Report of the Academic Engagement in Residential Education Task Force

OVERVIEW

The task force on academic engagement was charged by Ajay Nair, Dean of Campus Life, and Robin Forman, Dean of Emory College of Arts and Sciences, in January 2013, and met throughout the spring 2013 semester. Our charge was broad and ambitious: We were to review current initiatives, benchmark practices at peer institutions, and provide recommendations that enhance academic engagement through the residential experience, including residence halls and fraternity and sorority facilities. The complete list of task force members included faculty from the Emory College of Arts and Sciences, Goizueta School of Business, and the Nell Hodgson Woodruff School of Nursing; staff from a variety of offices within Campus Life; and several current undergraduates, who were invaluable to the deliberations of the task force (see Appendix A).

The task force met throughout the spring 2013 semester. It began with an overview of the Campus Life and Residence Life organizations, as well as an attempt to review recent efforts to foster academic engagement — particularly faculty-student interaction — outside of the classroom. Later in the semester, the task force held a full-day retreat to brainstorm about possible initiatives as well as to refine principles that could guide efforts to foster academic engagement (see Appendix B). Following that retreat, the task force co-chairs — Andy Wilson (formerly Assistant Dean and Director of Residence Life; currently Senior Associate Dean for External Relations in Campus Life) and Michael Elliott (Senior Associate Dean for Faculty in the College of Arts and Sciences) — met with a variety of constituencies to discuss the task force’s findings. In addition, the co-chairs traveled to Washington University with two members of the committee to learn more about that university’s efforts to address similar issues.

This report has been written by the co-chairs and shared with the task force as a whole. Though the entire task force has had an opportunity to read and provide input on the report, this report represents a consensus of its members rather than unanimity, and it could not possibly describe every idea put forward by its membership. We have made an effort to present a sense of the committee’s collective perspective, as well as to present a blueprint for the future.

The task force had both a sense of urgency and a sense of opportunity. We believe that it is more important than ever before for Emory University to articulate and demonstrate the value of a residential, liberal arts experience at a research university. At this moment, Emory provides its undergraduates with a world-class education in its classrooms and its laboratories. Emory also provides undergraduates a rich social experience in its residence halls. However, if Emory aspires to lead in demonstrating the value of connecting academic learning and the residential experience, it must do more. The University must leverage existing resources and invest in new ones to create a more intellectual campus...
climate. Doing so will be necessary for the University’s aspiration for national and international eminence.

Perhaps the most important — and most challenging — finding of the committee is that to meet these aspirations, we must attempt nothing less than to change the culture of the undergraduate experience. We can no longer regard academic instruction and support for the residential experience as existing in separate spheres — and we must cultivate their overlap with the goal of fostering intellectual growth. Residence life must add more value to the educational experience of residential students by connecting living and learning. Like all learning, the learning experience that takes place through residence life should have a trajectory that can be readily articulated and recognized.

Culture change can be extraordinarily difficult, and it is rarely achieved by a task force report or any single action. It requires concrete administrative actions, a consistent vision shared by leadership, and a willingness to challenge current practices and take risks on new ones. In addition, it requires the most precious resource of all: time. We must understand that the long-term goals will require the investment of time from multiple constituencies and recognize that our aspirations can only be met over several years.

If culture change is daunting, another of the findings of the task force is quite encouraging. We believe that there is a significant desire on the part of staff, faculty, and students for a deeper, more sustained agenda of academic engagement outside of the classroom. This is evident in the number of such activities transpiring already — albeit often in isolation and with little support. It is evident in the enthusiasm of the constituencies with which the co-chairs of the task force met, as well as in the remarkable — sometimes irrepressible — enthusiasm of the members of the task force themselves. This desire is borne out repeatedly in student survey data conducted by a variety of entities at Emory. In thinking about the way forward, we identified tangible steps that could give this desire an outlet.

