



As-Needed Housing for Commuters

Jennifer Patterson Lorenzetti

Commuter students can be, by their very nature, a bit disconnected from campus life. Residing off campus, they often come in for classes and leave before evening activities begin. Without a residence hall connection, they miss some of the important programming that the university has to offer. Additionally, when they do have a designated spot to call their own on campus, it is often a commuter lounge that is isolated from the hubs of activity, functioning primarily as a spot to sit, eat, and perhaps watch TV

Maravene S. Loeschke knew this better than did most college presidents; the president of Mansfield University in Pennsylvania, Loeschke spent her undergraduate years at Towson University as a commuter student without a car. This experience remained in her memory, and when she rose to the Mansfield presidency, she began working with Charles W Colby, associate vice president for residence life, to help commuter students when travel is difficult. The result was the Commuter Connection, a set of residence hall rooms reserved for commuter students who need to spend a night on campus.

Designing the Commuter Connection

"We live in a cold and wintery area in January and February," says Colby. Both he and Loeschke are painfully aware of the danger

this can present, as both have lost children in car accidents. Improving the safety of commuter students was the most pressing reason to open the Commuter Connection, but the hope of improving the student experience was also a driving force behind the project.

The Commuter Connection is a set of ten rooms-five for each gender, along with single-sex bathroom facilities-set aside in one of Mansfield's residence halls. Commuter students can reserve a room on an as-needed basis. Upon check-in, they receive a guest card that allows them access to the hall and to their room.

There are no set rules about when a commuter student can request a room, and there have been very few instances when students requested stays that were not in the spirit of the program. "We haven't been abused or taken advantage of," says Colby. Most commuters who request a room are dealing with bad weather or car or relationship problems, or they are visitors from other campuses who wish to attend an evening extracurricular activity. However, on one occasion, a student who needed to be on campus three days each week attempted to reserve a no-cost Commuter Connection room. "We had to say, 'You need to rent a room,'" Colby says.

Commuter students stay without charge in these rooms, which are furnished and stocked with necessary linens. The linen cost is the only ongoing cost that the university has to deal with. The

rooms are located in an unused wing of a dormitory, so there is no income that would have been realized had these rooms been rented to yearlong residents. The linen costs, Colby says, are paid for out of funds not designated for residence life, so students who live on campus are not subsidizing commuters' overnight stays.

The Commuter Connection has evolved since its inception in 2007. Initially, the rooms were located in a hall with extra rooms that didn't have separate bathroom facilities for the men and women. Now, Mansfield has moved the available rooms into a hall with separate bathrooms; the hall is also the one that houses international students and student athletes, both populations that might need to remain in their rooms over holidays. This reduces the likelihood that commuters might be left in a hall essentially alone (which would do nothing to reduce a commuter's sense of isolation).

Colby's office is also making greater efforts to work with the residence life staff and the government of the Commuter Connection hall to alert them to the presence of commuters in the community. "It is better that the RAs know that the commuters are there," Colby says. It also helps ensure safety and security if the residence life staff and the hall residents expect to see unfamiliar faces in the Commuter Connection area. For added security, Colby's office keeps careful track of the

guest cards that allow entrance to the hall; if a commuter loses or forgets to turn in a card at the end of a stay, Colby's office deletes the access privileges for that card.

Lessons learned

Obviously, the Commuter Connection and its program of allowing commuter students to stay in the residence halls without charge are only possible at an institution with vacancies in its halls. "We might never have gotten to this point if we were at capacity," says Colby, adding that the institution is also adding new student housing through a privatized system. Right now, Mansfield doesn't anticipate needing the Commuter Connection rooms for paying students.

Colby says that the program's success is currently assessed

through anecdotal evidence. Colby has gathered feedback from students who have used the program, and some have responded that it is a "very compassionate" university response to the challenges commuters face.

For other universities considering implementing a similar program, Colby suggests that residence life work very closely with the residence hall in which the commuter rooms will be located. "Initially, we didn't do enough integration work with the hall. [You] should do work with the hall government so it's not suspicious," he says, adding that this initial groundwork will also boost yearlong residents' acceptance of the commuters.

Further, he suggests that other campuses "think about the logistics

of getting access to buildings." This will vary based on whether the hall in use requires a key, an electronic key card, or the approval of a bell desk attendant. To ensure the best experience, commuters must be able to come and go as residents do during the course of their stay, but access must be denied to non-key holders in order to ensure security.

It is too early to tell if the Commuter Connection will make a measurable impact on retention at Mansfield. However, it is already certain that it sends a strong message that the university cares about the safety and comfort of its commuter students, as it allows students and their loved ones to sleep a little easier.

Jennifer Patterson Lorenzetti writes frequently for Student Affairs Leader. •