



Rethinking Residence Halls

TO MEET OUR STUDENTS' EVOLVING NEEDS

by David Vinson, PhD

Imagine you're a high school senior in the mid-90s. You step into the guidance office, grab paper applications for your colleges of choice, and after neatly scripting by hand the details of your academic achievements, you stuff the envelopes and sticker them with added postage. Months later, a different envelope arrives at your home. Thick with forms and instructions, it bears the logo of your first-choice college.



Celebration ensues, and the following summer is spent in pursuit of dry erase boards, ice trays, and microwaveable meals small enough to be accommodated by an absurdly compact microfridge that you will rent from Student Housing. You learn your roommate's name in a letter sent by the college, and it is not until move-in day that you meet this stranger. You both take in the dorm décor of off-white walls and teal-colored carpet. There are two beds, two desks, hardly enough space for one person let alone two, and the communal bathroom is down the hall. The room is drafty, the floor cold. But this is your new home for the indefinite future! You share a laugh with your roommate, the first of many in the years to come, and you both agree to make the best of this new space, however inhospitable it may be.

Thankfully, we have come a long way since the mid-90s. The internet and the technologies it inspired have forever altered how students apply to college, how they interact

with one another socially, how they learn and share knowledge, and how they go about their daily lives as they live on campus. It is understandable, then, that the impact of such changes has shaped what prospective and current students want and need as residents—and one of the many challenges we face is not simply keeping up with students' evolving expectations but also developing strategies for anticipating them.

The following sections call attention to how one small liberal arts college in Maine, Bowdoin College, has managed in exemplary fashion to anticipate as well as satisfy students' expectations as on-campus residents. The example of Bowdoin provides key lessons for all campuses striving to produce the best on-campus experiences possible. Most notable among these is the lesson that on-campus residents want a balance between community and privacy. Moreover, they want the conveniences of added amenities that emulate those they enjoy at home.

Students Love Options: The Housing Varieties at Bowdoin College

Located at the falls of the Androscoggin River, the town of Brunswick, Maine is home to Bowdoin College, one of America's most selective and rigorous liberal arts institutions. Bowdoin seeks students with "uncommon promise who want to work together—and live together, eat together, and talk it out." An emphasis on community building is a core philosophy at Bowdoin, and this emphasis extends to an inclusive and dynamic residential program that encourages students to form deep and lasting friendships. The 2021 freshmen class, all of whom live centrally on campus in one of eight residence halls (known affectionately as the "bricks"), reflect Bowdoin's commitment to cultivating a diverse student body in which 40% are persons of color, 17% are first generation college students, and 71% grew up outside of New England.

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Bowdoin has listened attentively to what students most want in their on-campus living experiences: convenience, comfort, safety, and ample housing options. The Bowdoin OneCard is one such response, for it functions as a dorm key, room key, meal card, laundry card, campus debit card, and photo ID. Washers and dryers are located in the basement of every first-year building, and money loaded onto the OneCard saves students a trip to the bank for a roll of quarters. First-year residence halls are guided by Proctors and RAs who serve as guides to new students by introducing available resources; their broader objective is to foster integration into Bowdoin's community. These on-campus leaders play an integral role in helping students to maximize the convenience, comfort, and assurance of safety available to them at Bowdoin.

Bowdoin's upperclassmen have the added benefit of participating in a "housing lottery," which enables them to choose from a variety of on-campus and apartment

