Standing on Tradition

On-Campus Culture Thrives Despite Non-Traditional Trends

by Virginia Myers

Once upon a time, college was a sequestered sort of experience. The ivory tower was anything but a disparaging term, and the elite of society went off unapologetically, gathering together to consider lofty ideals and ponder great thoughts in a heady and exclusive fraternity of scholars.

Today, college campuses go to great lengths to portray themselves as anything but elite. They strive to be inclusive and diverse, reach out to first generation students, and design programs that intentionally immerse students in “real world” experience, rather than protect them from the din of uneducated rabble.

But as established as the new approach to higher education has become, a healthy remnant of old-school collegial culture persists. It may not be as cloistered as it once was, but an on-campus concentration of young scholars learning and living together—the traditional undergraduate experience—remains popular and, some say, it is still the most effective approach to higher learning.

Tradition’s Place in a Changing World

It is true that the “non-traditional” student has captured the attention of just about every college and university in the nation (see story, page 2). Nearly half of all college students (47 percent) are older than 25, according to the Association of Nontraditional Students in Higher Education. In 1970, about 28 percent of the total population of college students were over 25 years old; projections show that, by 2018, that number will be closer to 40 percent (National Center for Education Statistics). Many of these older students have families of their own, have had or continue to maintain careers while they take classes, or are working full-time and living off campus. They have dramatically reshaped the college experience.

To accommodate this new population, online learning has become de rigueur, making higher education accessible to those unable to attend class on campus. The Instructional Technology Council recently found that
distance enrollments grew 11.3 percent from fall 2006 to fall 2007; the following year, statistics show an additional 18 percent increase. Night classes—indeed, entire programs of study—have become available to accommodate full-time work schedules. Degrees once exclusively committed to building a foundation of learning in the liberal arts are tailored for professional enhancement. And for many students, networking and resume-building workshops with fellow students have replaced participation in student government, membership in on-campus service clubs, and going down to the football game with the fraternity brothers.

So, amidst these sea changes, why does the on-campus, traditional college experience persist? Students ages 18 to 24—those traditional students who make up the other half of the college student population—continue to come to class in a bricks-and-mortar setting. They clamor for space in the residence halls, eat their meals in a common dining area, join clubs and Greek organizations and learn, over the course of four (or more) years, to live apart from their parents.

The traditional experience is so strong, in fact, that elements of it have seeped into the non-traditional approach. Online colleges have begun to offer virtual clubs, with virtual meetings, online discussions and video lectures. Members even get together in real time to share academic interests—at the University of Maryland University College. English and online literary arts club members have attended plays together, and online history club members gather to tour museums.

**Value-added Education**

“Learning is, by definition, social,” says George Mehaffy, AASCU’s vice president for academic leadership and change. “It requires a degree of engagement and that social engagement dimension is often enhanced by things that occur outside the classroom,” he says. “I think we’re long past the notion that the brain is independent of the heart,” agrees George Kuh, chancellor’s professor of higher education and director, Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana State University’s School of Education. “Learning is not done best independently and in isolation. Most people need affirmation. They need support. They need to see how their ideas play in a larger field. They just need people around them to motivate and inspire.” That sort of collaboration and support is one reason bands and choirs and athletic teams are so

“A University of Central Florida student uses a study area on campus.”

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meaningful to college students, adds Kuh. In such groups, students “get feedback on their performance in real time, it’s public, and what they do next affects other people.”

“The deepest learning, the kind of learning that will likely lead to the skills you need for lifelong learning, is going to be the learning you do in the company of others.”

This is especially true of students aged 18 to 25. While older students may have networks of family members and business colleagues, younger people yearn for social connection with their peers. “The research is pretty plain on this,” says Kuh. “At that age, students probably learn more from their peers and those outside of class interactions than they do from other agents of socialization—faculty and administrators.” During Kuh’s own undergraduate experience at Luther College (Iowa), he played on the basketball team, was president of his fraternity and wrote a column in the college newspaper. He still gets together several times a year with college buddies. “I had a terrific undergraduate experience,” he says.

