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Rewinding forward: What James A. Wallace's  
1980 essay on "the Philosophy of University  
Housing" tells us about where we've been, where  
we are, and where we're heading

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## Rewinding Forward: What James A. Wallace's 1980 Essay "The Philosophy of University Housing" Tells Us About Where We've Been, Where We Are, and Where We're Heading



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## Phi-los-o-phy [fi-los-uh-fee]

1. the rational investigation of the truths and principles of being, knowledge, or conduct;
  2. a system of philosophical doctrine;
  3. the critical study of the basic principles and concepts of a particular branch of knowledge, especially with a view to improving or reconstituting them;
  4. a system of principles for guidance in practical affairs.
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Why do we do what we do? Why is what we do important? What are the best practices to ensure that our “why” is accomplished? These are questions of philosophy—a topic of immense importance since the “why” behind our work influences everything about the “how” and “what” of daily affairs in the world of college and university student housing practice. The system of principles that guide our work is in a constant state of flux as the profession engages in a collective process of self-discovery guided by important questions about the purposes of housing students on a college or university campus. Of course, this discernment process emerges alongside a similar development taking place within the higher education enterprise in general and the student affairs profession in particular. As John Dalton and Pamela Crosby (2011) recently observed, “Clarifying the enduring mission and purpose for student affairs is also complicated by the many rapid changes confronting higher education that continually pose new priorities and functions in student affairs” (p. 2). Thus, contrasting our present with our past often provides important cues about what the future might hold. As such, *The Journal of College and University Student Housing* provides readers with a look backwards into the future through historical perspective essays. In this issue, we tackle what is arguably the most important question we must continually confront: Why?

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## REWIND

In 1980, James A. Wallace authored an essay in *The Journal of College and University Student Housing* titled “The Philosophy of University Housing.” His essay highlights how far we have come as a profession, yet confronts us with the need to reflect upon whether or not we have adapted as adroitly as necessary to best support students and their educational needs. In his essay, Wallace dissects the articulated goals of one housing program, at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, and argues that the example offers a template for understanding the general philosophical disposition of the industry. The 1980 stated philosophy was conveyed as follows:

University Housing has as its goal to be an integral part of the educational opportunities at Southern Illinois University; provide the best living accommodations possible in terms of physical facilities for students; provide ample, well-planned meals; and provide a living environment which will enable students to grow socially as well as academically.

University Housing recognizes that learning extends beyond the classroom and continues on into the area in which the student resides. Students must therefore be aided in developing adequate standards of behavior in cooperation with others; and, respect for the rights, privileges, and properties of all members of the community. (p. 23)

At the heart of Wallace’s analysis of this statement, he emphasizes a philosophical underpinning that acknowledges that there are “intangible benefits” of living in an on-campus residence beyond the provision of safe and comfortable facilities and good services, including dining. Placing students together

provides opportunities to interact with peers more intensely than if they were living off campus—and such experiences likely enhance interpersonal skills, shape values, and ultimately influence behavior. In fact, Wallace suggested that living on campus was tantamount to “registering for an action course based on everyday living” (1980, p. 24). Embedded in Wallace’s perspective is the assumption that environmental conditions influence behavior, that educational programming strengthens intellectual life, and that learning is a process enhanced by living among those with diverse value systems, including divergent religious, political, socioeconomic, and racial backgrounds. Particularly interesting, despite these assumptions, is that the general theme of diversity is not explicitly stated within the philosophical statement.

In many ways, Wallace, reflecting the views of the housing industry in 1980, was reiterating what John Henry Newman emphasized in 1873 in *The Idea of a University*, when he wrote that when students gather together, “keen, open-hearted, sympathetic, and observant . . . and freely mix with each other, they are sure to learn from one another, even if there be no one to teach them” (1873, p. 9). The philosophical foundation that Wallace emphasizes, however, conveys the many iterations of advancement in residential life that have occurred between 1873 and 1980. Most notable is Wallace’s emphasis on the importance of providing more intentional interventions that influence the physical and social design of such experiences. Indeed, placing students together in a residential setting is a learning intervention in itself, but Wallace conveys the maturing philosophical belief that housing professionals can and should intervene in the experience to strengthen outcomes.

