

Off-Campus living in Carlisle: Purpose and process

Introduction:

During the Fall, 2008 semester, a working group of students, faculty and staff have been engaged in conversation to develop a more coherent and intentional approach to off-campus living. The working group represents a partnership between Student Senate and the Division of Student Life.

The off-campus living issue has been in focus for several reasons:

- The increasing numbers of students who desire to live off campus has rendered the current selection process inadequate
- Dickinson values our positive presence in, and relationship to, the Borough of Carlisle. As the number of students living off campus has increased, we recognize the points of tension between neighbors and students as behavioral issues around social life have emerged
- The Division of Student Life is engaged in an intentional effort to align student programs, experiences, and initiatives with core outcomes that support the College's mission of fostering student learning for engaged citizenship. Living off-campus is among those experiences that can support positive learning outcomes.

Background:

Dickinson is a residential liberal arts college, operating on a belief that students, living in close proximity, have a unique opportunity to learn from each other, to extend lessons from the classroom into campus life, and to practice the art of engaged citizenship. The residential experience builds students' capacity for complex thought, and action by:

- enhancing critical thinking skills
- encouraging responsible decision making
- creating opportunities for problem solving and decision making
- promoting self-consciousness and awareness
- fostering interpersonal skills and development of social intelligence and
- fostering a useful application of knowledge to engage a world beyond the classroom

As a working group we support the values and outcomes of the residential experience. We also recognize that there are compelling reasons for extending to students the opportunity and privilege to live off campus. The outcomes articulated above are much related to effective citizenship, and the experience of living in our local neighborhoods can create for our students the opportunity to develop as citizens.

Benefits of the off-campus living option:

Enrollment support:

The growth in the student body over the past decade means that we find ourselves unable to accommodate all students in campus housing. Granting students the permission to live off campus provides a flexible and efficient means of maximizing the use of campus residential facilities and

resources. The College will continue to rely on off campus permission to manage our resources until such time as we are able to accommodate more students in campus housing. The working group is in favor of reducing the reliance on off-campus housing as a “release valve”, as doing so will provide greater opportunity to structure off-campus living as a more intentionally program driven initiative.

Academic program support:

For some students, living independently off-campus is in direct support of their academic program. Students who are student-teaching or engaged in significant internship work, for example, are living a more professional lifestyle that is often better supported by independent living.

Off campus living can provide flexibility for students who, given their personal circumstances, find the academic calendar restrictive. Currently, there are students who have a difficult time finding temporary housing when campus housing isn't available to them. Some students are engaged in local internships that begin or end outside the regular academic calendar. We have some international students, as well as students with families in transition that also fall into this category.

For some students, living off campus yields a modest cost savings (depending on the lifestyle they choose) that eases the financial burden to complete their degree.

Opportunities for developing civic and social skills:

Living independently in off campus housing provides an opportunity for the development of practical life skills related to household management, negotiation of contracts via lessee/lessor relationships, and financial management. Developing these skills has legitimate value. In the context of Dickinson's mission, however, an even more compelling outcome of living in the community is the opportunity to develop, through experience, the skills of civic engagement and community responsibility.

From the first, Carlisle was seen as a sort of laboratory for learning-a place, for instance, where Dickinson students could venture from campus to the nearby county courthouse to watch the new American judicial system in action. But it was also a place where, a few decades later, science students could study ecology by actually examining the wilderness of the surrounding Appalachian Mountains. (Dickinson was the first college to introduce field studies into its science curriculum.) These sorts of firsthand experiences, Rush believed, would foster the minds that would lead the next generations of Americans.

<http://www.dickinson.edu/about/history.html>

Learning community and civic engagement by living it and doing it as students become integrated into the wider community are perfectly consistent with Dickinson's emphasis on useful and engaged forms of learning.

Lifestyle choices:

For many students, living off campus is an opportunity to practice a more mature lifestyle and social life. Particularly for students who are returning from abroad, where they may have been living on their own in another country, the prospect of moving back to a college residence is unappealing and in some ways, erodes the life lessons they have learned while away.

Barriers to an effective off-campus living option:

Social benefits perceived by students:

Through our discussions, and through staff interactions with students, we understand that for many students, the perceived benefits of living off-campus may not fully align with the benefits the college might articulate. In multiple conversations with students, the following perceived benefits associated with off campus living were frequently noted:

- Off campus residents are seeking “complete autonomy” over their choice of housing, the people with whom they live, and how their living and social environment will be structured.
- Fewer restrictions are imposed on students’ social activities.
- Students feel increased sense of privacy
- A stronger cost/value ratio is a perceived benefit

These perceptions are in large measure what motivate many students to request permission to live off campus. Further, there appears to be a relationship between a student’s motivation to request off campus permission and the culture of Greek and Athletic social networks, as evidenced in part by the fact that over 75% of off campus residents in the Class of 2009 are affiliated with an Athletic team and/or a Greek organization. The social and peer group character of these networks can, and has, created tension in the local neighborhoods as student culture and neighbor culture conflict. These peer networks also have the potential to be tapped for positive social outcomes.