Building an On-Campus Community

Much of the traditional education Kuh enjoyed is anchored in living on campus. Dormitory living continues to be popular, so much so that applicants are clamoring for spaces in residence halls, and institutions are responding by building more. At George Mason University (Va.), which has traditionally had a large population of commuter students, administrators are expanding from 5,400 beds on campus to 6,000, with four new residence halls under construction (along with more classroom space). Queens College, City University of New York, built its first residence hall last year, a $72 million commitment for 500 beds; it is so popular, administrators hope to build another. Wayne State University (Mich.), another commuter school, built its first residence halls within the last five years, and has seen dramatic growth in the vitality of on-campus life ever since.

The University of Central Florida (UCF), which was until recently primarily a commuter school, is adding 750 new beds in dorm buildings and two new residences for Greek organizations. The university wants to provide on-campus housing to 80 percent of its freshmen; currently, 67 percent live on campus.

“Living on campus is the best way to become engaged on campus,” says Maribeth Ehasz, vice president for student development and enrollment services at UCF. “We see value in providing a strong living and learning environment for our students. Our investment in on-campus housing solidifies our commitment to offering a complete experience for students.” Her colleague, Vice President of University Relations Dan Holsenbeck, agrees. “Our retention from freshman to sophomore and sophomore to junior is strongly correlated with living on campus in one of our dorms,” he says. “Our goal is ultimately to house all of our freshmen class on campus, and to provide enough housing for sophomores and juniors to remain on campus if they so desire.”

“There’s a huge amount of data that shows that students who are in residence are more likely to be retained,” says Howard Shapiro, associate vice president for undergraduate programs and general education at Wayne State University. “There’s no question about student persistence being related to that.”

Data supporting what so many administrators believe—that residential learning is superior to commuting—is dated, but plentiful. “Living on campus has long been associated with persistence and student success,” cites A.W. Astin in What Matters in College? Four Critical Years Revisited (1993); “Students who live on campus generally interact more with faculty and peers and are more satisfied with their undergraduate experience,” say E.T. Pascarella and P.T. Terenzini in How College Affects Students (1991 and 2005). “Living on campus and all the benefits that it brings is as rock solid as it ever has been,” says Daniel J. Hurley, AASCU’s director of state relations and policy analysis.

“On-campus housing gives ready access to 24-hour support and emergency access through our residence life program,” says Ehasz at UCF, who cited a list of advantages to residence
hall living: immediate opportunity to interact, socialize and engage with a diverse community of learners; focus on leadership and services; available study space; academic support services; recreation and wellness programs; health and counseling services; and limited distractions from the diversion of the outside world (just like those scholars of the past). On-campus retention rates at UCF are between 4 and 5 percentage points higher than off-campus retention. Graduation rates for on-campus students are 10 percent higher.

Appalachian State University (N.C.) publishes a similar list for students deciding whether to stay on campus or not. Among its points:

- Students who live on campus score higher on writing tests, academic autonomy and interdependence than students who live off-campus. Students on-campus work collaboratively with their peers and develop increased motivation for academic success;
- Living on-campus puts students within walking distance of all their classes, the library, all the gyms. . . great food . . . and many friends;
- There are more events and activities within easy reach on campus;
- When students are asked what they remember most about living in the residence halls they almost always mention the close friendships they formed that are still in place after college;
- Students who live on-campus have higher grades in both their first and second years in college. They have greater access to the library, study space, the writing center and friends to help them study;
- Students living on-campus are more involved in all the activities and organizations college offers. Students on-campus take greater advantage of their tuition dollars by attending more events, joining more clubs and organizations, and getting involved in athletics, arts, education and entertainment.
- Students who live on-campus stay in college longer: By becoming more involved and being close to the center of campus, they are 13 percent more likely to stay in college than students living off-campus;
- Every residence hall has staff trained to help students succeed in class and get involved outside of class;
- Memories will be formed while living in a residence hall that will be fondly retold for years to come.

