Student Affairs Professionals' Perceptions of Campus Incivility

Amy J. Zieziula
Armstrong State University

Daniel W. Calhoun
Georgia Southern University, dwcalhoun@georgiasouthern.edu

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Abstract
The purpose of this study was to gather data regarding student affairs professionals' perceptions of student incivility and which acts of incivility are most often observed. Results from 409 participants suggested that student affairs professionals perceive that "very uncivil" acts are observed less often whereas acts that are perceived to be neither civil nor uncivil are witnessed more frequently. In addition, findings indicated that student affairs professionals are seeing an increase in uncivil acts related to social media and technology, and the manner in which students are using social media to vent frustrations with campus staff and their peers. Finally, recommendations for practice and further research are provided.

While the concept itself is broad and its definition can vary, the ways in which individuals treat and respect one and other has been a subject of great importance within higher education. Countless books have been written about it, and individuals regularly tour the country speaking to faculty, staff, and students on the topic. The Dutch scholar, Erasmus referred to it as "what enables us to live together" (as cited by Connelly, 2009, p. 52) and George Washington once wrote, "every action done in company, ought to be with some sign of respect to those that are present" (Connelly, 2009 p. 47). Additionally, Forni (2002) defined it as "being constantly aware of others and weaving restraint, respect, and consideration into the very fabric of this awareness" (p. 9). Today, it is most often referred under the broad term "civility".

In the context of the university setting, perhaps civility is best described as "the authentic respect for others when expressing disagreement, disparity, or controversy. It involves time, presence, a willingness to engage in genuine discourse, and a sincere intention to seek common ground" (Clark & Carnosso, 2008, p. 13). Conversely, incivility would encompass speech or actions that are disrespectful or rude, ranging from insulting remarks and verbal abuse to more volatile, aggressive behavior (Tiberius & Flak, 1999).

On college campuses, civility issues typically are linked to student conduct. In the early 1990s, a report by the American Council on Education and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching found that student conduct had worsened on college campuses, and that there was an increase in incivility towards other students and faculty (as cited by Sorcinelli, 1994). The council offered a number of recommendations, including the idea that faculty, administrators, and students increase their participation in campus life to build a better connection to their students. In addition, the report suggested that campuses create a list of common principles, values, and clear expectations that encourage respect for others.

In 1997, Forni co-founded the Johns Hopkins Civility Project to both promote and study civility on Johns Hopkins' campus (Troop, 2012). Other colleges and universities around the country followed suit, and the number of civility campaigns and programs on college campuses quickly increased. Institutions developed intervention programs, committees, workshops, courses, and websites in hopes of positively affecting campuses and decreasing instances of incivility both in and outside of the classroom (Connelly, 2009). These actions led to an initial feeling within higher education circles that incivility was on the decline.

Nonetheless, Connelly (2009) recommended that higher education institutions continue to research issues of incivility to assess its magnitude and impact. Despite this recommendation, thus far the research on incivility on college campuses has been either anecdotal, aimed at specific disciplines, (such as nursing or music majors), or institution specific (Bjorklund & Rehling, 2010). More recently, Alkandari (2011) found that classroom incivility was deemed an important issue by campus administrators, but in general there are few studies that have focused on this topic within higher education. Given this gap in the research, the purpose of this study was to gather information on acts of incivility from a student affairs perspective, and more specifically to assess the types of incivility observed as well as the frequency and severity of these acts.

Literature Review

Incivility and College Students

Baker, Comer, and Martinak (2008) researched ways in which generational changes have affected classroom civility. Forni (2002) posited that the internet age has created a generation of "radical informality" comprised of individuals who treat the web as their trusted source of knowledge. In the past, faculty were revered and viewed as respected conveyors of knowledge, but in today's academic climate, college students seem to view professors as being a paid service (Dechter, 2007). Similarly, universities have shifted to a business model in which students are seen as ways to attract money (Baker et al., 2008). This mentality can be harmful to both parties in that it produces "consumer graduates who think first of themselves" (Baker et al., p. 67) which in return has led to a change in thinking regarding incivility on college campuses.

