

CEECH Working Group Report, AY2014-15

Submitted by Liz Zechmeister, Chair

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Background

The Co-Curricular Engagement External to the College Halls (CEECH) Working Group was constituted by Vice Provost Cyrus in November 2014 with a charge to develop ideas and proposals regarding co-curricular faculty and grad/professional student involvement in programming aimed at residences outside the “College Halls.”¹ The CEECH roster is attached as an appendix.

Motivation: To address gaps between the College Halls and non-College Halls while responding to the strategic plan’s focus on enriching the Undergraduate Residential Experience² by developing suggestions for the implementation of new/revise channels through which to connect discovery and learning, faculty and students (with a focus on those living in residences external to the College Halls).

Goal: “[I]dentify themes or issues that need more focused attention so that the experiences from outside of the College Halls system remain a celebrated part of our campus community’s narrative.”³

Task: Deliver a short (2-5 page) report on “ideas, issues, concerns and the like that can inform and lay the groundwork for the conversations of our next academic year (2015-16).”

The working group was asked to consider the idea of faculty in residence/affiliation in all dorms, programs and practices that should be adopted across the entire system, and actions that should be avoided in order to “preserve the differentiated experiences that we now allow.” The group was also asked to extend its conversation beyond just these issues.

The working group met 7 times between December 2014 and 2015.⁴ Five guest speakers joined us during the course of the spring semester: Jim Kramka; Camp Howard; Andrea Ramos-Lewis; Matthew Sinclair; and Michael Brown. This report was drafted by Liz Zechmeister in consultation with the working group members.

Challenges to Programming

Successful programming will respond to and/or take into consideration hurdles that might otherwise undermine efforts at co-curricular engagement. Therefore, we first note two key challenges to enhancing co-curricular programming: lack of space for programming in the non-College Halls residences⁵ and (2) lack of time due to the already numerous demands on students’ schedules.

¹ “College Halls” include the Commons, Warren and Moore, and the “Living-Learning Communities.”

² <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/strategicplan/Academic-Strategic-Plan-for-Vanderbilt-University.pdf>

³ Text in quotes comes from the committee charge conveyed in email by Vice Provost Cyrus.

⁴ Because of the size of the committee and individuals’ schedules, it was a challenge to find times for the entire committee to meet. A subset of the students met with Liz Zechmeister on one occasion outside the full committee meeting, in order to prepare for a committee meeting in which they presented student views on the issues.

⁵ Common space is at a premium and often used by students who are studying; the student committee members report that those students often feel resentful when kicked out for programming events. Yet, this is important given that it is very difficult to draw students out of their residence halls for programming events.

Indeed, it is clear to us that we are approaching a *saturation* point with programming. We have found scant evidence of widespread student interest in more programs, especially those which are faculty-driven/centered. Therefore, success in refining or adding programming will be found in building carefully targeted programs that respond to student interests and that build bridges to existing programs, activities, and groups.

We identified several over-arching solutions to these challenges of space and time:

Space solutions: Use space creatively (e.g., furniture rearrangement such as queuing tables along walls), create new uses for already existing spaces (e.g., converting a dorm room into a programming space or into an office space for an affiliated faculty member/professional student), and/or adopt non-hall space (e.g., “supper clubs” at dining halls or meetings in other spaces on campus⁶).

Time Solutions: Cultivate programming that is student-centered and focused on “hot button” topics selected by students and curate existing resources, such as ties with student groups who already programming and can mobilize members. Drop-In, flexible, and small-group programs often work well and should be kept in mind in programming. Consider co-branding programs as both co-curricular and something else, such as service (which can be attractive to some students), in order to increase interest.

Some additional barriers to co-curricular involvement include incomplete information among those planning events with respect to options for using dining services (e.g., meal swipes and menu planning) and access to spaces outside the residences for program; difficulty in connecting with faculty interested in engaging with students in co-curricular activities; and need for mechanisms through which to connect with student groups on campus whose events draw residents away from hall-oriented programs.

