

# **RESIDENTIAL LEARNING COMMUNITY**

## **LEARNING ENVIRONMENT INTRODUCTION**

Winston Churchill stated, “We shape our buildings, and they shape us.” How true! And SigEp’s famous national scholarship chairman, U.G. Dubach, is remembered for saying, “We need to create an environment where it’s easy to do right, and hard to do wrong.” This is the heart of the learning culture for Sigma Phi Epsilon. The facility of a learning community is more than a place to live and pass the years in school. It is a dynamic environment for learning and living to occur on a variety of levels.

One interesting tale that illustrates the connections forged among faculty, staff, and members is that of “The Fish Tank” (p.55, Creating Learning Communities, Shapiro and Levine). This story serves as a metaphor for what a learning community can develop.

Students in College Park Scholars’ newly formed Life Science cluster were housed together on one floor of a residence hall and registered for several common classes. The faculty director was given a first-floor office in the residence hall and was expected to hold some of his office hours there. The faculty director was an entomologist by training, and his office housed terrariums and aquariums full of spiders and millipedes. This situation made for one of our first encounters with the housekeeping staff.

Who would clean the office with the bugs? Technically it existed in the residence hall, but it was used as academic affairs space, and the housekeeping staff was none too pleased to have to work around the insects. The faculty member, however, was not ready to abandon the environment he had created. Eventually a compromise was worked out, but just as the fumigation and cleaning issues were resolved, another issue cropped up.

The faculty director was awarded a grant from his department to do something special for his College Park Scholars students, and he suggested building an aquarium in the residence hall lobby. A committee was established to explore the issue. How much would it cost? Who would take care of it? What did it need to become a reality? Could we afford it? Faculty, students, and residence life building representatives reviewed the plan. They discussed pros and cons, feasibility, and cost and ultimately decided to proceed, with several stipulated understandings:

- The faculty member would pay for the tank and the fish and be responsible for the upkeep of the tank (even during university holidays) and the replacement of dead fish.
- Housekeeping would clean any water leaks and regularly check that the pump was working.
- Residential facilities would install a built-in wall unit for the tank with a locking storage case and secure Plexiglas sides to protect it from pranks and vandals.

When the tank was finally in place in the main lobby of the residence hall, the reality of the brilliant tropical fish and rainbow coral was breathtaking. Students, faculty, guests, and facilities staff regularly congregate on the benches to gaze through this watery window on another world. In this way, the fish tank contributes to creating community and the community sustains the fish tank.