Typical millennial college students today grew up with technology. They have a smart phone and constant internet access, are consistently in contact with friends and family, and enjoy socializing with large groups online; what Baker et al. (2008) referred to as being "well-wired" (p. 70). These students rely heavily on the internet and social media as a primary means of communication, which has led to less formal interactions amongst college students and their community. Often students will express their feelings and opinions on social media rather than directly with their peers of professors. In addition, when students are in a group or class setting they may continue to use their smart phones, indicating a disinterest in what is going on around them. This new method of communication may mean that incivility could soon be back on the rise.

Hirschy and Braxton (2004) found that classroom incivilities can negatively impact a student's commitment to college. Students who witness repeated incidents of classroom incivility may become less interested with the course material and less inclined to think critically during the class. Incivility in the classroom may also jeopardize faculty and student interaction, as well as group learning in the class, both of which are qualities for successful undergraduate education. Students may be less inclined to pay attention in class, and instead may act disruptive (Dechter, 2007). Instructors can also contribute to the problem by being dismissive, uninvolved, and sarcastic towards their students (Dechter, 2007; Forni, 2002). Occasionally professors may interpret student's restlessness with the course material as rebelliousness, when in actuality the professor may need to update his or her technology or materials to better captivate the student (Dechter, 2007).

Incivility and Faculty Members

Incivility in the classroom can be disheartening for professors, and in extreme cases can even cause them to reconsider their career choice (Bjorklund & Rehling, 2011). In 2000, the Indiana University Center for Survey Research conducted a survey of over 2,000 faculty and graduate instructors to help better understand what faculty perceives as incivility inside the classroom. The acts that faculty reported witnessing most frequently were "students arriving late for class, students cutting class and students being unprepared for class" (Indiana University Center for Survey Research, 2000, p.10).

Although there is little empirical data on campus incivility, there has been an increase in literature suggesting ways for professors to address issues of incivility in the classroom (Dechter, 2007; Knepp, 2012). Faculty most often address issues of incivility in the classroom by speaking with the involved students outside of class time (Indiana University Center for Survey Research, 2000). Others offer a more proactive approach to this problem. Baker et al. (2008), Bjorklund and Rehling (2011), and Sorcinelli (1994) suggested that faculty members include expectations in their syllabus or first class discussion about acceptable behavior inside and outside of the classroom as well. In hopes of preventing issues of incivility from occurring, professors may need to create a positive environment in the classroom (Sorcinelli, 1994) or consider designing class time to include more "cooperative and collaborative learning" (Hirschy & Braxton, 2004, p.69). Since not all professors agree on what is considered civil behavior and what is not, it may be beneficial for a faculty member to clearly explain to students what he or she considers inappropriate (Bjorklund & Rehling, 2011). Knepp (2012) suggested faculty members work with their students to create a classroom code of conduct or behavior contract. These types of agreements provides students the opportunity to realize how their uncivil behavior not only affects the professor, but also their peers. This approach tends to be effective because students may care more about what their peers think of their behavior than their professors (Knepp, 2012).

Incivility Outside the Classroom

Most studies regarding incivility on college campuses have primarily focused on student behavior and attitudes inside of the classroom (Bjorklund & Rehling, 2010; Boice, 1996; Dechter, 2007; Feldmann, 2001). Similar to their 2010 research on college students perceptions of incivility in the classroom, Bjorklund and Rehling's 2011 study found that faculty perceived acts such as "missing a scheduled appointment, wearing apparel with explicit language or images, and insisting that you force register them into a closed course" to be the most common disrespectful acts to happen outside of the classroom setting (Bjorklund & Rehling, 2011, p. 31). Clark and Springer (2007) and Clark (2009) examined acts of incivility based on student and faculty perceptions. Outside of the classroom acts included complaints about faculty, turning in late assignments, failing to use appropriate communication channels, and discrediting faculty. These acts were attributed to a general feeling that students had a sense of entitlement and lack of respect. Unfortunately, these are some of the only studies that mentioned incivility outside the classroom, and provide only the faculty or student perspective.

Role of Student Affairs Professionals

Even those with the highest of moral character can experience and participate in acts of incivility if the situation becomes too stressful or burdensome. For this reason, Popovics (2014) contends that fostering civility on a college campus is the responsibility of the entire campus community, not just of the faculty. In the nursing field, Hunt and Marini (2012) used the term "moral agents" when referring to those individuals in a position to lead and show others the civil way to act. Within higher education, it is student affairs staff who most often see and experience the stresses that that students face; and it is those same individuals who would be in the best position to provide information and education regarding civility and incivility to the campus community. With that in mind, the purpose of this descriptive study was to assess student affairs professionals' perceptions of incivility involving students outside of the classroom.