Differences in students/neighbor lifestyle:

Today, as it was in the College’s earliest days, students’ lifestyles are different than the majority of the Borough’s permanent residents. In his Plan for Education, Benjamin Rush recognized this, proposing that:

“Whereas the business of education is to qualify youth for the duties and manners of domestic as well as of public life, and as these are better acquired by their living in private families, than in any other way, and as the restraints imposed upon young men by the difference of age and sex, often prove the means of preserving them from vice, no young man who conducts himself properly in a private family, shall be compelled to board, or lodge in the College, when suitable apartments are provided for that purpose.”

(Rush, Benjamin. “Plan of Education for Dickinson College.” Article X, Of Boarding and Lodging, (1785) <http://chronicles.dickinson.edu/resources/Rush/>.

While the restrictions Rush notes may have merit from a behavior management perspective, we maintain that productive community living is an educational endeavor. Responding to problems with an exclusive reliance on rules, policies, and discipline will not yield the complex learning outcomes we seek. It is *expected* that students will develop critical social skills during their time at college and that, inevitably, some will make questionable decisions. Along with the obligation to educate students on matters of their conduct and increase empathy for those with whom you live in a neighborhood, the College also has an obligation to minimize the impact of students’ social

development on the lives of permanent residents and to develop a consistent, appropriate and educative response to any problems that emerge.

As students move off campus and become residents of the Borough, it is critical they recognize and adapt to this difference in lifestyle. By doing so they stand to gain maximum benefit from neighborhood living and have a productive and enjoyable off campus experience. The College aims to develop a strategy by which students are appropriately selected and prepared for this community experience, and for developing positive relationships with their neighbors.

Landlord issues

Landlords play an important role in the quality of the off campus living experience. Students often find themselves renting facilities that are in woeful condition, and have a limited understanding of their rights and opportunities for advocacy. Absentee landlords are a problem we have encountered as efforts have been made for constructive outreach. Certain off-campus houses/apartments have developed a reputation/on-going persona as houses where disruptive behavior occurs.

Proposed plan:

The working group is endorsing a plan to be implemented in stages over the next 12 months. More immediate strategies address student-centered issues around eligibility, process, education and intervention as we prepare to identify students who will be permitted to live off-campus for the '09-'10 academic year. During the Spring of 2009, issues related to landlords will be advanced, in preparation for subsequent cycles.

Composition of application group:

In prior years, students applied individually for off-campus releases. This approach is not problematic when supply and demand are roughly equal, as had been the case for many years. Last year, when demand so far outstripped supply, the process was disruptive and contentious. Friendship/living groups were split apart as some received releases and others did not.

Adding to the confusion was the fact that the application requested the names of other students with whom the applicant would reside. Students inferred this to mean that the group would be considered for the release. In fact, the rationale for requesting this information seemed to be related to other policy issues, namely concerns that 2 or more students representing one greek organization, for example, might create grounds for a property being viewed as a "greek house." We recognize this issue but think there are more realistic ways to address it.

Moving forward, we endorse allowing students to submit applications as groups, up to the limit of four residents permitted by Borough Code.

Eligibility:

The question of eligibility for off-campus permission is a critically important one. Students living off campus have a significant impact on the College's relationship with the Borough of Carlisle and, arguably, the greatest influence on the way Dickinson students are perceived in the neighborhoods surrounding campus. Therefore, it is essential that our students be good stewards of the relationship between the College and the Borough.

We propose continuing the practice of conduct screening with some revisions from previous years. The application for off-campus permissions will include the following language:

Applications that include students who have been in violation of the College's *Community Standards* will be reviewed by the Off-Campus Housing Review Panel. This panel consists of one Associate Dean of Students, one Faculty member who lives in the Borough, and one member of Student Senate. Generally, students are disqualified if they have been involved in: violations of the drug policy; repeated incidents that demonstrate a lack of responsibility around the use of alcohol; incidences of violence or harassment; or other serious or repeated violations of the *Community Standards*. If an applicant who is applying as part of a group is deemed ineligible by the Review Panel, the remaining applicants who are eligible will have reasonable opportunity to adjust their application. **Decisions of the panel are final.**

This new process of determining eligibility represents two substantive revisions:

1. As part of the initial application, students will reflect on any conduct violations in which they have been involved. While this will generate more information to consider in the selection process, requiring all students who have had conduct violations to reflect on that experience has value and imparts greater intentionality to the process.
2. The panel is the final decision-maker. The past process included an appeal to a single administrator (Director of Residential Life), who made the final decision. Using a panel that comprises staff, faculty and a student will result in a much more transparent process that is perceived to be more "fair" to students.

