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Residential Living at UM: Redefining Community in Terms of Diversity and Interdependence

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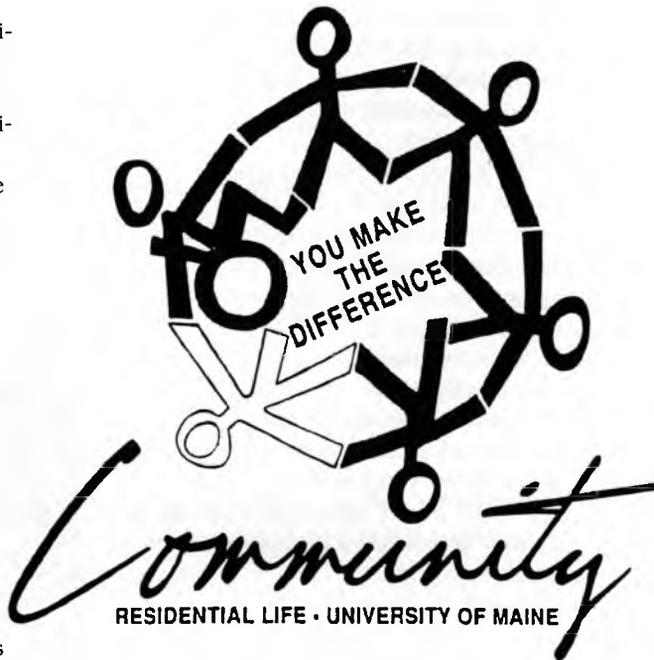
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Residential Living at UM: Redefining Community in Terms of Diversity and Interdependence

When students live on campus, they become participants in a residential community. But unlike traditional views of community in which homogeneousness predominates, on-campus residents this fall are being asked to incorporate differences and welcome all students, while maintaining their individuality.

"Community: You Make the Difference" is the theme chosen for Resident Assistant (RA) orientation and for the residence halls this academic year. It's a focus on mattering and diversity that is pervasive throughout Student Affairs. However, this year in the residence halls, it will be that emphasis on pluralism that will virtually challenge the long-held idea that community living means coming together as one - and giving up individual identities to become one.

"We can teach what it means to be a member of the community," according to University of Maine Residential Life Community Development Coordinator Katie Douglas. "We need to be inten-



tional in our messages about respect for others, the value of diversity and being interdependent in communities."

It is a theme that is setting the tone for residential life for students on university campuses across the country. In Maine, it will be the focus of a

statewide conference of college and university personnel Oct. 26 on campus. Mary Kay Kasper, also a Residential Life community development coordinator, and Douglas last spring presented a workshop at the national conference of the American College Personnel Association in Atlanta on: "Developing and Enhancing Synergistic, Residential Communities: Leading with a Qualitative Perspective." The pair, with the help of UM Residential Life Director Scott Anchors, has authored a chapter: "Developing and Enhancing Residential Communities," in a soon-to-be-published book: Student Housing and Residential Life: A Handbook for Professionals

Committed to the Goals of Student Development, edited by Anchors and Roger Winston Jr., University of Georgia.

In an annual survey of UM's on-campus student population, conducted every year for the past five years, it was found that resident satisfaction is directly related to five factors, including the student's perception of section unity, and the perception that they belong in their section. "There is a good correlation between satisfaction with residence living and a sense of belonging," Kasper said. "That's why it's important that the residence hall staff is creating an environment where students have a sense of belonging.

"So many young people think they'll get an education, go out and make money and live independently but this world isn't that way."

People have traditional viewpoints on community development, according to Douglas, who first became involved in student community development as a graduate student at Ohio State where she received her master's degree in student personnel. "The older definition of community is sameness. But we want people to know that community development means exploring differences and appreciating differences. It doesn't mean that the exploration process will be without conflict. But unlike the older view of a community as utopia, we're

1990 UNIVERSITY OF MAINE RESIDENTIAL LIFE QUALITY OF LIFE SURVEY: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Resident satisfaction is a direct function of:

- Resident/RA, resident/RD role congruence.
- Resident perception of section unity.
- Resident perception that they "belong" in their section.
- Resident perception that policies are enforced.
- Campus area and resident hall

Resident satisfaction appears NOT to be a function of:

- Sex.
- Class.
- Amount of time studying each week.