During the time that the task force worked together, there was no more encouraging sign than the fact that several of its members had worked before on similar issues in nearly identical committees and task forces in previous years—and were willing to work again on this one. We read through these earlier reports, and we were extraordinarily fortunate to take advantage of their knowledge of institutional history. The co-chairs also believe strongly that the recurrence of these task forces approximately every five years is itself instructive. The issues with which we are contending are important to a variety of constituencies, but the primary responsibility of none; they are the subject of great interest, but that interest has not led to consistent, effective action. One metric of success for the recommendations detailed below is that they should advance the campus culture to a point where no one will think of assembling a similar task force five or six years hence.

The challenge

From our focus groups and the annual benchmarking data available from Residence Life and Housing, the vast majority of Emory undergraduates are thrilled with their
experiences both inside and outside the classroom. They consider their academic
work, including the quality of their teaching and research opportunities, to be at a
very high level; and they regard their social and cultural opportunities to engage with
their peers as rich and rewarding. Yet they regard these activities as taking place in
separate spheres, with very little overlap. They see little connection between their
learning in the classroom, the library, and the laboratory with their peer engagement
in the residence halls, on the playing fields, and in their clubs. In order to make a
case for the value of a residential liberal arts university, Emory must urgently work to
bridge this gap, to find ways that knit together undergraduate life in a more seamless
tapestry of intellectual experiences. With more online learning occurring, we
definitely need to make the residential liberal arts experience at Emory distinctive.

We should emphasize that few research universities achieve this goal in a satisfying
way. Those that do so have often invested heavily in the architecture (both literal
and figurative) of residential colleges, and/or they are able to build on a distinct and
challenging core curriculum required of every undergraduate. Regardless of the
desirability of either of these structures, the task force regarded the wholesale
redesign of the residential or academic landscape to be beyond its purview. Instead,
Emory must work to leverage its existing resources. The deliberation of the task
force therefore focused on people, not buildings — on connecting existing structures
as much as developing new ones.

The opportunity

At the highest levels, leadership believes that the residential experience makes the
Emory education distinctive. Specifically, the leadership in the College of Arts and
Sciences as well as the Division of Campus Life agrees that the residential
experience should enhance learning and connectedness to the academic
mission. The expertise and enthusiasm of the current leadership, the pressing
importance of demonstrating the value of residential liberal arts education, and the
enthusiasm of constituencies across the campus afford us a unique
opportunity. What follows are our core recommendations for advancing the kind of
cultural change to the undergraduate experience that we advocate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The dedication of resources to ensure that residential education remains a
priority for staff and faculty, and that facilitate this mission.

One reason that academic engagement in the residential experience falls through
the cracks is that it is currently not the leading priority of the Residence Life staff, the
Office of Undergraduate Education, or faculty. This observation is not a criticism, as
each of those groups has other priorities. However, if this kind of engagement will
ever have a significant and consistent presence in the undergraduate experience,
there must be an institutional node that takes this mission as its primary
responsibility.

We recommend the appointment of a faculty champion who creates roles for faculty
and doctoral students to engage in cultivating the relationship between academic
such a position should be held by a regular full-time faculty member and have staff support who can work closely with both the academic support staff of the College (and other schools) and Campus Life staff. The faculty leader would specifically work closely with the Assistant Vice President and Executive Director of Residence Life and Housing in addressing our recommendations. We believe that executive leadership will be necessary to ensure the full implementation of the recommendations since these recommendations involve various aspects of the organizational structure in Residence Life and Housing. While this task force was charged with looking at academic engagement in residential education, we feel that a variety of other areas in Campus Life have great potential for academic engagement. A visible, faculty leader of this nature should focus on the opportunities beyond collaborations with the Residence Life staff.

Partnerships with faculty should include working collaboratively with each undergraduate advising office. Indeed, the task force discussed academic advising extensively, but this topic was beyond our charge. We do believe that the culture change described by the task force will enhance opportunities for effective undergraduate advising (both formal and informal) and thereby enhance the quality and nature of advising. Furthermore, a strong partnership the Center for Faculty Development and Excellence should exist to provide a platform for informing faculty development. More intentional integration of out-of-class experiences to developing stronger teachers, advisors, and researchers will provide ample opportunities for innovation and the professional development of both faculty and staff.