Proposals for New Programming

Undergraduate life at Vanderbilt is replete with opportunities for extra-curricular and co-curricular involvement. This is a challenge, yet it is also an *opportunity* to the degree that there are many co-curricular opportunities already in place that are under-utilized by undergraduate students – e.g., research programs (speakers, conferences, panels) sponsored by departments that generally attract graduate students and faculty but could be attended by more undergraduate students if bridges were made or incentives were offered.

We propose for consideration three types of programs that could be put in place to increase co-curricular engagement. For any of these three, if priority is to be placed on addressing gaps between the College Halls and non-College Halls, eligibility could be given only to those in non-College Halls. As our charge was to develop ideas, we do want to note that prior to launching any of these programmatic efforts, more research should be conducted to determine interest and to further refine and improve the ideas. With that in mind, the three programs are:

1. Co-curricular Fellows Program: Design a program/process through which students can tie-in to research topics and receive recognition for engaging in a series of student-selected co-curricular opportunities on campus (e.g., lectures by Vanderbilt and invited researchers, on-campus panels and research conferences). The student could select from a set of recommended themes (e.g.,

⁶ We note that mobilizing attendance at events for the residence hall outside the hall is difficult and therefore requires careful planning and targeted recruitment.

food studies; environmental sustainability; world politics; literature across the centuries or around the world; STEM success) or establish a new theme. The student would then attend an established number of lectures and once the requirements were met, the student would receive a certificate of accomplishment or other recognition.

If successful, students might then find other students with similar interests and grow into “traveling learning communities”. To facilitate faculty/grad-student interaction, it might be possible to assign a faculty or graduate student mentor to each group (or individual topic area). That individual’s role, at a minimum, would be to help individual students identify additional ways to engage in that specific topic on campus.⁷

We recognize that competing demands on students’ time may make this program attractive to only a small subset of students. However, there are ways to design the program to increase its chances for success. For example, we recommend a central faculty advisor to this program, in order to establish a clear faculty role in facilitating the program and in coordinating with Residential Education to implement the program. In addition, we suggest direct tie-ins to departments, which might include offering course credit or simply recognition and guidance to “Co-Curricular Fellows.” Finally, use of a title such as “Co-Curricular Fellow” is another idea we discussed that could serve to increase the attractiveness of this program.⁸

2. Co-curricular Supper Clubs: A series of “supper clubs” around themes selected by students, to which faculty and/or graduate/professional students are assigned; the supper clubs meet occasionally in the dining halls.⁹ These could be incentivized through meal credits. Topics for supper clubs could include themes related to food and sustainability, as an example of a topic that came up several times in the group’s discussions¹⁰; other topics that map on to “trans-institutional” structures might be encouraged to fit with that pillar of the strategic plan. This could be tied into the above-mentioned program and/or operate as a stand-alone program.
3. Extending Connections to First Year Houses: A set of mechanisms that increase the extent to which the identity of and attachment to the first year house is deliberately carried through to students after that first year on campus. This provides a way to “curate” from existing programming, by inviting “alums” from first year halls back to participate in programming in those halls.¹¹ One idea the group discussed was the designation of a set of “marshalls” from each upper-class year per Commons house. Marshalls would help direct “alums” back to the Commons houses for co-curricular programs.

⁷ There is a similar program run through AnchorLink and few students engage in it; however, that program does not have the same co-curricular focus and the “reward and recognition” system differs.

⁸ Addressing another pillar of the strategic plan, it could be that *trans-institutional* designs for engagement in this program are particularly encouraged.

⁹ Food draws participants, but food as a reward or food as an expectation is not ideal. Food often plays a key role in our society in community gatherings and bonding and an orientation on food can become a platform on which to inject co-curricular programming and learning.

¹⁰ A related idea is an “active food program” – one that incorporates academic research on food sources, sustainability, nutrition, and cooking.

¹¹ But, note that we lack data on transfer student preferences (do they prefer to keep their own identity as an “eleventh house” or would they like to be sorted into one of the 10 first year houses?).

Proposal for a Co-Curricular Engagement Position

Given the extent to which co-curricular and other programming already exists and given information and other barriers to drawing students to these opportunities and new programs such as those described above, we propose the creation a Co-curricular Engagement Position for a person designated as an outreach staffer for Residential Education / Dean of Students Office. The group discussed that this person might be a full-time staffer or could be a part-time graduate student, depending on the scope of work and need for continuity.