Methodology

The purpose of this descriptive study was to assess student affairs professionals' perceptions of incivility involving students outside of the classroom. The overarching research question for this study was as follows: What acts of incivility are witnessed by student affairs professionals and what is the perceived severity and frequency of these acts? In an effort to answer this question, this study utilized a survey adapted (with permission) from a similar instrument created by Bjorklund and Rehling that was administered to faculty in 2011. In addition, participants were provided an opportunity to respond to an open-ended question regarding their perceptions of acts of incivility they have witnessed.

Data Collection and Sample

The researchers utilized the purposeful selection process known as snowball sampling (Patton, 1990). A short-survey was distributed via email to various student affairs list-servs. Respondents were asked to describe their institution, their job classification, and number of years employed in higher education, but did not have to provide any personal identifying information (such as age, gender or name). The targeted population for this survey was full-time student affairs professionals.

A total of 409 participants who met the necessary criteria completed the survey. Over 300 respondents hailed from public institutions. Additional information regarding participant institutions is listed in Table 1.

Public university 308 (74%)	Private university 101 (24%)
2 year university 28 (7%)	4 year university 379 (91%)
Urban university 198 (48%)	Rural university 208 (50%)
Commuter campus 130 (31%)	Non-commuter campus 272 (66%)

Table 1: Institutional Characteristics

A variety of institutional sizes were represented, with 33% of participants employed at institutions with student populations between 20,000 – 40,000 and 22% from institutions with less than 5,000 students. This information is shown in Table 2.

Size of 5,000 or less	Size of 5,000 – 10,000	Size of 10,000 – 20,000	Size of 20,000 – 40,000	Size of 40,000+
92 (22%)	65 (16%)	88 (21%)	139 (33%)	25 (6%)

Table 2: Size of Institutions

Forty-four percent of respondents had worked at their university for 5 year or less, and only 11% had worked at the university for over 20 years. More than half of the respondents had worked in student affairs for less than 10 years (59%). This information is displayed in Table 3.

Worked at university 0 – 5 years	Worked at university 5-10 years	Worked at university 10 – 15 years	Worked at university 15 – 20 years	Worked at university 20+ years
184 (44%)	104 (25%)	56 (13%)	20 (5%)	45 (11%)
Worked in student affairs 1 – 5 years	**Worked in student affairs 5 – 10 years**	**Worked in student affairs 10 – 15 years**	**Worked in student affairs 15 – 20 years**	**Worked in student affairs 20+ years**
139 (33%)	108 (26%)	75 (18%)	34 (8%)	55 (13%)

Table 3: Years of Experience

The majority of respondents worked in health services (118) and the second largest group of respondents classified themselves as working in an area that was something other than those listed (109). This information can be found in Table 4.

Department	Number of Respondents	Percent of Respondents	Department	Number of Respondents	Percent of Respondents
Admissions	11	3%	Health Services	118	28%
Campus Recreation	6	1%	Multicultural Center	5	1%
Career Services	4	1%	Student Activities	19	5%
Counseling Services	32	8%	Student Conduct	19	5%
Dean of Students	38	9%	Student Disab. Resource Ctr.	1	0%
Educational Opportunity Programs	2	0%	Student Leadership	10	2%
Fraternity & Sorority Relations	0	0%	Student Media	0	0%
Financial Aid	3	1%	Other	109	26%
Housing/ Res. Life	38	9%			

Table 4: Campus Departments

Instrument

Respondents were provided a common definition of the term incivility. Also included on the survey were examples of common acts of incivility in extracurricular settings, such as students leaving programs early, arriving late, students not showing for scheduled meetings, inappropriate attire, and rude or disrespectful interactions with staff. Respondents were asked to use a 5-point Likert scale to rate the severity of these acts, ranging from being "very uncivil" to "very civil". For example, one question asked, "How would you perceive a student committing the following act – wearing apparel with explicit language or images?" In addition, respondents were asked to state the frequency of how often they witness these acts, ranging from "daily" to "never". In addition, respondents were provided an opportunity to include any additional acts they may have perceived but were not listed, and their opinion as to the severity of those acts via open ended questions at the end of the survey.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics for closed items and an inductive analytical approach for open-ended responses (Thomas, 2006). Data were used to calculate the mean and to compare different subgroups of the respondents. Results were reported by highlighting those acts of incivility that were reported as most frequent, as well as those reported as most severe. Open-ended responses were categorized and analyzed according to the patterns and trends of incivility.