Prioritization

After screening for eligibility based on conduct, applications will be prioritized by lottery so that individual and group applications have equal chance of receiving permission. If an application is selected in the lottery, all students on that application will receive off campus permission. The College's administrative housing database will be used to generate the lottery numbers in a manner consistent with the on-campus housing lottery system, and a committee of students from student senate will participate in/assist with oversight of the lottery process.

The selection process describe combines a merit-based approach and a lottery system. A merit approach is advanced by considering in more substantive ways the conduct record of applicants. Living off-campus is a privilege and this approach is appropriate. However, given student familiarity with and acceptance of the lottery-based housing system, the lottery approach was retained.

Application timeline

The timeline for off campus permission is driven in large measure by the process of projecting College enrollment figures that ultimately determine the number of permissions that will be available in any given year. Developing these projections is a complex process developed by Institutional Research in collaboration with Campus Life, Global Education, Financial Operations, Campus Operations, and Admissions.

The number of off-campus permissions is normally available the second week of February. While we have heard from students that they wish that they could receive their off-campus permissions earlier, it is essential for the college's financial status to make decisions about number of off-campus permissions in a way that very accurately reflects anticipated enrollment.

Using early February as an "anchor" date, the following timeline will be implemented. This timeline permits juniors who are on campus during the fall, but who plan to be away in the spring, to receive application materials and information prior to their departure for spring semester study abroad sites.

Return from Thanksgiving break: Applications available and information sessions scheduled. Informational email to parents of juniors sent (described in Preparation/Education section).

End of January: Applications due and financial holds checked

First week of February: Students deemed ineligible notified. Applicants affected by a student's ineligibility will have reasonable opportunity to adjust their applications if they wish.

Early February: Lottery numbers assigned to eligible applicants.

Late February: Permissions offered (to include general guidelines about adjudication of off-campus conduct)

Wednesday prior to Spring Break: Deadline for students to accept or decline off campus permission

Students who accept off campus permission will not be eligible for the on campus housing lottery. In the event a student requests to return to campus housing after having accepted off-campus permission, they will be placed on a waiting list and assigned housing on a space-available basis after the incoming first year class has been assigned (typically early August).

Preparation/Education

Seminar:

Building students' capacity for a responsible, enjoyable and educational experience living in local neighborhoods is an essential requirement of our plan and responsibility that the college should adopt. As a working group, we agree that students' participation in a seminar to foster community living skills should be required of all students who apply and are selected to live off-campus.

Once the cohort of students accepting off campus permission is identified, seminars will be offered throughout the remainder of the spring semester to help students prepare for the experience. Students are expected to attend a seminar, or risk losing their off campus permission.

The off-campus seminar will be a small (no more than 20 students), interactive, discussion-based format. This approach will allow for engaged conversation about the issues related to off campus living. These include:

- Landlord-tenant rights & responsibilities
- Relevant Borough ordinances

- Neighbor relations
- Responsible social hosting
- Household management
- College's role in responding to conduct issues off-campus

Members of the working group will continue to meet to develop the content of this seminar, which will be ready for delivery after off-campus permissions are accepted in March. Campus and community resources will be utilized in this seminar.

Parent education/information:

Given that many students are guided by their parents in the process of securing off campus housing, there is an opportunity to partner with parents in our educational endeavors. We think that a useful strategy would be a simple informational email that might be sent to parents of juniors. The email can provide parents with information about our goals for the off-campus living program, and remind them that students should not sign leases until permissions are granted. Beyond these information items, and given many parents' role in the lease, it would be important for parents to know that the college reserves, and is prepared to act, on the right to pull students back to campus for incidents that demonstrate a failure to live responsibly in the community. Such a decision would result in a financial loss, which any co-signer would wish to be aware of.

Such an informational email will be sent prior to the conclusion of the Fall semester.

Intervention

The working group discussed three primary interventions that arise with students living off campus. The most common is intervening when the conduct of the residents and/or condition of the property are disruptive in the neighborhood. The second most common (although far less so) is assisting students with neighbors who may be unreasonable. Finally, on rare occasions a concern about an off campus resident's health, safety or welfare may arise.

Students are accountable to the *Community Standards* regardless of where they are studying:

"The expectations of the Dickinson College community as articulated in the Community Standards create an environment that supports a vigorous academic life, tolerance, civility and respect. To understand the specifics of these expectations, the College community has agreed on standards of social conduct. The standards apply to on-campus behavior, behavior while studying in a Dickinson program abroad, as well as to off-campus behavior that does or has the potential to adversely affect any member of the on-campus community or the College itself." (Community Standards).

Also, it is important for off campus residents to be familiar with local Ordinances and Codes. Failure to comply with local expectations can be disruptive to the local community and, as such, may be addressed by the College. The working group affirms the College's authority in this regard, and supports the educational foundation upon which College conduct intervention is based.

