

# **Weber State University**

## **Housing and Residence Life Program Review**

### **January – February 2013**

In January 2013, Weber State University Student Affairs division tasked a review team to conduct a program review for Housing and Residence Life. The team consisted of both internal and external review team members:

- Craig Allen, Director of Housing and Residence Life, Texas Christian University
- Ray Gasser, Senior Associate Director of Residence Education and Housing Services, Michigan State University
- Brenda Marsteller Kowalewski, Professor of Sociology and Director of Community Involvement Center
- Andrew Young, Associate Director of Admissions
- Laura Anderson, Instructor Specialist of Network Technology and Business Multimedia

The committee was tasked to report on the department in the following six areas: mission/goals/outcomes, programs & services, leadership and staffing, financial resources/budget, facilities/equipment & technology, ethical and legal responsibilities, and assessment & evaluation. At the conclusion of this report, the review team will provide an overall summary and recommendations for the future. The review team felt overall that the department was operating effectively even while there were opportunities to move the department forward in the future.

#### **Mission, Goals and Outcomes**

The mission statement for the department is consistent with the mission of Student Affairs and the University. The reviewers would like to call attention to one aspect of the University mission statement though - "extensive personal contact..." in and out of the classroom. There may be some opportunities here for Housing and Residence Life in the future. This will be elaborated on later in the report.

The three primary departmental goals are functional, but perhaps simplistic and could be expanded. Specifically, having a program model is important but goals are the items contained in the bullets. And the item listed as the third goal is a repeat of the previous items. Reviewing the department's overarching goals through a departmental retreat might be in order and could help galvanize the current team moving forward.

The Housing department should consider writing some more definable outcomes for the department. For example, if academic success is something Housing hopes to impact, write an outcome such as - students living in Weber State University (WSU) housing will achieve x.yz average GPA. Or maybe an outcome about freshman to sophomore retention? These are more specific outcomes that can lead to more focused efforts in programming, staff time and other department priorities. With specific identifiable outcomes, the department can focus its resources and staff in very intentional ways and can ultimately better support the University's mission while enhancing the value of Housing and Residence Life at Weber State University.

#### **Programs and Services**

CLV divides into four areas of Marketing/Leasing, Accounting, Facilities and Residence Life.

This is not unexpected but raises the question of what is most the important aspect of what Housing does. Two functional areas are all about one goal - occupancy. The Facilities area contributes to basic needs of students, and occupancy, but only minimally to student growth and learning. For being a relatively small department, the department may want to look at organizational structure in order to enhance those programs and services that best enhance the student experience by living in Housing and Residence Life buildings.

WSU Student Affairs should investigate methods to support the marketing and accounting functions. The reviewers recommend that an enterprise software system such as Star Rez, or E-Rez Life or other be purchased to help automate some of the assignment, billing and reporting functions. The time saved in those areas can then be shifted to more programmatic items that promote student leadership, student growth and student's connection to campus. The reviewers also recommend that CLV offer more support from its national office for marketing. If CLV is bringing their expertise in these areas, then marketing strategies and materials should be used by the team on campus at WSU. Finally the reviewers recommend that the Housing and Residence Life team find ways to better utilize the talents of WSU students. For example, hiring an intern in marketing or strategic communications, or hiring an accounting student to assist with some business functions. These recommendations are designed to shift personnel resources to the residence life function with in Housing and Residence Life.

The reviewers found that there were indeed outstanding programs and services being offered. Custodial and maintenance appeared to be strong. The resident assistant program appears to be in good shape. There are always minor ways to improve an RA program, but the selection and training process seemed appropriate. Supervising RAs with undergraduates can be challenging, but the CLV staff appear to do well with this model. The supervision model absolutely requires outstanding training and preparation for undergraduate supervisors and support from mid-level and senior Housing and Residence Life staff.

The Housing and Residence Life team seemed well versed in all their critical incident management procedures. There is adequate on-call coverage, and the fact that even the director lives on campus is a signal that any residential crisis will get the appropriate staff response. Student conduct matters are handled appropriately. The reviewers are not in favor of a reliance on fines, and we recommend that educational sanctions and a focus on restorative justice as the predominant model. Finally, there was some feedback from students that safety checks were just a way to fine students. While we believe that this is not in fact true, it represents an area for improvement. We recommend that safety checks be done in a way such that students are almost always present when checks are done. We also recommend that checks always have an educational outcome, and as much as possible a focus on another way for staff to get to know students and have positive personal contact with residents.