Findings

The findings provide some insight into answering the research question: What acts of incivility are witnessed by student affairs professionals and what is the perceived severity and frequency of these acts? These results are organized by the survey and open-ended responses.

Survey Responses

The two scenarios that received the highest percentage for being perceived as very uncivil were emails or voicemails with explicit language (62%) and attending campus programs under the influence of drugs or alcohol (72%). Ninety-two percent of respondents reported observing students leaving emails or voicemails with explicit language either never or once or twice a year. Eighty-five percent of respondents reported observing students coming to programs under the influence of drugs or alcohol either never or only once or twice a year. Acts that were considered uncivil and received high percentages of respondents were abruptly leaving meetings (61%), leaving garbage in an administrator's office or meeting space (72%) and using cell phones during meetings (64%). Forty-four percent of respondents reported observing students abruptly leaving meetings once or twice a year and 33% reported observing students leaving garbage in their office or meeting space once or twice a year. The majority of respondents reported these acts as uncivil, yet they were rarely observed. Finally, 62% of respondents reported observing students using cell phones during meetings either monthly or weekly. This information can be seen below in Table 6.

Act committed	Percent perceived	Time frame observed	Percent observed
Emails or voicemails with explicit language	Very uncivil, 62%	Either never or once or twice a year	92%
Coming to programs under the influence of drugs or alcohol	Very uncivil, 72%	Either never or only once or twice a year	85%
Abruptly leaving meetings	Uncivil, 61%	Once or twice a year	44%
Leaving garbage in your office or meeting space	Uncivil, 72%	Once or twice a year	33%
Using cell phones during meetings	Uncivil, 64%	Either monthly or weekly	62%

Table 6: Top Acts Perceived Uncivil

Open-ended Responses

The open-ended responses showed some trends of student affairs professionals dealing with situations involving students being disrespectful, rude, or inappropriate as a result of technology such as email, social media, and smart phones. Respondents explained that students utilized Facebook as a means for airing their grievances about particular departments on campus, described by one respondent as "micro-aggressions". Similarly, another respondent explained that students had posted inappropriate pictures of other students on social media.

Open-ended comments revealed a general annoyance over students frequently texting during meetings, which supported the data stated in Table 6. Some respondents indicated that they often witness students actually walking into others on campus because they are so heavily engrossed in what they are doing on their cell phones.

Other respondents expressed concern over students ignoring email and phone call requests to meet. At the same time participants indicated students regularly demand things above and beyond the usual accommodations. Respondents also commented on students screaming rude chants at athletic events and just overall inappropriate behavior at public events. Additionally open-ended responses included physical altercations and arguments among students.

Discussion

The findings of this study were similar to previous research on incivility in the classroom setting. Much like Bjorklund & Rehling's (2010) study, student affairs professionals rarely observed acts that would be described as being "very uncivil". Similarly, the results parallel those of Feldmann (2001) regarding students' disregard for presenters' time (arriving to programs late or leaving early) and blatant cell phone usage during events. Many responses indicated that acts were perceived as neither civil nor uncivil. One can infer that this may be caused by individuals becoming more accepting of certain occurrences, and perhaps certain acts previously viewed as uncivil have now become too common on college campuses to make one view it as civil or uncivil.

Meaningful information was extracted from results of the open-ended questions. Examples of Feldmann's (2001) "classroom terrorism" and similar larger and more disruptive incidents were revealed when respondents described of fights and threats among students at events or in the residence halls. These larger incidents of incivility have a different impact than that in previous research since they may disturb an office or a campus community, rather than just a classroom.

Despite common definitions provided in the survey instrument, the data showed that individuals have differing thresholds for how they view incivility, echoing the work of Bjorklund & Rehling (2010). For example, one respondent shared that as a male, he does not view issues of students yelling or arguing with him as serious, but he believes that some of his peers may feel differently. While this idea was not within the scope of this study, it brings an interesting perspective and is one that could be explored further through future research.