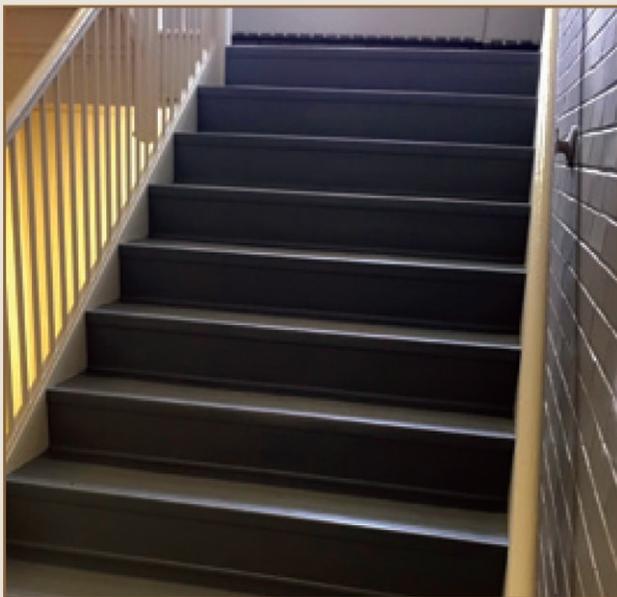
configurations. These range from rooms furnished with extra-long twin beds (36" x 80") to full size XL beds (54" x 80"), desks with chairs, dressers, television services that can be delivered through multiple portable devices, and high-speed wireless internet access. Easy access to parking, bicycle storage, and laundry are all available, and the residence offerings are positioned centrally on campus so that everything is about five minutes' walk from everything else. What makes Bowdoin's housing options so special, however, is the range of options it provides in terms of housing sizes and architectural aesthetics. Take, for example, 52 Harpswell: all white on its exterior, it is a two-story, wood residence that houses thirty-five students in seven singles, twelve doubles, and one quad. There are bathrooms on both floors of the house, and the first floor includes a living room, a study, laundry room, full kitchen, and dining room. Another exciting option is Harpswell, a steel and wood structure

apartment complex that houses 132 students in three three-story buildings. Each building has a two-story common space for activities and includes apartments designed to accommodate anywhere from four to eight persons, respectively. The eight-person apartments are akin to townhouses in design, with bathrooms accessible on both floors. Coles Tower is among the largest of the resident halls; this sixteen-story, brick residence accommodates approximately 218 students in quad suites and triple rooms. Each quad consists of four single bedrooms, a common room, and bathroom. The triple rooms include one bedroom, a common room, and a bathroom.

**"The Houses" at Bowdoin:
Engendering Leadership
and Community via
On-Campus Residences**

"The Houses" at Bowdoin, of which there are nine in total, are together considered a cornerstone of the residential experience.

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Each house offers its own unique architecture, is furnished, and contains high-speed internet. But it is the culture promoted within each house that makes them a model for instilling the values of leadership and community among the student body. The houses are known for sponsoring special meals, study breaks, and other campus-wide events for first-year students. They also host campus-wide events ranging from lectures and film screenings to apple picking trips and registered parties. Each house is comprised of twenty to thirty members, has an officer team, and is advised by two faculty or staff advisers.

College Houses enrich the campus community with a diverse offering of programs. These programs, funded by Bowdoin, serve both academic and social purposes, ranging from debates with state politicians to broom-ball tournaments between houses. House members develop and coordinate all aspects of these programs, providing members opportunities to expand their learning and skillsets outside



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of the classroom. Such is the College House prestige, residents are selected through an application process with input from faculty, deans, students, and staff. Successful selection is based on creative programming ideas and willingness to contribute to an energetic, cooperative team. All College House members gain leadership skills that often propel them to other highly visible leadership roles at the College. Once selected into a College House, students can choose to run for a house chair or programming chair role. There is no shortage of support for these leaders; the residential life directors, deans in the Office of the Dean of Student Affairs, and faculty and staff advisors all serve as advisors to the College Houses.

Sustainability and the Future of Residence Halls

Like so many other private college and universities, Bowdoin holds sustainability as a core value. Sustainability guides the institution’s efforts at everything from energy consumption,

to dining, to waste management. Bowdoin’s next step will be to maintain its remarkable variety of on-campus housing options just as it transforms each building towards maximum sustainability. All campuses face this challenge to some extent—to preserve architectural aesthetics and traditions while also embracing cutting-edge heating and energy solutions, water reuse, integrated indigenous landscaping, and when possible, making use of rooftop gardens. Not only is sustainability beneficial to the environment and also a great cost-saving investment, but students want to feel like they are playing their part in creating a cleaner, more sustainable world.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dr. David Vinson has a PhD in English with specializations in transatlantic literature and cultural studies. He is a committed scholar, teacher, and dad. If you ever meet David, avoid the subject of soccer. His fandom borders on the truly obnoxious.

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