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June, 1995

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Community Contracting at Mankato State University

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High-rise residence halls present unique problems for residential life staff. Since structures of typical high-rises, such as single-loaded corridors, are not conducive to community development, creative programs to encourage the growth and development of individuals within these residence halls must be implemented. Having already been utilized effectively at other institutions (Scheuermann & Grandner, 1986), community contracting seems to be a reasonable strategy to consider.

Community contracting was introduced to one of three residential complexes located on the campus of Mankato State University at the beginning of Fall Quarter 1993. All 24 floors of Gage Complex, a two-tower, 12-story facility, participated in the contracting process. Residential life staff observed dramatic, anecdotal changes in student behavior following the strategy's implementation.

Philosophical and theoretical frameworks as well as the contracting procedure are discussed herein. Efficacy of the community contracting process is examined by comparing the number of student conduct violations during Fall Quarters 1991, 1992, and 1993 for all three residential complexes.

Theoretical Basis

Boyer (1990) identifies six components of positive communities: purposeful, open, just, disciplined, caring, and celebrative. Mankato State University's Department of Residential Life recognizes Boyer's components of a positive community in its mission statement.

Through the community contracting process implemented at MSU's Gage Complex, students set GPA goals, explicitly state behavioral expectations, and plan celebrative programs when goals are met. The community contract itself allows students a vehicle through which they may discuss what it means to be an educationally purposeful community where expectations are well-defined and the well-being of each member of the community is supported.

In a study by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Boyer (1987) suggests that students are requesting more guidance. Boyer (1987) also states that students need behavioral standards to clarify expectations, and participatory governance as an approach to developing community and balancing community with individuality. Through discussion and democratic decision-making, well-designed community contracts encourage these ends.

Implementation of Community Contracting

Two one-hour floor meetings were scheduled within the first week of the quarter. Resident Advisors (RAs) were provided written guidance for each meeting. Prior to the initial encounter, RAs contacted returning residents to hear about positive and negative aspect of the previous year's community. They also discussed community contracting and encouraged these returning residents to exert positive pressure on their peers regarding the community contracting effort.

During the first floor meeting, a contract outline was introduced to all residents. Each issue was discussed using returning residents as facilitators. Positive peer pressure was exerted to arrive at tentative decisions concerning noise, visitation, cleanliness, and alcohol use. At the conclusion of the meeting, each resident submitted his/her GPA goal for the quarter. All GPA goals were later averaged by the RA to obtain a community GPA goal.

During the second floor meeting, residents discussed the academic focus of the floor, the

GPA goal of the contract, a list of academically-focused floor programs, and its study-lounge usage/noise policy. They then proceeded to vote on each of the tentative decisions suggested for inclusion in the community contract during the previous gathering. The community contract was completed and ratified by students at the completion of this meeting.

Evaluating Community Contracting

GPA's for all floors and halls are computed by the Residential Life office each quarter. The number and nature of conduct violations are reported by all hall directors each quarter. Information utilized in this study was, therefore, readily available for analysis.

All three residence halls on campus had slightly higher GPA's during Fall Quarter 1993 than during Fall Quarter 1992. Between groups, examination of gender, year in school, and residence hall indicated no significant difference in GPA between contracted and noncontracted residents. Community contracting appears to have had little effect on GPA's in the short-term.

Since behavioral changes may need to be in place longer than an academic quarter before positive movements in GPA's are noticed, the academic component of this contracting process was expected to take longer to show results. Significant improvements of contracted student GPA's were anticipated, however, when the effects of this new contracting process were examined following Winter Quarter 1994.

Vast improvements were noted in the number of conduct cases reported among contracted residents versus violations reported in other MSU residential complexes. Not only did the proportion of infractions relative to the population of each residence hall show important changes, but proportionally the number of conduct cases in the high rise were similar to the number of conduct cases in the other residential complexes for the first time in at least two years.

The total proportion of conduct cases remained equal among the contracted residents between Fall Quarter 1991 and Fall Quarter 1992. A large decrease was seen for Fall Quarter 1993, upon implementation of the community

contracting process. A decrease was not, however, evidenced in noncontracted residence halls. Violations in those two complexes remained the same between Fall Quarter 1992 and Fall Quarter 1993.

Conduct cases involving noise and/or alcohol constituted the majority of all violations for all three years. Primary changes among the contracted residents during Fall Quarter 1993 can be traced to large reductions in "alcohol and noise" and "noise" offenses.

Issues related to alcohol and noise, including the effects of each on academics and a sense of community, were discussed in length during both contracting meetings. These data suggest that discussions altered the number of cases heard by hall directors in the community contracted residence halls.

Discussion

The efficacy of the academic component of this community contracting process cannot be firmly established from study results thus far. Data collection will continue Winter Quarter 1994. It is anticipated that improvements in contracted resident GPA's will be documented as the program contains throughout the year.

Behavioral changes, especially related to alcohol and noise problems, were evident. Students appear to be drinking less in Gage residence halls. They also appear to be more cognizant of their noise levels. This decrease may also be attributed to students confronting each other about noise, since this was stressed in the contracting meetings.

Community contracting appears to hold promise as a proactive way to address alcohol and noise concerns in high-rise residential facilities. This is likely true for several reasons. First, students hear from their peers, not residential life staff, in regard to behaviors that are acceptable for the community. Second, resident consensus regarding behavioral standards brought about contractual policies. Finally, peer confrontations regarding noise violations are encouraged. An established procedure for confronting inappropriate behaviors is part of the contract.

While this evidence is far from conclusive, results of this analysis support the continuation of the community contracting process at Mankato State University's Gage Complex. The discussions involved in the process appear to have an effect on student behavior. Continued assessment of the program is essential, but preliminary results indicate positive behavioral change.

References

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