The College shall make reasonable attempts to first intervene informally through direct conversation with students about specific concerns, if appropriate given the severity of the situation. Every incident is different and articulating a minimum set of reactions and sanctions is rarely the most effective course of action for creating change. That said, a general framework for

the college's response to conduct concerns will be developed in early Spring of 2009, and provided to students who receive off-campus releases (prior to the date for students to accept their permission).

It should be noted that official reports from the Carlisle Police Department and the Department of Borough Codes are considered information for purposes of administrative and formal resolution under the *Community Standards*. Also, the reports and observations of local residents may be taken into consideration when responding to allegations of misconduct. The Borough, of course, reserves the right to take action in response to violations and the working group supports and affirms this approach.

Occasionally, students will encounter neighbors whose expectations could be considered unreasonable. While the College cannot speak on individual students' behalf, in these situations the College can be a resource for students on a consultation basis, and facilitate access to local services offered by the Borough.

In the case of a concern about a student's health, safety or welfare, the Student Safety & Success Team (SSST) shall be engaged to address the concern.

Future considerations and opportunities

The recommendations and plans described to this point in this document relate primarily to the student side of the off-campus equation. Three additional strategies are offered to strengthen the quality of life for students and neighbors in the local community:

Strategic partnerships with Borough Departments:

Beginning in January, 2009, regular breakfast meetings will be convened for the purpose of providing a forum for conversation about neighborhood issues. The goal of these meetings is to build sustainable relationships with those individuals from the college and the community most directly involved in these issues. Rather than reacting when problems occur, this on-going forum will allow all parties to appreciate the complexities of the issue of students living off campus and provide the opportunity to work together toward common goals. We anticipate these meetings will occur three times each semester and invitees shall include representatives from:

- Carlisle Police Department (Carlisle Borough)
- Faculty members on Neighborhood Associations (Carlisle Borough and College)
- Codes Office (Carlisle Borough)
- Student Senate (College)
- Public Safety (College)
- Student Conduct/Student Development (College)
- Associate Dean (College)
- Executive VP for College/Community Development (College)
- Local landlord constituency

Neighborhood relations:

We will continue to explore creative ways to foster positive, proactive student-neighbor relations. In addition to the strategies presented in the seminar, the College will consider hosting a

student/neighbor reception within the first two weeks of the fall semester for each of the major neighborhoods in which students typically reside. These social/acquaintanceship receptions will begin the process of community development toward productive relationships. *Participation will be expected of students as part of the preparation/education for community life.*

Partnerships with local landlords:

On November 6th, 2008, Tim Poirier (Associate Dean of Students), Nick Stamos (VP for Campus Operations and Rusty Shunk (Executive VP for College/Community Development) participated in a seminar at Franklin and Marshall College about college/community relationships and student living off campus. One idea presented at that conference was about a “landlord certification” program. In such a program, the college would partner with landlords who meet certain standards, and who might agree to work with the college to develop students as good citizens.

This idea has merit and we propose that the appropriate working group be convened during Spring, 2009 in order to explore and potentially develop this kind of program for implementation with the cohort of students who would be given permission to live off campus for the 2010-2011 year.

Developing a strategic partnership with landlords, to include the development of a “nuisance house” policy will be an important dimension of improving the off-campus living experience.

Summary

We believe that the recommendations above address the legitimate student concerns about the process that were expressed last year, when for the first time demand outpaced supply of releases. We also believe that the recommendations provide a more systemic approach to education and intervention, and give students the opportunity to learn and grow from community living.

To summarize, the following recommendations/changes/enhancements are made:

- Permit students to apply for off-campus releases in groups (up to 4 individuals per group as per Borough Code)
- Enhance conduct screening of applicants by: a) requiring a reflective essay by applicants who have had conduct violations and b) vesting final decisions about applicants with a conduct history in a panel of student, faculty and staff.
- Articulate clearly at the front end of the process that a lottery will be used if demand by eligible students outpaces supply. Involve Student Senate in “oversight” of assignment of lottery numbers for transparency
- Require successful candidates to participate in a seminar about productive neighborhood living
- Explore creative ways to facilitate the development of positive student-neighbor relations, possibly to include beginning of year neighborhood gatherings for students and community members to become acquainted

- Educate/inform parents of junior students about the requirements of off-campus living and the consequence (revocation of privilege, including financial loss on lease) for irresponsible behavior
- Incorporate facilitated/restorative conversations between neighbors and students as an early intervention on conduct concerns
- Refer serious and/or sustained conduct problems to a hearing panel for decision about revocation of lease
- Convene, for purposes of regular meeting and discussion, a coalition of college and community stakeholders to continually assess and address issues of common concern
- Explore and develop a landlord certification program for implementation prior to the off-campus release process for the class of 2011.