By the 1980s, long after Newman's poignant observation, many individuals had been infused into these residential environments to teach students in different ways. A cadre of student affairs professionals, including residence hall directors and resident advisors, had been embedded into the fabric of residence

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hall living in order to manage behavioral expectations, offer educational programs, and keep facilities in good working order. These efforts, for sure, were improvements for education, but they were also combined with practices that detracted from ideal learning environments. The most obvious of these detractors included the large occupancy high-rise residence halls that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s undergirded by the value of efficiency above other considerations.

The era in which Wallace was writing was one when housing professionals crafted spaces and conditions that provided for student development in preparation for life after college. Wallace's essay clearly commu-

nicates the predominant paradigm of 20th century student affairs—the student development model—birthed primarily from the field of developmental psychology. There are also clear vestiges from the earliest framework guiding student affairs—the student services paradigm—that emphasized the overall welfare of students by providing supervision and services to support the educational endeavors of students while at college. Why? As Wallace writes, "Incorporated into this philosophy are the intangible benefits derived from the socialization process that takes place in the residence hall environment" (1980, p. 23). This socialization, managed by residence hall staff, transformed dorms into educational environments called residence halls.

As noted earlier, Wallace articulated the intangible benefits of living on campus. Living among students representing a diversity of racial, ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds is something that research over the past 30 years has validated as an incredibly important variable for student learning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The time in which Wallace's article was written does not fully explain why the theme of diversity was omitted. For decades the housing profession has embraced a philosophical disposition sensitive to social change, especially with regard to the appreciation of human difference. Perhaps one retrospective and surprising void in the Southern Illinois philosophical statement is in this vein. Multiculturalism, a global perspective, and participation in a diverse community are fundamental values today, yet they were only emerging in the 1980s.

The maturity of the student affairs profession since 1980 has provided a wealth of

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empirical evidence solidifying anecdotes and hunches about the impact of residential living on students and their development during college. Many studies assert that residential campuses boost retention, produce more enthusiastic and connected alumni, afford admissions counselors an important marketing advantage, and enhance student satisfaction. Some of the most widely known and admired studies of college experience (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) collected longitudinal data to examine student outcomes. Among the many findings, students living on campus are more likely to obtain higher grade point averages, report more interpersonal contacts with faculty and peers, and are more likely to persist and graduate (Pascarella & Terenzini).

Despite such impressive findings with respect to student growth and development, the prevailing wisdom of the student development paradigm has not been without criticism. As John Dalton and Pamela Crosby (2011) recently asserted,

Some critics challenged the usefulness and relevance of the student development model in light of contemporary challenges facing higher education. . . . An expertise based on a foundation of developmental theory has limited practical value in the everyday work of student affairs, is largely irrelevant to the major changes facing higher education, and is little understood and valued by colleagues in the higher education setting. (p. 4)

Certainly criticism is common to all approaches solidly anchored in philosophical assumptions. Testing critiques against the hopes and aspirations of any given educational philosophy requires important discernment, the kind that does not too quickly abandon an approach nor

dismiss the voices of concern. In the case of the critique summarized by Dalton and Crosby, the arguments highlight questions of practical value, relevancy, and understanding. When an idea is slow to be understood or embraced by colleagues, two questions seem worth serious consideration: Does the philosophy hold merit for the future? How effective have we been in translating the philosophy and its relevance to those with whom we work in the university community? The wealth of evidence since Wallace's 1980 study sounds a provocative "yes" to the first question and a "somewhat" to the second, for there is still work to be done. Whatever the causes for debate or dissent, they spur all of us to a grand reminder: that we must continue to adapt tightly held philosophical drivers in light of our new learning along the way.

So where do we go from here? Wallace, drawing from emerging literature in 1980, prophetically predicted that housing would become more coupled with the academic community,

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with informal learning more intentionally intertwined with the curriculum of colleges and universities, and that the large, efficient dormitories would be replaced with facilities more conducive to learning. He wrote, “If the university separates learning from living experiences, it is teaching the lesson that intellectuality is separate from real life. If it teaches by the condition of its buildings that ugliness and overcrowding are acceptable as the price to pay for efficiency, then all the words in the classroom cannot counteract that lesson” (1980, p. 25).

