5-27-2020

Being There, and Not / In My Room: Being Members of a Residential College, at Home

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ENGL 109

27 May 2020

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According to Rebecca Chopp, president of Swarthmore College, "a residential educational setting serves as an incubator for intellectual agility and supports the creation of new models of engagement to help both individuals and communities survive and flourish" (Chopp 17). Carleton College, among many other highly-regarded liberal arts schools, strives to cultivate such an environment. By Chopp's standards, their approach has been successful; but, if you really want to hear from an expert about the impact of a residential college, just ask a student who is currently dispelled from one—a student who is sitting in the bedroom of her childhood home rather than her dorm room.

As is hinted in the name "*residential* college", the most developmental "incubator" on campus is the one in which we shower, sleep, and microwave ramen noodles: the dorm hall. During the winter of 2020, students around the world were forced to vacate our dorm halls in response to the Coronavirus pandemic. It was with sadness in our hearts that the Carleton community awoke one March morning to President Steven Poskanzer's email informing us that Spring Term would be taught remotely. We were given six days to pack our things and return home. The two of us writing this paper had the privilege of rooming together prior to the evacuation. Doing so taught us a great deal about responsibility and balance. We began to

depend on each other and on our shared space. Returning home meant disrupting this routine, and we have since detected a clear shift in our motivation levels. The upheaval as students return to our childhood bedrooms—and subsequently to our childhood habits—proves that online school is not a sustainable alternative to life on campus; without the presence of hallmates and roommates, students are less able to foster intellectual, emotional, and social growth.

Colleges encourage (and often require) students to live in dorm halls because doing so helps us evolve in our critical thinking, moral and civil character, and ability to use knowledge to improve the world—three principles which Chopp considers foundational to a residential liberal arts education (Chopp 13). In any coinhabited setting, some community standards must be put into place. Before moving in together, the two of us, like most college students, had only ever lived with our families; while there are certainly community standards at home, we did not collaborate in establishing them—they existed before us, and we were raised to obey them like rules. Upon arriving in our dorm halls freshman year, we realized just how different the dynamic would be. On the first night, we sat down with our entire floor to discuss each other's needs. Then, we went back to our room and did the same thing (eventually turning our expectations into a decorative poster, which is greatly missed). This process involves a great deal of communication and compromise—two skills which play an important role in Chopp's principles; a critical thinker cannot make an impact if she is unable to communicate her ideas, cannot develop moral and civil character without being willing to compromise, and cannot use knowledge to improve the world without experience to support her claims. This last point suggests another reason why residential colleges are so integral—one which Chopp does not acknowledge: by living together, students are presented with the opportunity to learn directly from one another outside of the classroom.

College living conditions—particularly those involving roommates and busy hallways—improve not only the life skills of those involved, but also the intellectual and academic acumen. Roommates are not just friends or acquaintances with whom we live, they are also scholarly peers (just look at the two of us). Chopp puts significant emphasis on the notion of "social learning": "we 'understand content through conversation and grounded interaction around problems or actions'" (Chopp 19). Unlike high school where we are exposed to such interaction, in college we are immersed in it—and there is nowhere more immersive than the dorm room. Indeed, in responding to the question "how are first year student room assignments determined?", Carleton makes a point to state that "part of the learning that takes place at a residential college is meeting and living with people who are different from you" (Hartwig 1). The two of us have a lot in common, but our differences sparked the most memorable conversations—conversations which challenged us for days at a time, as there was literally no escaping. Flashforward to the spring of 2020: confined to our separate bedrooms, if we wish to avoid these conversations we can just shoot a text and cancel the call altogether.

Now, living in different and distant spaces, many of us in our childhood bedrooms, we are all having to adjust to our "new normals." Some parents and students may argue that readjusting to family life, coordinating entirely new schedules, and struggling to find privacy are the most pressing matters for families quarantined together (Levin). More significant, we think, is the fact that we lose the opportunity to learn from our peers outside of the classroom. At home, we are not expected to take part in developing our community standards, which is a large part of the social growth we experience in our dorms. We are expected to follow the expectations already laid out for us. Additionally, at home we are living with people very similar to ourselves, so we are rarely forced to rethink these living expectations. Because of the guidelines we live

under at home, as well as the lack of diversity, college students do not need to practice communication and compromise quite as much at home as we do in our dorms, living with people very different from ourselves. Living at home both stunts us from continuing to grow our community living skills and makes us feel as if we are reverting back to younger versions of ourselves—which is, in fact, the complete opposite of what most young adults want out of our college experience (Levin). Levin explains how some young adults who moved home for quarantine have again been subjected to the same rules of our youth—including curfews, chores, and our parents' watchful eyes. We agree that we feel like kids again, back in our sheltered homes. When kids are young, these practices are necessary. But as teenagers turn into young adults, we less need to be subjected to rules and more need to be exposed to the outside world. This is one reason we moved out to go to college: to be exposed to more of the world and have the freedom to explore it. We want to continue to develop our lives by interacting with different people, which can rarely happen in our childhood bedrooms.

Trying to recreate dorm and campus life at home is vitally important, especially for students' mental health, but unfortunately, is not a sustainable practice. Most colleges are hosting online events and activities in an attempt to help students maintain their social connections. These events also cannot ever truly teach us the same lessons that living with our peers would. Carleton has hosted several trivia nights and has even replaced the beloved tradition of Friday Flowers with a virtual version through email. We think these activities do a great job of combating loneliness; personally, we feel so connected to our friends when we receive a Friday Flower or see people's faces at virtual events. And of course, social media and cell phones help students stay connected to one another on a more casual, daily basis. However, something that must be taken into account is that all of these attempts to replicate campus life can be exhausting.

Our professors talk about zoom fatigue in the context of our academic classes. Trying to interact with other people through video calls makes us feel tired, isolated, and unmotivated. The same effects occur regardless of whether we are learning, hosting traditions, or trying to foster a sense of community at home. Even when trying to engage in an enjoyable activity, we feel the fatigue of doing so virtually. After a day of online classes, texting friends, and doing homework, the last thing we want to do is get back on our computers to socialize. While joining in to one of these events might be a brief hour of normalcy, it reminds us of how abnormal everything else is and teaches us that we cannot continue living like this.

Simply by asking anyone who went to a residential college, you will surely hear stories about their roommates, dorm life, and how much they loved living on campus. But, beyond the individual experiences we have at college, dorm rooms teach us a great deal about how to form a community even with people incredibly different from ourselves; the lessons we learn in dorm rooms simply cannot be replicated from our childhood bedrooms, try as we might. This proves that if we wish to continue to learn from our peers both academically and socially, we must continue the tradition of residential liberal arts colleges. As Chopp points out, one of the reasons to maintain the "residential" in "residential liberal arts" is "what it can offer in a world in which learning to navigate the new may be far more important than ability to master the old" (Chopp). That is, to see the true value in dorm living, we should look beyond our individual experiences and towards the lessons we learn. In the age of social distancing, face masks, and banishment from campus, students are more than ever understanding why residential colleges are so important.

Works Cited

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