

2010 NeoCon Presentation

This Isn't Your Old Dorm Room Anymore

No longer are “dorm rooms” the sterile institutional box of a room many of us may remember from our college days. Even the name has changed from “dorms” to “residence halls” signifying the difference.

Dorms were a place to hang your clothes and sleep. Studying, entertaining, hanging-out with friends was all done outside the dorm. Today our approach is wanting our residents “to come home to us” by making the residence halls a place where residents have what they need inside their residence hall.

The world today has become exceedingly fast paced for all of us and today’s students are no exception. They have been indoctrinated into a world where anything and everything is available and what was new today has quickly turned old by tomorrow. Often times they are in the forward momentum of a freight train and their expectation is the train tracks remain free and clear so as not to impede their travel.

THE BEGINNING

What were dorms like in the beginning and what changes have occurred? In general, it doesn’t seem like they have changed that much but stop for a moment and think back to a simpler time. A time when parking wasn’t an issue because students didn’t have a car to bring to campus. Back to a time when the campus community was smaller and students were more in touch physically versus electronically. Security wasn’t an issue, nor was there anything strange with barrack style sleeping or open style bathrooms. Fire Safety consisted of a fire extinguisher in the hall, along with a pay phone. There was a time when dining was formal instead of dash and go food. A television set was something found in your parents home and not in a dorm. You worried about getting all your belongings into two suitcases, and the thought of co-ed dorms was out-right sinful. Curfews were standard and strictly enforced by the “dorm mom”. Exercise was something you were made to do not something you choose to do. Standards were set and not made to be broken or questioned. How have these changes affected dorm life and the behavior of today’s residents?

CHANGE STARTS OUT SLOW

As our culture changed so did the expectations of students living on campus. Students began bringing their cars to school which required places for them to be parked. Electronics amenities enhanced student life. Fans to better circulate the air, portable television sets to keep up with the latest television programs, radios for entertainment, mom’s old refrigerator to store those goodies from home along with snacks. While these amenities enhanced the resident’s experience it



required changes to be made to the residence halls. With the added electronics no longer was electrical power adequate within the building which required upgrades and retro-fitting areas to meet these needs.

With the passage of the American's With Disabilities Act (ADA), more changes were required to accommodate the various needs of students with disabilities. Ramps into buildings for wheelchair access, elevators and points of safe refuge locations, Braille on signage, door openers to meet ANSI 117/A156.19, student room furniture that was appropriate for a person in a wheelchair, along with kick plates on ADA doors, strobe lighting for hearing impaired, grab bars in bathrooms along with accessible toilet and shower stalls, to name just a few changes. All of these are beneficial and mandated changes. All these changes while good, require modifications to our resident halls and re-thinking how spaces are used within a residence hall. No longer can we construct buildings that are simply adequate to what we think they should be, and in return no longer are residents accepting and silent of their needs.

NEW GENERATION

A decline in residents willing to live in a “dorm” because they were ugly, lacked amenities or programs, and were thought of as buildings that only provided a place to hang their clothes and sleep, brought about new ideas on how to attract students to live in a residence hall. Feedback was the realization that students wanted more than just four walls and a bed. In addition to their requests for better study space, social areas, TV rooms, vending, game rooms, came the realization that we not only needed to provide these types of areas but they needed to be attractive and functional so the residents would want to stay and use these spaces. Once again the electronic age burst forth with computers and the internet. Information now traveled at warp speed and access to the “net” was a priority. Residence halls were wired for Ethernet and then switched to wireless, just as we went from large bulky computers to laptops. Residents today are tuned into every type of electronic gadget on the market. They no longer arrive with their two suitcases – now they arrive with the U-Haul truck and after that is unloaded go out shopping for more! Today, student rooms need to have flexibility to hold all the additional items the residents bring and to also provide them the ability to make it their own space. This can be accomplished by using student room furniture that allows for beds to be multi-positioned so they can be used as a single bed, Jr. Loft, or bunked depending upon the amount of space they wish to create in their room. Furniture that is on casters so it can easily be moved, file desk drawers that can separate from the desk and also be used as a nightstand, desk chairs that convert into a floor rocker chair and table, these are just a few of the items enhancing students rooms and making them more accommodating for the resident.

These needs carry over to shared areas in the residence hall. Student no longer sit in a big room with tables and chairs to study by themselves. They require areas where group and team projects can be worked on, or a comfortable seating area to stretch out with their laptop, media capability for presentations, or quiet zones for the person doing solo studying. Meeting these varieties of study habits is essential to retaining residents.

This carries over to understanding the life style of today's residents. Music majors want pianos in the halls, health consciences residents want exercise equipment and not having to cross campus to go to the gym at 2:00 a.m., art majors want to see art and color in the residents halls, residents want comfortable furniture and spaces where they can chill-out and get out of their room. They also enjoy small informal areas on their floor that are open spaces so they can be seen and gather for informal conversations or hang-out space close to their room. Today's



residents are much more expressive in their wants and needs and will let you know what they like and don't like. Does this mean we should give them everything they request – of course not; but it does require us to listen and evaluate their needs. It also requires us to stay sharp and in-tune with the latest trends and technology. A good way to determine if a new idea should be introduced or tried is through sample testing. Many manufacturers are willing to lend you their product for a period of time. Something new and innovated may or may not work but by testing the product in an area and conducting a simple survey and observation test you can learn why that product may or may not work. To get the most accurate data a number of methods should be used. Recently, we conducted a test on Steelcase's new Media:Scape. We were able to use it from mid-terms through finals to get a good idea of how it was being used. We conducted a paper and on-line survey with an enticement of a \$50.00 gift card, observation, feedback from staff and a follow-up meeting with residents. The results were very interesting. Feedback from the staff was negative. They said it wasn't being used for study and only for entertainment which was disruptive to residents trying to study. The staff also said the system didn't work properly and residents didn't like it. Our observations were that residents were using it to study and when we talked to them they had not had any problems with the system. On-line surveys were a bust – no one took the time to go on line and answer the couple questions we asked. Students did take the time to fill out a paper survey. The results were that they all loved the product and wanted to see it remain in the hall. If we had depended upon the staff or on-line survey the results would have been negative and a decision that it would not be worth the expense to purchase the item. Observation and paper surveys proved the input from staff and the on-line survey to be false. Therefore, if you are testing a product make sure you have a variety of test methods to give you a fair evaluation.

THE FUTURE

What do today's residents want in a residence hall? The student's vision for tomorrow includes residence halls that are more homey and less institutional, buildings that are green, air conditioning, security and feeling safe, the latest technology and amenities such as; swimming pools, spas, laundry service, concierge, pick your room paint color, spaces that are flexible and more community space. Are you ready to move into the future and out of your old dorm room? This isn't your old dorm room anymore!

