



Residence Life at the University of Alberta

Report and Recommendations of the Residence Life Task Force

March 2017

Presented by the Residence Life Task Force:

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Preamble

Residence life at the University of Alberta is extremely important, and for students living in residence, it is a meaningful part of their overall post-secondary experience. Building an environment that is respectful, equitable, and fosters growth for students and employees is a collective responsibility of University administration, residents, student leaders, and residence employees.

Background and Purpose

The Residence Life Task Force (RLTF) was struck in April 2016 and included members of the University of Alberta administration, the University of Alberta Students' Union, and the Graduate Students' Association. This was an opportunity for administration and student representatives to collaborate in reviewing the state of the residence experience at the University of Alberta, and to listen to the experiences of students, employees (including student employees), and elected student leaders.

Committee members:

Dr. Wendy Rodgers (co-chair) - Deputy Provost

Dr. André Costopoulos (co-chair) - Vice-Provost and Dean of Students

Fahim Rahman - Students' Union President

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The RLTF was tasked with conducting a comprehensive examination of the state of the residence experience at the University of Alberta and reporting back the findings and actionable recommendations.

Process

A research firm was enlisted to prepare and run an online survey in consultation with the RLTF. Respondents included current and former (past 5 years) residents on North Campus, Michener Park, and/or Residence Saint-Jean; current and former Residence Services employees from the same timeframe; and Elected Officials of the Students' Union. The survey launched on December 5, 2016, and closed on January 3, 2017. It sought perspectives on various themes including: transparency and consistency of tenancy processes; student consultation on major changes in residence; upkeep and standards of cleanliness; behavioural expectations amongst students and between residence employees and students; and student representation, discipline, and dispute resolution. A total of 1,621 responses were analyzed, representing a response rate of 9%.

Findings

The key findings from the Residence Experience Survey are as follows:

- Undergraduate and graduate students did not differ significantly in their responses.
- A smaller proportion of current domestic student residents (56%) than former residents (66%) currently living in residence reported experiencing problems.
- About as many current (47%) and former (48%) international students in residence reported experiencing problems.
- The greatest number of problems were reported in HUB, Newton Place, and East Campus Village (62% - 65%).
- Both current residents and current employees identified the same three areas needing improvement:
 - Maintenance and repairs - 34% of residents; 55% of residence assistants; 63% of other residence employees
 - Residence amenities - 46% of residents; 66% of residence assistants; 46% of other residence employees
 - Cleaning services, cleanliness, and inspections - 32% of residents; 53% of residence assistants; 56% of other residence employees
- Among current residents experiencing these problems:
 - In relation to maintenance and repairs, the most common problem expressed was the length of time between reporting a problem and seeing the repair completed. There were also concerns expressed about inadequate communication regarding requests for maintenance or repairs. Comments of repairs not being completed satisfactorily, the presence of pests, and issues with plumbing in kitchens and bathrooms were commonly cited.
 - Those who reported problems with maintenance and repairs had relatively low satisfaction with the resolution of their problem:
 - About 36% of current residents were very or somewhat satisfied with problem resolution.
 - About 20% of former residents were very or somewhat satisfied with problem resolution.
 - The most frequently cited amenity issues were problems with the wi-fi, laundry facilities, dining/meal plan, and washrooms.
 - Primary concerns reported in relation to cleaning services, cleanliness, and inspection were the general cleanliness of the facilities, particularly common areas such as bathrooms and kitchens, infrequency of inspections, and the fees/charges associated with cleaning services.
- Both residents and employees identified residence move-in/orientation as an area working well.

- Employees indicated that consultation on changes in residence require improvement at a far higher rate than the residents.
 - 18% of current residents, versus 66% of residence assistants, and 51% of other residence employees
- The relationship between residence employees and students seems to have improved over time, with 14% of current residents reporting it as needing improvement compared to 35% of former residents. Similarly, 26% of current residence assistants and 44% of other residence employees noted it needs improvement, compared to 57% and 58% of former residence assistants and other residence employees, respectively.
 - Both residents and employees would like a more mutually respectful relationship.
 - Both residents and employees would like more opportunities to meet each other.
 - Both groups reported feeling distrustful of the other group.
 - Development of a more positive, solution oriented culture was mentioned.
- Of those residents who reported a problem with respect to discipline and dispute resolution, only 22% were very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the resolution.
 - Respondents noted a seeming lack of consistency and transparency in discipline and dispute resolution.
- Better training of employees for dealing with students, in particular international students, was suggested.
- Communication between residence employees and students was highlighted as being important, specifically with regard to building meaningful relationships. Students and employees both commented that they often felt uninformed, whether that be related to major changes, or more day-to-day issues such as cleaning services, repairs, or other operational matters.
- Email was by far the preferred method of communication. Residence Assistants overwhelmingly indicated that meetings were an effective form of sharing information.
- Residents commented generally that they felt safe while living in residence. However, a higher proportion of residents in Newton Place and International House (20%) reported problems regarding safety and security than residents of other residences (3% - 15%). Concerns at Newton Place, in particular, related to homeless people entering the building.