## FORWARD

Following the publication of Wallace’s article, many college and university housing programs have modeled innovation and flexibility. Many residential environments have been adapted to help facilitate the curricular aims of their college or university campus; and progressive living-learning programs, freshman interest groups, theme communities, and residential colleges represent the future that Wallace projected. Even so, many more campuses are only now beginning to embrace an academic integration model of housing. And even on campuses where such progressive programs exist, they typically represent only a small portion of the repertoire of a housing system’s inventory.

Many argue that a new paradigm in student affairs is well underway and that this model is redefining the “why” of residential life, positioning student affairs in the mainstream purpose of higher education—student learning (Dalton & Crosby, 2011; Schroeder, 1996; Tagg, 2003). Such a transition requires that we build on our recent efforts and recognize the positive effects of faculty and student affairs collaborations that have been solidly

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established through research. As such, we must acknowledge that the classroom and the cocurriculum are complementary, mutually interdependent, and critically important to the growth, development, and learning of students and that classrooms can infuse the out-of-classroom experience with academic content (the curriculum), which in turn can be practiced and understood at a deeper level through the cocurriculum. Robert Maynard Hutchins (1936) writes in *The Higher Learning in America*, “Thinking cannot proceed divorced from the facts and from experience” (pp. 89-90). While a few faculty and student affairs educators may believe that real learning happens primarily either in the classroom or through cocurricular involvement, this thinking is contrary to the preponderance of evidence that the best learning occurs when the curriculum and cocurriculum are intentionally united. In *How College Affects Students*, Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini (2005) carefully synthesize decades of research that encourages institutions to combine the expertise of student affairs educators (in adult development, learning styles, cognition, and

human communication) with the subject matter specialties of the faculty. The goal is to point all resources in the direction of student learning. In this way, faculty expertise informs student affairs practice, and student affairs practice informs faculty work with students.

As the housing profession has developed, we have become a mixture of philosophies that undergird our practice. Residence halls are powerful tools for advancing student learning, but our philosophies, both personally and institutionally, have a significant influence on what facilities we build, who we assign to live there, and how we enact operations. Shushok, Scales, Sriram, and Kidd (2011) emphasize this point in their recent article on the mental models or theories of residential life that guide our work: “The assumptions upon which residential life is conceptualized on a campus, therefore, affect a variety of important outcomes. However, our underlying or subconscious assumptions, theories, or philosophies of residential life are often different than the ones we speak out loud” (p. 14). What Wallace knew in 1980 is true today, that the philosophical premises under which housing administrators operate define “their role in the personal and intellectual development of students” (p. 25). Fast forward for a moment to the year 2040. What will the evidence shout when practitioners 30 years from now are trying to determine the answer to the timeless question, “Why did they do it that way, and what now can we learn from them?”

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## Discussion Questions

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1. The authors offer a snapshot of an essay written by James A. Wallace (1980) on the philosophy of student housing in order to situate the housing profession in both the past and present. They contend that in the past there was a lack of emphasis on diversity issues within the academy, while today's campuses are awash with a growing diversity of students unimagined in the early 20th century. Given the importance of this issue, how can housing and student affairs staff collaborate with faculty to meet the needs of diverse students? Given the importance of this aspect of student residential programs, how do you design programs such as themed living-learning communities that ensure that diversity is always in fact present and used as a learning tool?
2. Consider the residential cocurriculum activities offered at your institution. What internal and external barriers or hurdles exist that prevent these activities from becoming truly complementary to the academic curriculum?
3. The diversity of our students challenges us to meet learners where they are and to find new ways to meet their needs while maintaining a living-learning environment that is positive, supportive, and productive of educational goals. What can be done to assess student learning outcomes in housing with diverse clientele?
4. *Learning Reconsidered 2* (2006) advocates for seamless learning and defines learning as a "complex, holistic, multi-centric activity that occurs throughout and across the college experience" (p. 5). How can collaboration among all educators (student affairs staff and faculty alike) be enhanced within your institution?

*Discussion questions developed by  
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