### **Leadership and Staffing**

WSU is fortunate to have a Director who is passionate about student housing and though a private company employs him it is clear he and WSU staff considers him as a "WSU person." The staffing model is lean, but effective. The Director has been very successful in hiring motivated and talented staff at the Assistant Director level who have helped to move the program forward over the past several years.

WSU is getting great contributions from undergraduate village coordinators. If the opportunity presented itself to move those to graduate students or entry level professionals (bachelors degree only) it might offer additional staff energy to reach new goals and grow the housing program. Graduate or entry level professionals would also likely enhance the department's ability to strengthen its living learning communities and other academically tied programs. As a consideration, entry level staff could take on some of the other departmental responsibilities including marketing/leasing. The reviewers therefore recommend that a plan be developed to add either 2 graduate positions or one additional live-in position to support the residential program for WSU students.

The review team did believe that some level of customer service training might be in order for some staff throughout the department in order to provide outstanding customer experiences each and every time. It would also provide staff with mechanisms and strategies to respond to requests without simply saying "no". The review team also recommends that the Housing and Residence Life staff evaluate all business practices, involve students in a review, and then finds ways to eliminate any unnecessary paperwork or perceived bureaucracy.

### **Financial Resources/Budget**

The department runs a tight budget. This is evident from the financial reports and in discussions with the staff in Housing, but also supported by the View President for Finance and others in Student Affairs. There may be little opportunity to find additional revenue, but summer conferencing represents one area to investigate. There are expenses when running summer camps, but given a housekeeping staff that is already on payroll, it makes sense to keep buildings as occupied as possible. Long-term groups are ideal as they take less staff time.

An additional scenario to explore within the tight budget is where the department can find efficiencies in expenses. Based on the size of the department, the use of student employees in more areas may present opportunities to replace some full-time, benefited positions through attrition. This would require a thorough analysis of job responsibilities and departmental needs. It also might provide opportunities to look at 30 hour/week jobs in some instances if work can be successfully completed. Internships and apprenticeships are also opportunities to continue to explore and enhance.

Room rates seem low, but it is clear that students are price sensitive. However a strong residence life program in these new and very nice facilities should promote a growth in demand on campus housing. A focus on excellence in customer service will cause students to seek housing. The same thing will happen as living learning programs take hold. Every effort to hire exceptional RAs and give them great training and focus on building relationships through "extensive personal contact" as noted in the University mission statement will help build demand. Students told us they love the connections with other students and this will keep them coming back. With support from CLV, the review team believes that there is a capacity to raise rates but that this needs to be done carefully and in conjunction with creating even stronger residential communities. Housing and Residence Life should conduct a market research analysis of the Ogden market to determine how it might be able to find some additional revenues through rates without chasing customers away.

### **Facilities, Equipment and Technology**

The new halls are great and the design for the next hall looks impressive. These halls lend themselves to strong communities and an exceptional experience. The reviewers would applaud

Weber State's recent decision to build 50-100 year facilities rather than stick built 20 year facilities like Wildcat Village. Equipment and technology seem strong, though repeated questions about the TV service raise a question. The reviewers noticed a level of dissatisfaction in the TV service as an emerging technology. We would challenge the vendor on product delivery.

The maintenance plan is strong and the personnel seem to do a great job. The review team believed there was strong evidence of collaboration between WSU Facilities personnel and CLV employees. It was noted that there are no reserves and again the theme of running a housing program on a tight budget came up. The review team recommends that Housing and Residence Life start to build some reserves, even if it is a nominal amount just to get started. One approach would be to look at the bottom line at the end of each year, and take a percentage of any balance for reserves, regardless of other short term needs. This would obviously need to be carefully reviewed, as we would not suggest that short term repair items be deferred to create reserves.

There are clearly challenges with Wildcat Village, and though it may seem backwards, the reviewers would advise that enough is done to keep it looking good and maintained to ensure that it survives through its bonding, even though there are major issues. Students will tolerate some of those issues as long as their furniture looks good, their appliances are well maintained, and their carpet looks nice. It does not solve ice dams, but it will help keep them happy and paying customers.

### **Ethical and Legal Responsibilities**

CLV and the Housing staff seem to be well versed on their duties and there are no concerns about this area. As the market continues to evolve, it is critical that staff utilize the support of CLV and professional development to understand the changing legal considerations of a comprehensive housing program.