There are less tangible advantages as well, and some that might not seem obvious in the moment—aspects that Hurley calls “character building.” At George Mason, for example, students from relatively homogenous areas of the country are immersed in a much more international population. “The residential campus will induce and, in some instances, require people to interact with people they would rather avoid,” says Kuh. “How do you learn to deal with people who are different than yourself? You don’t do that by reading about them. When you bump into such a person or when you now find such a person is your roommate or lives next door, you can’t avoid them. This is potentially a very positive personal development experience.”

Incorporating Change

The diversity of today’s campuses is just one of the changes the traditional campus approach to education has absorbed. While the premise of learning communities has remained, the methods of maintaining them have been transformed.

At Keene State College in picturesque Keene, New Hampshire, Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs Emile Netzhammer says, “It might not look that different but the educational experiences that students are getting as part of our community would be unrecognizable to students a decade or 15 years ago.” There are residence halls, bricks and mortar classrooms, dining facilities—but there is also an integrated curriculum connecting subjects across disciplines. There is service-learning and undergraduate research. Students take fewer classes, but the ones they do take delve into material more deeply. And a lot of learning takes place away from the classroom in the forests, mountains and waterways around the school. “Students learn differently today than they did even a decade ago, and we need to reach them in the ways...
that they learn most effectively,” says Netzhammer.

Similarly, students unions—traditionally places for debating societies—now sell pizza, notes AASCU’s George Mehaffy. Dormitories with two bunk beds and two desks have morphed into suites with private bathrooms and living areas. Where gymnasiums once meant basketball courts, recreation centers now mean Olympic-sized swimming pools and climbing walls. And, of course, technology has become ubiquitous.

But the point of it all remains the same. “All of those structures are ultimately designed [to] remain or have been incorporated and persist because they provide strategies for social interaction and interpersonal development,” says Mehaffy.

Extending Campus Life to Everyone

You don’t have to live in a residence hall to pick up on the advantage of a traditional on-campus community. Having on-campus living is better for everyone, even those who live in town, because it anchors campus life, posits James Muyskens, president of Queens College.

One of the first things Muyskens did when he came to Queens eight years ago was appoint a vice president for student affairs, who focused on Muyskens’s quest to improve life on campus, to “not have so many students just coming by bus, taking their class, and leaving.” Now the school has lively music and drama programs with an active schedule of student performances on campus and more than 100 clubs that engage students in on-campus interaction, like Model UN and chess club. Pedagogically, faculty are encouraged to assign more group projects. Even the physical plant has been redesigned to include lounges and public indoor and outdoor spaces conducive to socializing. “The campus looked worn out and tired; we’ve tried to make it park-like,” explains Muyskens, who replaced chain link fence and barbed wire with attractive wrought iron fencing. The changes, he adds, aid in student retention. “We think it really helps indirectly in that [students] want to stay in school. They build friendships, they take on responsibilities.”

Other administrators point to recreation facilities, where students can use the treadmill next to the professor teaching their class, or simply stay fit—one way colleges are addressing the whole student approach to learning. At Wayne State, residence halls were developed in conjunction with campus retail to boost activity, and administrators are encouraging private residential development that would serve upper classmen near campus. They’ve established more options in food service, so that students aren’t locked into three square meals a day and can visit vendors.

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late at night. The student center is being revamped, and plans are underway to ensure that commuters and veterans feel more a part of campus life. “The vision is to make this 24-7 campus a place where people are, people live, people learn,” says Shapiro. That goes for off-campus students as well. “We decoupled the idea of learning communities from residence halls,” says Shapiro. The

communities are instead centered on academic pursuits, economic background or the need for remedial English. There’s even a learning community focused on the Motown history of the city.

“It comes down to engaging students on the campus so they don’t feel they’re a part-time student.” Shapiro would like them to think of themselves first as students, and secondarily as a part of the outside world. The image may have changed but the impulse to create a distinct community around learning is alive and well, even this far from the ivory towers.

Virginia Myers is an independent writer in the Washington, D.C. area.

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