We also believe that the faculty leader should work with an advisory board similar in composition to this task force including faculty representatives from the three undergraduate divisions on the Druid Hills campus, undergraduate advising program staff, Campus Life administrators, and students. The board would be chaired by the faculty champion and the Assistant Vice President and Executive Director of Residence Life and Housing. The issues that task force members have been discussing require a continuing process of deliberation and dialogue. Rather than appointing such a task force every 5-7 years, an advisory board with rotating membership could facilitate a richer conversation. The advisory board would oversee the academic engagement efforts in residential education to ensure that it remains distinctive and engaging.

In recommending the creation of a faculty leadership position, we are mindful about the need to conserve the energies of our faculty and to avoid the growth of administration. It may be possible, indeed, to create staff support for such a leader through the reallocation of existing resources rather than the investment of new ones. Moreover, we believe that a position of this kind can accomplish quite a lot with very little investment. Just as the Center for Faculty Development and Excellence has come to be identified campus as the resource for issues related to pedagogy and faculty development, we need a place that is identified with helping facilitate faculty and staff academic engagement in residence life.

During the course of our work, we encountered enthusiasm from a wide range of constituencies, and this enthusiasm could translate into action with a small amount
of focused facilitation and logistical support. For example, currently, even at the most basic level of faculty-student interaction, it is unclear to most faculty members where they might receive help in arranging to have a meal with their students, or taking a group to an off-campus event. It is unclear to most students how they can effectively bring faculty into their residence halls, sorority and fraternity facilities, or organizations in a meaningful, sustained way. Such things do occur at Emory, but they rely on the tacit knowledge of those who have learned to operationalize their aspirations. We need a structure that could make such activities easier and nurture the more significant ideas and activities that will inevitably emerge.

The communication about this initiative as a priority should include endorsements at the highest levels of the institution. Credibility for these efforts will come from both top-level and grassroots support. An intentional effort to ensure that Trustees, the President’s Cabinet, and Dean’s Council actively encourage academic engagement in residential education will serve as a powerful message to the community.

**Resident Scholars: Faculty-in-Residence and Graduate Students.**

The task force, particularly the group that traveled to Washington University, discussed extensively the possibility of expanding the faculty-in-residence program. We see tangible benefits to creating faculty-in-residence opportunities in first and second-year residence halls, and we recommend below the creation of apartments to allow for this. Eventually, this might evolve into a more consistent and substantial endeavor.

Yet the task force is even more enthusiastic about an opportunity we believe that Emory and its peers have not considered fully: The employment of graduate students as live-in Resident Scholars who could serve as living-learning mentors. Doctoral students, in particular, have been an underutilized resource in our academic engagement in residential education. Bringing doctoral students into the residence halls in such roles could be of tremendous benefit to our undergraduates as well as to the graduate students themselves. Live-in graduate students might work with the office described above, in leading academic programs, engaging faculty, and even providing assistance to students related to their own academic expertise. Graduate students can serve as intellectual role models for undergraduates, and also as strong partners for the residence life staff. For a select few graduate students, it would provide a significant professional development opportunity. If the program is constituted with the professional development needs of the graduate students in mind, we believe a cohort of interested and talented graduate students could be identified. For example, a cohort of such graduate students could come from such pre-existing programs as ORDER (On Recent Discoveries of Emory Researchers) in which interdisciplinary teams of graduate students have, for over a decade, taught freshman and senior seminars based on their research. Finally, many graduate students have more modest residential needs than most faculty members, which would enable us to put the program in place without major structural renovations.
From our consultation with administrators in the Laney Graduate School, such a program should be put into a pilot phase quickly and with a great amount of excitement for providing experiences desired by emerging faculty members.