This research differed from previous studies in that the results highlighted the perceived ways students use technology (specifically social media and cell phones) in an uncivil manner. The high reliance on technology and cell phones by students today makes it difficult to gauge whether or not there is an issue of incivility. It is not always known if the student is being rude to those with whom he or she is meeting or if the student is using their phone for something related to the meeting.

Open-ended responses highlighted some instances where the use of technology in an uncivil manner was more evident. For example, one respondent commented about students "posting lewd or harassing messages on Facebook anonymously". Another respondent mentioned a student "using social media to belittle the conduct process because they were not happy with the result". Another example was described as occurring when students "ignore emails or requests to meet sent to them". These findings reflect the research of Baker et al. (2008) that indicated that certain traits of millennial students are highlighted through uncivil behaviors in the classroom. Some of these findings reflect on millennial students as having a sense of entitlement, a lack of respect for people's time, and having a constant online connection via social media and email. Similarly, respondents made reference to students who demanded particular services or requests to which they believed they deserved. Forni (via Dechter, 2007) described this way of thinking as the "consumer mentality of students" (p. F1). One respondent specifically stated "students often act entitled - as if they are deserving of special treatment, when in fact they are not". Another respondent stated that students were "calling different administrators in the same office to get a different answer from one of them". Essentially, these students continued to push administrators until they received the answer that they wanted. The situations revealed through these responses are an indication of what Dechter (2007) described as a transformation from students being viewed as a way to attract money for institutions, and universities viewed as a service. Because of this shift in higher education, students may feel more entitled to their demands and institutions may be more likely to succumb to their demands.

Implications

One can infer from this research that incivility is a prevalent issue and an area of concern for student affairs professionals. While the philosophies of the institutions, departments, and student affairs professionals who took part in this study are different, the findings reveal that issues of incivility seem to be similar across the board. These findings reflect the change in the culture of today's college student described in previous studies (Bjorklund & Rehling, 2010; Boice, 1996; Dechter, 2007; Feldmann, 2001), however, given the increased presence of technology; it seems that these issues are becoming more prevalent.

In fact, technology has made it easier for students to be uncivil because the personal interactions are now removed from the equation. Today's student has grown up with technology, and the consumer mentality of many students makes it necessary for student affairs professionals to be well trained in a variety of areas.

This notion of cyber incivility is one that is impacting how students communicate with their college community and how students express their opinions.

It is essential for student affairs professionals to understand the technology that today's students are using so that they can educate students on how to use it in a civil and respectable way. If meeting students where they are developmentally is an important belief of student affairs staff, it may be beneficial to incorporate technology into our interactions with students. Student affairs staff should be trained to deal with interpersonal conflicts that occur completely online, as these issues are no longer limited to face-to-face interactions. Staff may implement communication modules for students to complete that promote healthy communication between students and their peers, but also between students and faculty or staff.

It may also be beneficial for staff to be trained on how to deal with an upset student that is making extreme demands upon them. Although these students may be acting in an uncivil manner it is imperative that student affairs professionals continue to respond in a civil manner. As the moral agents of the campus community, it is important that staff model appropriate behavior to the students. They should see that students' questions are answered and that if demands are unable to be met that students at least understand the reason why. Respect and courteousness should be included in university student handbooks and codes of conduct and promoted through campus civility campaigns.

Previous research recommended that faculty members should engage students in discussions about civil behavior, and student affairs professionals should do the same. Student affairs professionals may want to implement programs or workshops that address online etiquette and email decorum. It may also be beneficial for students to be offered panel discussions from lawyers regarding the real life implications from student's online actions or uncivil behavior.