### **Assessment and Evaluation**

The conduct process is working well. It might be advisable to review the conduct sanctioning and the use of fines as often these do not associate with behavior changes. Fines also are inherently inequitable to students from upper-class versus lower-class socio-economic status families. The reviewers do believe that fines are appropriate in some instances but should not be used as an overall solution to conduct sanctioning.

EBI results showed areas of strength and areas for improvement. The important thing is that these evaluations are happening and the results are being used to shape decisions. The reviewers would recommend that annually the staff retreat to review the evaluations and identify annual goals and work tasks.

The reviewers recommend that a five year strategic plan be developed. As construction wraps up on the final phase of new housing, this is the ideal time to have a plan that sets the priorities for the department, priorities for each position as well as detailed goals and action plans. We recommend that campus partners and students be involved in creating the strategic plan.

### **Additional Recommendations**

1. Perhaps the most dominant theme of the review, and thus a point for future discussion and strategic decision-making is the relationship between WSU and CLV. It appeared to the reviewers that the relationship works well, and many believed that the CLV management contract was more cost effective than WSU operating housing. While this may be true, those numbers should be

carefully reviewed to be sure that the actual amount of money being saved is providing value to the University. The university may find it can exercise more control in job descriptions and allocation of personnel dollars if Housing is operated by the University, which might be a consideration for the future.

The flip side of this recurring theme was that the CLV staff was viewed by most as true “WSU people.” While CLV staff did mention that they are sometimes reminded they do not work for WSU, all were dedicated to the University. There do appear to be some minor considerations that remain for how business is done when CLV staff is perhaps not given access to information in the same way other WSU Student Affairs staff may be given information. There were examples given about financial reporting/processes and access to university computer networks. A thorough look at what if any other processes are slowed by this issue is recommended as part of the thinking on the overall value of continuing to outsource housing to CLV.

The CLV staff appear to be well integrated in Student Affairs. They serve on committees, collaborate with many units and participate in the Student Assistance and Intervention Team, which is an absolute priority.

2. Another significant theme was the role of campus housing as the University looked to create a small but stronger campus living community. All acknowledged that housing growth would be near complete for the foreseeable future, but there was a lot of discussion about how housing on campus could play a role in attracting students, creating learning opportunities for students, meeting needs of a diverse group of students (and especially a role with international students). Many in Student Affairs talked about living-learning communities (LLCs). LLCs are mentioned in the CLV goal statements and in discussion with CLV Vice President Doris Collins, she highlighted LLCs as an item that CLV can lend its expertise in developing for the WSU community.

There are of course many models for LLCs and the challenge is developing the model that can really work best at WSU. The reviewers recommend that an LLC team be led by the Provost or designee. If there is good support from Academic Affairs then WSU should try to collaborate with academic units from the beginning to create desired outcomes, and then a plan to achieve those outcomes. A design charatte should be done to first establish what living-learning programs at WSU should look like. Standards need to be established and roles defined. Regardless of the LLC model selected, this type of collaboration from the beginning will help ensure success at implementation. It does not appear that faculty-in-residence is viable, given the facilities do not lend themselves to faculty apartments. However, freshmen interest groups (FIGs) seem plausible, and perhaps some concentrated sophomore living groups as well. It will be important to involve students in creating the LLCs, as soon as the model is selected. Students can help the University shape the action plans, or steep activities and specific programs in a way that promotes student buy in to these LLCs.

While living-learning programs can help create strong campus communities, there are other ways to build a sense of community on campus. Given the size of the on campus population as a percentage of the overall enrollment it is clear that campus housing will not influence the entire campus community. However, for students who do live on campus WSU has a unique opportunity to truly get to know those students through extensive personal contact. The reviewers recommend that a programming model that focuses on systematic and intentional plans to get to know students be established. It is not sufficient to simply have a programming checklist for RAs. Rather, a well-designed plan to have contact with all students (those who attend programs and those who do not)

is needed to make a sustainable impact on a residential community. Most students living on campus were first year students, so this is a great way to build the connection with students and ideally find a way to keep those students engaged as they matriculate through their four or five years at WSU.

Overall, we believe Weber State University's Housing and Residence Life department has made some significant progress in the past five years and looks to be evolving moving forward. We believe that the recommendations in this program review would be important considerations to analyze in their application. And even though the WSU/CLV model is unique, it appears to be mostly a successful marriage for both the vendor and the institution.