**Focus On Creating Shared Intellectual Experiences**

One of the needs that a variety of stakeholders consistently raised in our meetings included the cultivation of a greater number of identifiable, shared intellectual experiences. Not every constituency advocated the same kind of experiences, though, and the suggestions that we received extended in two different directions: On the one hand, many urged that we create more experiences for students that are continuous across time, across two more years of their undergraduate academic lives. On the other, we also heard from many who would like to see a greater number of shared intellectual experiences within a single semester or even a single day that involve a large number of students, faculty, and staff. We offer some suggestions along both of these axes:

a. Utilize the existing living-learning themes to house large groups of juniors and seniors at Clairmont Campus with a Faculty In Residence so a cohort of students might live together in Few and Evans or Woodruff during their freshman and sophomore years then matriculate with that cohort for junior and senior years. The Clairmont-based Faculty In Residence might work with the Resident Scholar or other Faculty In Residence early in the students’ tenure and have an ongoing relationship with those specific living-learning themes. In essence, students could opt to extend the first-year identity to all four years.

b. Rethink Convocation to include more emphasis on the residential experience. Students might, for instance, sit by residence hall, and faculty or Resident Scholars involved with residence halls could carry gonfalons or banners.

c. A common book program: A staple of many campuses is a common book program to foster academic engagement in the first-year class. While we see real merits to such a program, we believe that it can only be truly effective if the program has significant faculty involvement and a supporting arc of programming that continues through the academic year.

d. Large-scale Saturday events. The campus does not need a greater number of programs. However, students noted that Saturday afternoons on the Emory campus offer a particular opportunity, since little programming takes place during that time. In the fall, especially, Emory students are often quite aware of the absence of large athletic events. The task force sees this as an opportunity to create something special that can be distinctive to Emory. In order to be successful, such events might have elements of whimsy and carnival, but still retain some level of intellectual engagement.
Create Multi-Year Living Experiences.

Members of the task force, both in their group meetings and in meetings with different constituencies, heard consistently that a different level of academic engagement could be cultivated by a greater number of residential experiences that extend beyond a single academic year. Currently, we emphasize the segmentation of the undergraduate experience (first-year, second-year, etc.) in a way that can inadvertently frustrate organic attempts by students to develop their own communities of academic engagement. We therefore recommend the consideration of the following:

a. Enhance and elongate the identity and connection students have with their freshman hall. Find ways to allow sophomores and upper-division students to “connect back” with their first-year residence halls.

b. Freshmen might be allowed to live in the same residence hall as a sophomore.

c. Increase the number of Sophomore Advisors, and allow Sophomore Advisors to remain in their first-year residence halls.

d. Because juniors and seniors who are not Resident Advisors or Greek cannot live on the central campus, allocate at least one residence hall on the main campus as an option for juniors and/or seniors to live with freshmen and sophomores. This might be connected with a particular academic experience, such as participation in the honors program.

e. Develop a hall-based alumni group of juniors and seniors so that former residents may engage with current residents.

f. Create traditions, identity markers (crests, mascots, colors), reunions for each hall.

Fraternity and Sorority Housing

Throughout the task force’s work together, we heard from residents living in fraternity and sorority facilities about engaging periodically with faculty and benefiting from the intergenerational learning experience. They spoke highly of these experiences and remained thirsty for more. Despite the stigma that sometimes exists related to a lack of academic engagement in sorority and fraternity experiences, academic engagement embedded in chapters’ residential experience appears to occur sporadically. More intentionality and support from administrators and faculty would maximize this opportunity.

We encourage the following as it relates to the sorority and fraternity experience:

a. Develop the Resident Scholars program in fraternity and sorority chapter facilities by utilizing the current House Director positions. House Directors are
enrolled in graduate and professional school and are well positioned to serve as intellectual leaders to residents.

b. Work with chapters and faculty to enhance academic engagement through leadership development and recognition programs offered by the Office of Sorority and Fraternity Life.

c. Utilize the Sorority Village apartment and office (used by an RHD Fellow) for a Faculty In Residence in order to provide a hub for academic engagement for sorority and/or fraternity members.

