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Building a Successful Community

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Building a successful community

It's Friday night at semester's end at Linfield College. Students are tense and eager for a break. Tests loom, papers and projects are due and students are trying to squeeze in socializing with friends.

The self-styled "Delta Force," Sarah Rittacco '13, Rhiannon Ladwig '13 and Cesar Bueno '12 are among the 20 Resident Advisors who will spend from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. walking in shifts around campus, checking each residence hall to make sure that all is well.

Building community values

With some 1,700 students and more than 300 faculty and staff, Linfield is larger than some Yamhill County towns. Each member of the residence life staff – 63 resident advisors and four professional staff – serves as a combination of counselor, educator, trainer, mediator and, sometimes, security officer. Sophomores to seniors, they live in residence halls or apartment complexes. Sometimes called the "fun police" because they occasionally break up parties or report violations of college policy, their core responsibility is to build a community within their living area by getting to know each resident personally, helping organize a governance system and coordinating activities. Their education extends far beyond the classroom, as they hone leadership and communication skills, develop multicultural understanding and competency, and learn the meaning of collaboration as they help their residents learn how to live and learn with people from diverse backgrounds and experiences.

RAs begin their journey long before students step on campus. They arrive two weeks before the students for an intensive training program. The training includes role

playing and team building, CPR and first aid. They learn to trust one another and gain an intimate knowledge of Linfield policies and procedures.

Garrick Rozairo '12 is from Sri Lanka, a culture that features a top-down style of leadership, in which few challenge authority. He was surprised to learn that leaders aren't always loud and outspoken.

"Here I have met very quiet leaders and learned the value of using different leadership styles for different situations," he said. "I have had the flexibility and freedom to develop the type of programming that will be most successful for my residents," instead of following a one-size-fits-all formula.

Serving as an agent of change

A recent incident helped Jenaveve Linabary '13 realize that her actions can benefit others. Posters displayed on a resident's door were defaced with derogatory comments. Linabary knew it was her responsibility to hold her hall accountable for the incident, regardless of who committed the act.

She emailed her residents a message that said, "It is never appropriate or funny to mock someone in terms of their gender identity, their sexuality or sexual orientation." Using skills she had learned in her gender communication class, she reminded her residents – all female – that they would be "up in arms" if such comments were made about a successful woman.

"I have no respect for anyone who makes derogatory comments of any kind, even if they are not intended that way," she said when discussing the incident later. "It still makes an impact and affects our societal perceptions of

people. I realized by responding to this incident I was making a valuable contribution by asking my residents to consider the impact they have on each other and their community.”

Jeff Mackay '88, associate dean of students, knows the RAs are helping students succeed within and outside the classroom and asks students to identify what they are learning in areas of leadership development, communications skills, multicultural understanding and collaboration as a result of those experiences. How does resolving a roommate conflict help communication skills? How does organizing events such as food drives or challenging students to make wise choices about the use of alcohol increase their social responsibility?

“I have learned that leadership is not something you do in order to make money or have power, but it is something that should be done for the greater good,” said Ben Edmonds '11. “The ability to work with a variety of people and meet them where they are, will be invaluable to me.”

And those leadership skills get noticed, President Thomas Hellie told the Board of Trustees in May. He relayed a story of a conversation with a CEO who said any student's resume with RA experience gets moved to the top of the pile.

graduate at higher rates and have higher retention. It's not just living in the residence hall that helps them succeed. It's building a community that supports and encourages a living-learning environment.

But incidents do occur. One night after rounds, an ambulance was called because of suspected alcohol poisoning. Quick action by an RA and area director averted what could have been a tragedy.

“College students will be students,” Mackay said. “Some will experiment with alcohol or drugs. But by establishing a close-knit community, we know if that behavior is occurring at dangerous levels and we will intervene.”

As finals week creeps closer, RAs are busy with their own classes and weekend rounds, but they still plan activities to help students relieve stress. Some hand out “survival kits” with candy, bubbles and other treats. Others plan ultimate frisbee or basketball games. They might hold a yoga night, take a walk downtown for ice cream, hold movie marathons or fondue parties. What better way to prepare for finals than intense studying followed by a manicure or pedicure? Because when the students sleep soundly, so do the RAs. 🌸

– Mardi Mileham

Saving lives, changing behaviors

Although the impact of RAs is difficult to measure, Mackay notes concrete examples where RAs build trust with residents who in turn feel safe to share concerns personally or about friends. Faculty members contact them about students who miss class or whose grades have plummeted. RAs routinely check in with residents, and track those who are struggling. They monitor progress and step in if students are in unhealthy or dangerous situations.

“We know that RAs have stopped sexual violence and they have saved students from committing suicide,” Mackay said. “RAs change the lives of students by intervening and sometimes by ensuring students get the help they need.”

Linfield and national data show that students who live on campus earn higher GPAs,

Clockwise from top left (blue hat) Andrew Carpenter '12, Eric Tompkins '12, Ben Edmonds '11, Brinn Hovde '13, Peyton Mizell '13, Garrick Rozario '12, Rhianna Wallace '13, Cesar Bueno '12 and Jenaveve Linabary '13 (center).

