, who is a national name in student housing [Editor's note: ACUHO-I renamed its National Housing Training Institute (NHTI) the James Grimm National Housing Training Institute in honor of Grimm, a housing leader at the University of Florida, who, along with Norb Dunkel and Pam Schreiber, launched the institute in the early 1990s]. I was influenced, in many ways, by his leadership and direction. He was a great friend and mentor. He encouraged me to think about housing as a career. My entire housing career, before joining Northwestern, was in Florida. I worked at a small private school for 10 years and for 15 years before coming here worked at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville. In those years, I picked up residential life, housing operations and facilities. I have built a number of buildings at UNF. I wrote my doctoral dissertation on how we build student housing. I joined Northwestern in July 2012.

SHB: You have been at public and private universities; how are they different?

Riel: I worked at both public and private universities before arriving at Northwestern. There is no doubt that when you are working at an elite private university, like Northwestern, it is different, even than smaller private universities. The politics and dynamics of how things work at a private institution versus a state institution is unique; there is a learning curve to it. Private institutions have a bit more flexibility and latitude to do things quicker. Financing, for example, came together for us quicker at Northwestern than it would have at a public institution. At Northwestern, there is a spirit of cooperation. Staff and faculty really want to make a difference here.

SHB: Your doctoral thesis was, 'Preferred project delivery methods when building student housing on-campus.' Can you sum up what you think that is, and how it relates to what you are doing at Northwestern?

Riel: I wanted to know, when you are building student housing on a college campus, what is the preferred construction methodology. I talked to campus planners across the country. Hands down, from coast-to-coast, unless you are building less than 200 beds, construction management at-risk was the preferred methodology to build student housing [Editor's note: Construction management at-risk is a method whereby the construction manager agrees to deliver a project within a maximum agreed upon price]. Since I've done the research, I have had a number of phone calls from the privatized community wanting me to do the research for the off-campus market. It would be interesting to see what the results would yield of that research. On-campus, construction management at-risk seems to be the preferred methodology, in large part because the risk is pushed back on the construction manager. Institutions like it because they know the budget and they don't have the financial risk on new construction. That's the short summary.

SHB: You completed a master plan recently. What did that tell you about your housing?

Riel: We completed the master plan about eight months ago. Our conclusions were not anything that we didn't already know. The Midwest is a tough climate on buildings. We need to put an emphasis on our facilities, in terms of renovations and repairs and upkeep our spaces. The

master plan we created was our way — over the next 9.5 years — to aggressively transform our housing facilities and put them on par with our peer institutions. We've already altered the plan to do more within a shorter period of time because we recognize that the experience that our students are having on our campus is influenced by the condition of the facilities that they live in. We identified a number of properties that need renovation. We have identified a few buildings that we feel are better off to demolish and replace. We also identified some space on campus where we thought new construction would be beneficial.

SHB: How did your master plan come about?

Riel: It came from the leadership of our vice president. About four years ago, Dr. Patricia Telles-Irvin became the vice president of student affairs, and she began to assemble a team to revitalize student life at Northwestern. She was previously at the University of Florida. I was pleased to be one of the folks who joined her team. About six months before I arrived, Dr. Julie Payne-Kirchmeier joined; she is now associate vice president for auxiliary services. The conversation about a student housing master plan was really the first step we took to revitalize the residential experience. We soon thereafter hired Brailsford & Dunlavy to do the comprehensive master plan for us.

SHB: What are some of the challenges you have with your existing housing stock?

Riel: Aging facilities are a challenge that we have encountered. Northwestern is an established institution; we have some housing buildings that are close to 100 years old. The newest stock we have was built in 2002. Because of the types of buildings that we have, there is a growing demand among students for more amenities. We don't have large buildings; our largest hold as many as 400 to 500 students. We have a lot of buildings that hold 60 to 130 students. The sense of community is something that we are struggling to create with our residential program. We are also working diligently on integrating our academic programs into our residential spaces. We believe, because of the nature of our institution, the academic experience and the residential experience need to be linked every year that a student is living on campus. We have residential colleges here; there are 11 of those. They are thematically based, each with faculty members assigned to live in them. In the next five years, you will see a radical change in how our housing program is related to our academic experience.

SHB: Is that going to be at your traditional residence halls as well?

Riel: It will be across the campus. We have already created neighborhoods within the campus. We've divided the campus into three distinct neighborhoods and around those we've set up neighborhood desks. These desks run 24 hours and provide services to the students. That helps to create identity with the neighborhood. Within each neighborhood you have Greek communities, residential colleges and residence halls. The next step is blending those elements together to create a sense of community. We have a unit within Residential Services called Residential Academic Initiatives that is led by Dr. Brad Zakarin. His job is to support the faculty and the Residential Life team to assimilate academics into the residential experience. We are serious about integrating academics, and we want to make sure we are going about it the right way.

SHB: How long until your master plan is carried out?

Riel: The plan will be carried out over 9.5 years. It has already started; we are now in Phase I, which is the design and construction of our first residence hall since 2002, known as 560 Lincoln. We expect to open that building in fall 2017. In February, we will make the decision on the architect for our next project, called Southwest Villages. Once those two buildings are up, we will be able to begin renovations on some older buildings. Thereafter, we will be able to sequence renovations and new construction as we build and renovate. In all, we are going to demolish just over 800 beds, build 1,300 new beds and renovate 1,350 spaces in our program. We should gain a net of about 250 beds on campus. The institution is not planning to dramatically increase enrollment. We want to enhance and upgrade our facilities, while adding new beds. We have plenty of double-loaded corridor housing; anything new that we build will be suite-style with private baths included in the suites. Our surveys indicated that would be the best type of housing for our students. With some of our older suite units, we are looking to remove the living room space from the unit and create communal living spaces. Some of the units were built with generous living rooms that really isolate those residents in their units. We are looking to build communities of 40 students, not communities of four. Our new building, 560 Lincoln, will be loaded with communal spaces.

SHB: Did you consider a public-private partnership?

Riel: We didn't in this instance, because all the work we are doing is on our campus property. Financing was not a challenge for us either. The P3 option was not really something that we had to explore. A lot of the work we are doing is the renovation of existing facilities.

SHB: What are your big day-to-day challenges?

Riel: A large part of my work here has been getting an organization blended from different parts and getting everyone on the same page, as well as aligning policies and procedures between all of these departments. We are trying to introduce more technology into our student housing program. There are some learning curves to learning some of the bed management software.

SHB: When you look at the on-campus student housing world, what trends do you see?

Riel: Students have a lot of demands with technology. There is an instant mentality where they want to have information immediately. Creating ways that we can communicate with our student-residents beyond email or Facebook is something that we are working on. At the same time, we are trying to keep up with all the devices they are bringing to campus. When you are at home and there are five people in your house and you want to get online, that is fine. When you are on a campus with 4,000 other people trying to get online, the demand for bandwidth can be profound. We have recently upgraded our wireless service in our residence halls because we felt it was an expectation that students had. We are also one of 12 schools in the country that have a wireless program from Xfinity; it's a platform that enables our students to watch about 130 channels online. They can buy premium channels if they want. Another macro issue is the special needs of students. Some campuses are building housing specifically for special needs students as a way to make sure they are accepted into the university communities. That's expensive and intentional, but they are important for campuses. We are looking at that as well. We believe at the student

affairs level that great things are happening here. It is a great place to be and a great time to be here and I wouldn't want to be anywhere else.