Open responses indicate a need for student affairs professionals to continue to address issues of social media and online forums, as it seems that this is an area which breeds incivility. A suggestion for student affairs professionals might be to create workshops and presentations on proper online etiquette and email decorum, and connect these programs to their civility campaigns. The use of cell phones during meetings was observed frequently by respondents, so student affairs professionals may also want to make certain that their campus civility campaigns are addressing this issue.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies could include qualitative interviews focusing on a particular position or a specific department within student affairs to gather data on how a dean or a director views student incivility. In addition, one could conduct observations of student programs or events in order to track instances of incivility (such as how many students arrive late or leave early, or the amount of students using cell phones or other personal devices during speakers or events). Using a similar survey to the one that was administered, but emailing it out to a broader, more intentional population (such as covering all student affairs organizations and not just those to which the researchers belonged) may provide more expansive data. In doing this one might be able to gain a better understanding as to the different issues of incivility various departments endure. Future research may also include tracking data from Residence Life departments as it relates to roommate conflicts to better understand the root of these conflicts and if it stems from a generational change in how students interact with one another by a greater use of technology and the potential incivility of these actions.

Another recommendation would be to study participants from various ages to see if there are any generational differences with how incivility is viewed. Another recommendation could be to focus on respondents' gender or ethnicity and determine if there are in fact gender or ethnicity differences as Alexander-Snow's research indicates. The final recommendation is for one to survey both staff and students on the use of technology to see if there are in fact different ways that technology is viewed in terms of civility.

Limitations

Our research includes several limitations. Participants were recruited electronically through emails and list-servs, primarily those associated with the professional organizations of the researchers. Those completing the instrument either needed direct access to the email or have it provided to them via another professional. As such, the respondents were not evenly distributed among the functional areas or institutional type. While the survey did not target a specific functional area, health services professionals represented a significantly large portion of the respondents (28% health services and 8% counseling). Similarly, approximately a quarter of respondents selected "other" as their functional area. Not knowing the specific department or area limits how the results may be interpreted as the nature and level of student interaction is unclear. Also, this study did not ask for information on participants' gender or race. In retrospect, this information would have helpful to have for comparison purposes. Finally, the majority of responses came from participants at four-year institutions, which limits the generalizability of the data across all student affairs settings and institutional types.

Conclusion

In spite of these limitations, this research suggests that student affairs professionals are witnessing fewer extreme acts of incivility but they perceive an increase in smaller acts of incivility involving social media and other technology. In addition, students continue to demonstrate a consumer mentality regarding their education and appear to be placing unnecessary expectations and demands on staff members.

Today's college student relies heavily on technology and social media, so it is likely student affairs professionals will continue to see an increase in uncivil acts by students using smart phones or social media. It is important for colleges and universities to work to educate students about online etiquette and the best way to use social media. Student affairs professionals need to turn their focus towards these smaller acts of incivility and work to create programs and workshops to educate the student population on appropriate behavior. Similarly, they should engage students in conversations about technology and explain to students the greater impact this could potentially have on them. Curbing incidents of cyber incivility and the methods in which students express their opinions and communicate with their college community should be an ongoing focus for student affairs professionals.

While previous research indicated that incivility was a concern for faculty inside of the classroom, now it is evident that incivility is a concern for student affairs professionals as well. Furthermore, the responses indicated that incivility on college campuses, and those tied to technology, remain a concern for student affairs professionals. Student affairs professionals have a unique opportunity to educate students outside of the classroom. These findings indicate that further educational opportunities are necessary to better educate students on proper behavior, not

only in person, but on the internet and via social media as well. It is clear that college students are not merely behaving in an uncivil manner in the classroom towards faculty, but outside of the classroom in their daily interactions as well. More than ever, there is a need for faculty, staff and students to address incivility on college campuses. Many universities have begun to implement civility campaigns; however, this research shows a need for more specific educational programming to inform students of civil behavior outside of the classroom as well.

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Amy J. Zieziula is the Assistant Dean of Student Integrity at Armstrong State University and is a doctoral student in Higher Education Leadership at Georgia Southern University. Ms. Zieziula has developed and implemented Codes of Conduct at various types of institutions. In addition, she currently serves on the research committee for the Association for Student Conduct Administrators (ASCA), has presented at several professional conferences, and was a panelist at the Women's Empowerment Conference in 2013 at Georgia Southern University.

Daniel W. Calhoun is an Assistant Professor and program coordinator of the M.Ed. in Higher Education Administration program at Georgia Southern University. His research is focused on the support and development of graduate students and new professionals. Dr. Calhoun is an active member of ACPA and currently serves on the Commission for Professional Preparation directorate and as a Faculty in Residence for the Standing Committee for Graduate Students and New Professionals.