

# STUDENT AFFAIRS LEADER

NOVEMBER 15, 2007

VOL 35, NUMBER 22

## Against Theme Halls

*Robert O'Hara*

Consider these recent developments in the world of residential life:

- A Virginia university, under the auspices of a campus diversity program, sets off a special wing of a dormitory and makes it available only to female engineering students.
- A top-fifty California university designates a special residential area for students with an academic interest in "interpersonal relationships."
- A Massachusetts university tells all its first-year nursing students that they must live together in a single residence hall.
- A large Midwestern university opens a new multimillion-dollar residential complex to great acclaim, but scientists need not apply: it's just for arts and humanities majors.

Theme halls like these — dormitory spaces that bring together all the art students or all the science students or all the athletes or all the nurses — have been proliferating in American higher education for a number of years.

Born of a desire to repair the social decay that has spread through campus life since the 1960s, these well-intentioned programs are better than the status quo

that has long existed on many campuses, and they are certainly better than nothing.

But theme halls are misguided, and there are intellectual and practical reasons to reject them.

### Why they are a bad idea

Theme halls are intellectually misguided because the aim of higher education should be to integrate, not segregate. Universities should work to ensure that students reap the benefits of living in a diverse environment; they should not suppress those benefits by putting already like-minded people together and screening them off from people who think differently.

It is fundamental to the education of free citizens that people with different interests and backgrounds be encouraged to get to know each other so they will be able to learn from their differences. Theme halls stand in the way of this. Grouping like with like is easy to grasp and easy to sell, but especially in education, what's easy isn't always best.

If we segregate students according to interest, who will play Mozart in the athletes' hall? Who will write epic poetry in the science hall? Who will program computers in the arts hall? Would you want to be treated by a nurse who spent four years in college living only with nurses and no other kinds of people?

Theme halls also create practical problems that give rise to administrative bloat and student disaffection. What should be

done with students who switch majors or change interests? Are they required to move and disrupt their social network? If not, do they prevent another student interested in the theme from being admitted? And who polices all this to make sure everyone is keeping with the program?

We should be encouraging students, especially freshmen, to explore all the intellectual offerings their universities provide, not discouraging them from doing so out of fear that intellectual exploration might disrupt their living arrangements.

It may be argued that theme halls can be configured so they don't really present a barrier to anyone: if a science student wants to join the arts hall, she is allowed to do so. But then why bother with the theme at all?

On some campuses, students may well have a legitimate complaint that there aren't enough opportunities to get to know other people with similar academic interests. If that's so, then the problem needs to be addressed within the academic departments. Does the university have a biology club and a philosophy club and a nursing club and an English club with regular meetings? Does each department host social events for its students?

The academic departments, not the campus residential areas, should be the primary places where students with similar academic interests are brought together.

*continued on page 2*



President - William Haight

billh@magnapubs.com

Publisher - David Burns

dburns@magnapubs.com

Editor - Catherine Stover

catherine.stover@magnapubs.com

Creative Services Manager - Mark Manghera

Art Director - Deb Lovelien

Customer Service Manager - Mark Beyer

#### Contributing Editors:

Arthur Sandeen, University of Florida;  
Margaret Barr, Northwestern University;  
Kathleen Manning, University of Vermont

#### Editorial Board:

Laura Harrison, Stanford University;  
Davis Jenkins, Columbia University;  
Shawn McGuirk, Fitchburg State College;  
Kimberly Novak, Arizona State University,  
Marjorie Savage, University of Minnesota,  
Twin Cities;  
Rick Winslow, William Jewell College

*Student Affairs Leader* (ISSN 0300-6646) is published semi-monthly by Magna Publications Inc., 2718 Dryden Drive, Madison, WI 53704. Phone 800-433-0499 or 608-246-3590. Email: [cust-serv@magnapubs.com](mailto:cust-serv@magnapubs.com). Website: [www.magnapubs.com](http://www.magnapubs.com). Fax: 608-246-3597. One-year subscription: \$169. (Substantial discounts are available for multiple subscriptions.) Photocopying or other reproduction in whole or in part without written permission is prohibited. POSTMASTER: Send change of address to *Student Affairs Leader*, 2718 Dryden Drive, Madison, WI 53704. Copyright © 2007, Magna Publications Inc.

To order back issues, call Customer Service at 800-433-0499. Back issues cost \$20.00 each (\$149 for the previous year's complete collection), plus shipping and handling in the US. You can pay with MasterCard, VISA, Discover, or American Express.

Authorization to photocopy items for internal or personal use of specific clients is granted by *Student Affairs Leader* for users registered with the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) Transactional Reporting Service, provided that \$1.00 per page is paid directly to CCC, 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923; Phone 978-750-8400; [www.copyright.com](http://www.copyright.com). For those organizations that have been granted a photocopy license by CCC, a separate system of payment has been arranged.

from page 1

## An alternative arrangement

Is there an alternative to theme halls? Yes: permanent, fully cross-sectional, faculty-led residential colleges that provide the advantages of a small college within the context of a larger institution. This is the organizational model of Oxford and Cambridge Universities in Great Britain and as such is one of the oldest educational arrangements in existence.

Residential college systems based on these models are appearing at more universities every year, and I chronicle this international movement on my website "The Collegiate Way: Residential Colleges and the Renewal of University Life" (<http://collegiateway.org>).

Unlike theme halls, cross-sectional residential colleges — called "houses" at some institutions and familiar to many people through the fictional house system of the Harry Potter novels — are designed to integrate rather than segregate. They bring students and faculty from all departments and disciplines together into stable permanent educational societies.

The residential college system now being planned for the University of Mississippi, for example, was consciously set against the idea of theme halls. "We made a decision not to do 'thematic housing,'" says Provost Carolyn Staton, "because engineering students (for example) are with other engineers all day long in the classroom. They wouldn't get the richness of meeting other people from a wide variety of disciplines."<sup>1</sup>

And this is not just an American view, nor is it restricted to secular public universities. Looking back in 1946 on a hundred years of residential college life in Australia, W.R. Barrett recognized that

"It has been for the good of all that students from various faculties [academic divisions] should be thrown together in the various

associations and activities of [residential] college life. In that atmosphere and environment nothing is exempt from the test of criticism and experience; opinions are sifted and convictions hammered out; men learn from the interplay of thought and action; character and faith are developed; and men are saved from narrowness and exclusiveness, receiving a wider vision for their life's work."<sup>2</sup>

Theme halls have emerged in part from the student-as-customer model of education. If you ask (inexperienced and unreflective) students whether they want to live with other people like themselves, most will say yes. And if that's what our customers want, then that's what we should give them.

But students are not customers, and what they want is not always what they should be given. In creating theme halls, we are teaching students the wrong lessons: we are teaching them that different branches of knowledge don't connect, that liberal education is impossible, and that they should only associate with people like themselves. Theme halls are better than nothing, but they aren't the best we can do.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Castens, E. (2007). "Residential colleges to transform Ole Miss experience." *Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal*, July 26, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Barrett, W.R. (1946). "The warden's letter." Pp. 7–8 in: *The Wilfridian: Special Issue to Commemorate the Centenary of Christ College* (C.C. Cowling, ed.). Hobart: University of Tasmania.

*Robert J. O'Hara is an evolutionary biologist and the author of "The Collegiate Way: Residential Colleges and the Renewal of University Life" (<http://collegiateway.org>).* ●