Recruitment and Training

The success of every endeavor at a University is in the people who execute it. No matter what kind of structures we might create, the success of our educational enterprise depends upon its execution by professionals who are well prepared for the challenges and opportunities that await them. We believe it is important that we move to a new culture in which the staff of Residence Life is regarded and regards themselves as academic staff and strong partners in the academic mission of the faculty. This will require that we overcome, even slowly, the suspicion with which faculty and campus life staff members sometimes regard one another.

In the recruitment process, we must use expertise and passion for academic engagement with faculty as primary criteria for staff selection decisions at all levels in residence life. Equally important, we must provide ample training and supervision on engaging with faculty to residence life staff at all levels. This training is critical, as we too often presume that staff and students will know how to engage faculty productively. Moreover, from conversations with staff at various levels, we heard the challenges of balancing the day-to-day responsibilities that do not include academic engagement. Supervisors must work with staff at all levels to ensure academic engagement serves as a primary focus.

For faculty, we must ensure that they learn about opportunities to engage students out of the classroom, and those who do so are properly recognized through their evaluations and in other ways that clearly benefit their professional development. If we are successful, faculty will begin to understand this engagement as an extension of their teaching and perhaps even their research activity. As noted elsewhere, many faculty are already engaging in these activities, and we believe that a significant number will be more engaged if they receive effective and focused support and see a structure that allows their efforts to have an impact.

Create More Opportunities for Peer Education

While the primary focus of the task force was on the cultivation of intellectual engagement through faculty-staff-student interaction, we also believe that the intellectual climate of the undergraduate experience could be significantly enhanced by the creation of a greater number of opportunities for students to be involved in teaching one another. There are currently a limited number of places where this has been attempted throughout the curriculum. For instance, the Center for the Study of
Human Health has recently created a peer mentoring system that has been quite successful in providing peer mentors with a rich, rewarding experience and in providing first-year students with engaging and effective guidance. We urge the College and other schools to consider the development of more such opportunities, in which students are able to advance to new levels of mastery by teaching what they have learned in earlier courses.

We should also develop other kinds of opportunities for peer education. These might include mini-courses that are offered for zero or 1 credit (but noted on a transcript); courses that are tied to a particular residential community; and weekend-long immersion experiences that allow students to teach one another intensively around a single topic related to their research or expertise. Opportunities exist with newly created Campus Life initiatives such as Play Emory and the Respect Program. At this moment, our concern is less with imagining the ideal logistical structure and more with developing a climate of experimentation and innovation. To put it differently: We do not need an exact blueprint for the structure, so much as to lay a foundation strong and sustainable enough to allow students to design and build their own.

The Physical Environment

The focus of this task force has been on people, not buildings. Given the recent investment of the University in building and renovating residence halls, we do not believe that it would be wise or responsible to recommend a new set of physical structures that would be suited to supporting the goals and programs we have outlined above. However, we do note that some modest modifications of the existing structures could significantly enhance the opportunities for academic engagement in residence life including to:

a. Utilize current guest apartments as additional Faculty In Residence apartments at Clairmont Campus

b. Repurpose existing apartments to house Central Campus Faculty In Residence apartments (Woodruff, Harris, Longstreet-Means, Sorority Village)

c. Redesignate spaces for Resident Scholar apartments (Evans, Alabama, Raul, Dobbs, Turman, Complex)

d. Identify Resident Scholar offices in each residential facility

e. Intentionally utilize the SAAC, Woodruff, and Few classroom and office spaces to anchor academic engagement through programs and services (e.g., spaces for upper-division students to gather informally as hall alumni clubs, graduate student/faculty offices)
f. Provide outdoor residentially-adjacent gathering spaces with picnic tables, adirondack chairs, etc where faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates can gather informally, including on the Clairmont Campus, Holmes/Turman/Longstreet, Longstreet green space, Alabama Hall

**MEASURING SUCCESS**

In order for Emory to be successful in cultivating academic engagement in residence life, we will need to be deliberate and thoughtful in measuring both our progress and our shortcomings. Student retention, especially of high-achieving students after the first year, might also provide a measure of success. Our dashboard indicators might include: student satisfaction with academic engagement in residential education, seniors viewing their residential experience as complementing their academic experiences, faculty satisfaction with their engagement in residential education, faculty knowledge of key resources, the number of faculty engaged in residence-based programs, and the percentage of alumni giving to particular residence halls.