New first-year students are constructively influenced by the resident hall environment.

- Three-quarters of new first-year students report some concerns about adjusting to their on-campus living arrangement; one-quarter are "very concerned" at the beginning of the fall semester.
- Students who expressed concern in the fall were no less/no more satisfied than others and reported no less/no more "belongingness" in their section than other residents.

saying the developing of a community is hard work, and once you get there, it will be a more vibrant place to be, not necessarily an easy place to be.

"This year's theme has two meanings," Douglas said. "One is a message of inclusion, and the other is that, in the community, you make a difference. Each person matters and each person has significance on campus. It's all part of promoting diversity and continuing multicultural education and pluralism."

The process begins with the RAs, who traditionally have been asked to take on the roles of counselor, programmer and, at times, code enforcement official. This year, under the theme of "Community: You Make the Difference," RAs are being instructed in the means of capitalizing on individual strengths - those of the students in residence as well as their own.

"We have done community- and diversity-building workshops all along," according to Kasper, who received her master's degree in student personnel from UM and is starting her doctoral program in counseling education. "The RAs now need to look at the whole picture to understand what their role is. They need to come with an open mind and look at all the possibilities for creating a total community, look for the tools on campus to build that cooperation and help students be more responsible. The RAs need to be role models."

This year's newly trained RAs will be expected to be "conscious of the process by which they do things, making sure many viewpoints, including the difficult ones, are included," Douglas said. "They even need to look at hierarchical structures within student communities that may exclude people, and look at new ways of consensus-building. More precisely, we're asking them to look at process issues and why they are making some of their choices."

Such new ways of community-building will call for less competitiveness among community members and between members of other communities, Kasper said. "For the RAs it will mean working with other halls, including students in the work that they do, listening better to students, and looking more broadly at the connections between everything they do."

It may mean decorating residence hallways with artwork representative of

all the students, thereby sending a welcoming message to all people. It may mean making more inclusive decisions, like selling tickets to an event to individuals rather than just to couples, or arranging meeting rooms to avoid hierarchical orders.

"We're seeking common ground as part of a community, not as the outcome," according to Kasper. "We're seeking common understanding and not common product, looking at the differences and finding the commonness too."

"What we hope to accomplish is to help students find common grounds so they can work together. They have to learn to understand how to live together and behave responsibly. If we can do that here, we are encouraging people to do that in their lives away from here. The future depends on us teaching young people to do that."

"This is something we want students to be a part of, this is what we're all about," Kasper said. "This is for them because they are important to us. We want to show them through this that they matter." ▲

New faculty in the Colleges of Engineering, Forest Resources and Sciences are, seated left to right, Kurt Maasch, Department of Geological Sciences, and Lynn Katz, Department of Civil Engineering. Standing, left to right, Neal Pettigrew, Department of Oceanography, James Patton, Department of Electrical Engineering, and Robert Rice, Department of Forest Management. Not pictured are: Pierre LePoutre, Department of Chemical Engineering, Susan Brawley, Department of Plant Biology & Pathology, and Susan Hunter, Department of Zoology.



New faculty in University College, the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, and the College of Arts & Humanities are: seated, Sandra Sigmon, Department of Psychology, and Sandra Butler, School of Social Work. Standing, left to right, Timothy Maciel, Intensive English Institute, Department of Foreign Languages & Classics, Timothy Cole, Department of Political Science, Owen Smith, Department of Art, Carl Ekstrom, Department of Public Administration, Paul Grosswiler, Department of Journalism & Mass Communication, and Roger Powers, School of Nursing. Not pictured are: Cynthia Mahmood, Department of Anthropology, Marie Hayes, Department of Psychology, Carolyn Ball-Richardson and Napoleon Bamfo, both of the Department of Public Administration, Michael Montgomery, Department of Economics, Carol Roberts, Administration, and Timothy Weiss, Department of English.