The person in this position would be charged with following-up and expanding on information offered in August orientations/trainings to RAs, etc., and acting as a bridge to and facilitator of co-curricular programming (by finding opportunities, distributing information on dining options, space availability, and funding support through the Additional Funding Request program already in place; establishing mechanisms to make things easier on student planners; identifying shared interests, hot topics, etc.). Resources could be attached to this office/position, for example in order to offer incentives to student groups to plan co-curricular events in conjunction with residence halls on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday evenings (for example); resources could also be attached to this office to support small, scale co-curricular engagement programs (e.g., supper clubs or single-event, small group programs on issues of the day involving faculty and/or grad/professional students).

The person in this position could also be tasked with helping to develop programs that tie-in to or are developed in partnership with already existing student groups on campus, which can be useful in drawing student engagement. If funds are available, student groups might be incentivized to make minor adjustments to their programming (increasing the learning component, inviting a faculty member or graduate student to be a guest at an event, or changing the time/day of the activity) in order to transition a planned activity to a co-curricular activity.

The person in this position could conceivably also help to publicize and recruit into the above-proposed co-curricular fellows program. For example, by working with GEO, students returning from study abroad programs could be identified and offered the opportunity to develop a co-curricular engagement group and plan that centers around a topic that they engaged in during their study abroad. This would accomplish another important goal at our university, which is to create more bridges between study abroad and campus-learning.

The person in this position could also be charged with identifying regional and other professional conferences at which undergraduate students could be involved in presenting research, and could work to distribute that information, identify sources of support, etc. The person in this position could also work to develop opportunities for such presentations on campus. With the development of immersion programming, there will be more “final products” ready for presentation.

Proposal to Continue the Working Group

We recommend the continuation of a CEECH-type working group/committee to support co-curricular programming (discussion of ideas and ways to support it) on campus. It is also possible that the group could be converted into an advising/resource board after such a position is inaugurated. The working group could work on the implementation of the above ideas and on revisions and extensions, such as finding more ways to bring in the graduate/professional students more.

Addressing the Question of Faculty Affiliation with Non-College Hall Residences

We believe that the process of converting dorm rooms into faculty residences in these halls is cost-prohibitive and is unappealing to many students who select into these halls. The working group instead identified two ways that faculty (or graduate/professional students) could be affiliated with the halls:

1. Small scale idea: affiliation with faculty who live near campus who would be willing to sponsor meals at their homes a few times a year; the events could address a “hot button” topic and bring faculty and students into conversation over it.
2. Large-scale idea: affiliation of a faculty member who is given office space within a hall; faculty-student engagement could be fostered through the holding of open office hours and hosting drop-in events.

But note, given how residences are selected (with many students selecting non-College Halls out of a desire for independence) and given that this would require specific faculty commitment, we note that more discussion with students and faculty would be necessary before deciding to pursue either.

Miscellany

A number of additional, related topics were discussed in the CEECH meetings. These include:

- A. Brick and mortar asymmetries exist across the College Halls and the non-College Halls and are a concern to students, especially those living in non-College Halls.

Recommendation: Resources should be put toward freshening the space in the non-College Halls residences. For example, community spaces could be evaluated in terms of their use and for potential repurposing (e.g., patio space outside Towers could be used but currently access to the decks is difficult with respect to pathways). One idea that is that financial support could be allocated to a committee of students representing the non-College Halls to determine which spaces to facelift.

- B. Community-building is an important goal in any programming.

Recommendation: Focus programming efforts around developing mechanisms and opportunities that build communities around interests (and not necessarily in hall-specific ways). Each of the above program proposals --the “traveling learning communities” idea; the faculty/grad student/undergraduate hot topic “suppers” idea; and efforts to cultivate and build on the first year house identity/access to programming – was developed with community-building in mind.

- C. Existing programs in place or in development by Residential Education that fit the mission of the CEECH working group should be encouraged. An example is the new deliberate programming around transfer students and the creation of an LLC experience for an expanding subset of transfer students, with faculty/grad student tie-in/involvement.

Recommendation: Review and consider expansions to co-curricular programming already in place or in development.

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