Prioritization

The review of the residence experience highlighted a number of areas of concern for both residents and employees. In considering what actions should be taken to address areas of concern, the RLTF used the following criteria to prioritize its recommendations:

Criterion	Description
Frequency of responses	The total volume of comments about a particular matter
Trends	Issues where there appeared to be a negative trend or no improvement over time
Between groups discrepancy	High discrepancy between employee and resident assessment of a problem
Severity	The severity of the problem or potential impact on the residence experience on those who encounter it
Urgency	Pressing or acute issues that could quickly have significant detrimental effects
Feasibility	Opportunity costs; ease of addressing the issue; immediate solutions and/or requirement for long-term efforts

Principles

The Task Force identified a number of principles as foundational to a successful residence living and working environment for the entire residence community. These include:

- A general culture of respect, equity, and growth
- Safety
- A generally welcoming environment
- Alignment of values among all community members
- Responsiveness of all community members to the needs of others
- Sustainability of the facilities and the community
- High health standards for all
- Meaningful involvement of residents, student employees, and student leaders; opportunities for stakeholder input in large and day-to-day decision-making through consultation according to the Student Participation Protocol
- Residents and employees should feel that they have some control of their environment through consultation according to the Student Participation Protocol
- Strong and positive communication between Residence Services and residents

- Mutual understanding between residents and employees regarding the challenges facing each other
- Consistency and transparency in landlord-tenant matters
- Quality control including well established and consistent services and processes including regular evaluation according to mutually agreed to principles and priorities
- Consistent application of principles of natural justice
- Strategic, evidence-based, fair, and inclusive approaches to resolving problems
- Regular identification and recognition of positives and opportunities, not just problems

Recommendations

The Residence Life Task Force offers the following recommendations to ensure the best possible residence experience for University of Alberta students:

- A Residence Oversight Committee (ROC) should be developed, composed of the Dean of Students; the Provost and Vice-President (Academic), or delegate; the Vice-President Facilities and Operations; Students' Union executives; and Graduate Students' Association executives. It should meet two to three times annually to touch base on matters related to residence operations and residence life to ensure high quality experiences of the entire residence community. This committee would periodically review progress and maintenance of the implementation of the recommendations in this report.
- The Residence Oversight Committee (ROC), Residence Advisory Committee (RAC), and Residence Budget Advisory Committee (RBAC) should use the *Student Participation Protocol* in all efforts to consult on major changes in residence with students, residents, and with employees.
 - These committees can delegate or conduct consultation as it pertains to their respective mandates.
 - The terms of reference for RBAC and RAC should be reviewed and updated:
 - to ensure clarity of mandates.
 - to reference *For the Public Good* and the *Student Participation Protocol*.
 - to enable ad-hoc sub-committees to address specific problems arising.
- With leadership from ROC, a philosophy and set of collective values should be collaboratively developed that will support a culture of respect, equity, and growth in University residences and form the basis for expectations for behaviour and service. The philosophy and values should underpin all operations and activities in residences, be shared widely and endorsed by residents and employees annually.
 - This effort should be jointly undertaken by the groups noted above.
 - A clear communication plan for the philosophy and values should be developed.

- Clear expectations for behaviour of all members of the community, including students, and employees, should be communicated and consistently applied and evaluated.
 - With leadership from the Assistant Dean Residences, particular emphasis should be placed on the development and practice of mutual understanding and respect for the responsibilities of both student representatives and employees in the residence system.
 - Expectations must be consistent with the philosophy and values, particularly mutual respect, and relate clearly and specifically to matters such as discipline and dispute resolution processes and outcomes.
 - Expectations should be actively communicated to all members of the residence community.
 - The expectations should be reviewed regularly by the Residence Oversight Committee.
- Employee hiring, training and development, and evaluation practices must be reflective of, and consistent with, the philosophy and values, and of a commitment to supporting students.
 - Philosophy and values should be clearly communicated at the time of recruitment.
 - Training on the philosophy and values should be instituted for all new employees, with annual refreshers for returning and ongoing employees.
- Information Services and Technology (IST) should immediately review the provision of wireless internet services in University residences with the goal of improving access and connectivity issues, including potential for levels of service provision for fees, and the like, using the *Student Participation Protocol* to consult with stakeholders.
- Methods used to communicate about residence operations, tenancy issues, and community matters must be reviewed and improved using the committee structure suggested above.
 - There is a need to ensure consistency of interpretation and application of all relevant policies and procedures.
- Ancillary Services should take steps to address responsiveness and communication related to maintenance requests, and develop regular reports that can be accessed on request by the committees referenced above.
 - Communication should be paramount (particularly when a quick fix is not possible to explain the status of a request and the associated action).
- The Room Assignments unit of Residence Life should review and revise the process by which roommates are assigned in an effort to improve roommate compatibility.
 - A revised and expanded roommate questionnaire is suggested.