**CONCLUSION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The task force looked at how Emory will leverage residential education over the next 5, 10, and even 20 years in order to enhance its liberal arts mission. The task force forecasts the need to make the residential education experience more intergenerational and seamless as well as making academic engagement a priority for those administering the experience. Several other groups at Emory have been tasked with looking at intersections of learning for students — most notably the committees working on the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) regarding “evidence,” and the Commission on the Liberal Arts. Our concerns intersect with the matters being discussed by those groups, and we hope this convergence signals a widespread interest in asking important questions about the future of residential liberal arts education. A great deal of passion and opportunity comes from this task force’s work. This report comes at an opportune time, and we have great faith in our colleagues to honor the recommendations set forth.

The co-chairs benefited from wise counsel throughout the process. Task force members, students, and the residential life staff gave freely of their time, perspective, and advice. We thank them for their assistance.

We also wish to thank our assistants throughout this process who helped in ways too many to mention here. Ieisha Fuller and Rebecca Nurse provided ample support for this task force.
APPENDIX A

Task Force Members

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APPENDIX B

Academic Engagement in Residential Education Task Force Retreat Principles

**Place matters**: The physical, intellectual, and social environment impacts the academic engagement of students living in residence.

Examples:
- Live-in intellectual leaders (Grad Students/Profs)
- Late night food trucks on campus
- 24 Hour Coffee Machines
- Residentially-based traditions
- Serendipity spaces on Campus (With Technology)
- Doors and Windows should be open to campus
- Summer experiences for rising juniors
- Forums where student groups athletic groups, and faculty SA's come to Freshman Halls
- Use themes of residence halls to promote living-learning environments
- Make facilities available to all (reasonable rates)

**Residential education should address the holistic development of students**: The residential experience should facilitate academic and social growth by creating seamless living experiences.

Examples:
- Diversity training for all faculty and administrators
- Create a core group of Campus Life administrators and faculty who promote residential education
- Four-year advising: Shift the focus of advising from majors to life coaching
- Fun facts sheet given to new students
- Make happiness an automatic minor for every student
- More opportunities for shared meals/co-ops
- Moments of pause: Time allotted each semester for reflection and community building
- Create a Junior Seminar Program

**Residential education should be challenging and transformative**: By creating common intellectual experiences using the residential experience as a platform, students will engage in activities that challenge their minds.

Examples:
- Common reading that supports a theme/mission throughout the freshman or Emory Experience
- Use culture and language learning as a platform for intellectual and social engagement (e.g. SpanishHouse)
Keep study abroad cohorts connected
Change hall themes to topics that students must interpret for themselves
Emory as "the" place for burning issues symposia
Common intellectual experiences (common book, trips, lectures, etc.
Great thinkers (futurists, philosophers, technologists, etc.) in residence for 2 weeks
Make Dooley's Week more condensed and spirited. Get professors involved
Reward Campus Life administrators for teaching and researching with students
Residential "staff" are "academic"
Class break one half week each semester to engage in campus wide dialogue
Creation of space in halls as centers for student learning facilitation (language labs, science labs, entrepreneurial incubators, etc.)
Require each department to offer at least 1 class that pulls in campus "living" as a topic/site for study etc. (funds)

**Students and faculty learn from each other:** Providing students and faculty more opportunities to transmit knowledge. Specifically, students teaching other students.

Examples:
Leadership and training for select students
Opportunities for students to apply their learning through teaching their peers and faculty
International student organized events
Innovative programs linking graduate and professional students to undergraduates
Online course material within the residential program
Use of multimedia to enable students to film/create annual Emory Experience "Documentaries"