

Hogwarts U.

By [Robert J. O'Hara](#)

What does private and wealthy Princeton University have in common with the public and less-wealthy University of Central Arkansas? What links Acadia University in the Canadian Maritimes and Vanderbilt University in the American South? What does the new International University in Bremen, Germany, share with the Universidad de las Américas, in Puebla, Mexico?

Each of these institutions has established, is planning, or is expanding an internal system of residential colleges: permanent, cross-sectional, faculty-led societies that bring the educational advantages of a small college into the environment of a large university. This wave of college founding, taking place in public and private institutions from Kentucky to Louisiana, from Missouri to Florida, from Pennsylvania to Arkansas, [and elsewhere around the world](#), is one of the most substantive structural reform movements in higher education today, and it promises to repair a half-century of destructive bureaucratic centralization.

Dividing a large university into cross-sectional residential colleges is not a new idea: it is the organizational structure of Oxford, Cambridge, and Durham Universities in Great Britain, and as such is one of the oldest ideas in higher education. The collegiate organizational model is common in universities in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, and it was adopted by the undergraduate divisions of Harvard and Yale Universities in the 1930s and by Rice University in the 1950s. But residential college systems have remained rare in American higher education until quite recently. Paradoxically, they are better understood by many American undergraduates today than by American senior faculty and administrators, since, as students often remind me, the collegiate model is “just like Harry Potter.” The fictional School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in J.K. Rowling’s popular young adult novels is divided into a system of four “houses” that parallel, in their structure, the structure of a collegiate university.

Although many universities that are in the process of establishing residential college systems are also embarking on construction projects at the same time, the two do not have to be connected. Creating residential colleges within a larger institution is more a matter of *arranging* resources that already exist than it is a matter of acquiring new resources. It need not be expensive, and it doesn’t require any changes to the curriculum.

The residential college movement today is guided not by financial concerns or questions of curricular reform, but rather by four organizational principles: decentralization, faculty leadership, social stability and genuine diversity. Each of these principles attempts to repair a portion of the damage that was wrought during the “industrialization” of higher education in the post-World War II era, and especially in the post-1960s era, two periods of widespread bureaucratic massification when student numbers exploded, central

administrative offices proliferated, faculty retreated, high-rise dormitories sprouted, and alienation spread.

Decentralization is a fundamental principle of both new and old residential college systems because all education is local. Real education — the substantive development of intellect and character — depends on sustained personal contact between students and teachers over the long term. But universities forgot this basic principle when they ballooned in size from the 1960s onward. No matter how many slogans campus public relations people may invent about being “student-centered” and “caring,” a university with high-rise dormitory towers, vast impersonal dining halls, and central advising offices that students report to for 15 minutes each term to have their schedules checked cannot possibly offer the sustained, local, personal contact that is fundamental to real education. The slogans are phony, and the students know it.

Small, decentralized residential colleges counteract the effects of educational massification by bringing students and faculty from all academic disciplines together into rich and cohesive social communities. Because of their small size — [400 members is ideal](#) — residential colleges ensure that all students are known one by one, and that no student is anonymous. And while these collegiate societies are usually called “residential” colleges, they need not be entirely residential, and can be established within any university regardless of the number of students who actually live on campus. The emphasis is on the word *college* as a small, intimate society of members, rather than on the word *residential*.

Faculty leadership of residential college systems is fundamental because as universities became more centralized and bureaucratic over the past half-century, the oversight of campus life within them was largely handed off to a class of full-time residence life managers. However well-meaning these officials have been, because they are detached from the academic structure of the university, they have not been able to create meaningful educational environments for students. Even more noxiously, some universities have come to see campus dormitories as income-generating tools analogous to parking lots and vending machines. For more than a generation these deep structural flaws have cheated students out of the most important thing a university can offer them: sustained personal contact with their teachers in a rich and diverse educational environment for years at a time.

Residential college systems return the management of campus life to the faculty, and distribute most of the functions now performed by departments of student affairs and residence life into the faculty-led residential colleges. And they treat student life and housing as academic functions of a university, not as business functions. Residential colleges, as faculty-led academic societies, are consciously crafted to provide a wide range of informal educational opportunities for their members day and night, week after week, year after year. Their object is to ensure that students’ formal learning in the classroom is integrated in every way with their external life in the world.

Social stability is vital to the health of every human community, both within the university and without. But two generations of bureaucratic centralization and non-academic leadership have profoundly eroded the social fabric of university campuses, and nowhere has this erosion been greater than in “endlessly rescrambled” campus residential life. Alcohol abuse and vandalism have proliferated, elementary discipline has not been maintained, students have been bounced from “freshman experience halls” to “health and wellness halls” to social fraternity halls to upperclass apartments, all the while never seeing any older adults except an occasional police officer or maintenance worker. Students have described their time on campus to me as “the worst living experience of my life” and as “unbearable and unacceptable.” For many years universities have been failing in their fundamental responsibility to support student welfare and have produced what William Willimon and Thomas Naylor have called an “abandoned generation.”

Small, permanent residential colleges under faculty leadership return meaningful social stability to campus life. And as educators we must provide students with this basic social stability if we want them to take the kinds of risks that produce intellectual instability. Social stability means that elementary civil order is maintained, that [buildings and grounds](#) are attractive and safe and, most importantly, that there is a [weekly, monthly and annual rhythm of events](#) that give students a sense that they are part of something bigger than themselves, something that existed before them and will continue after them. The life of each year in a small residential college builds on the life of the year before, and students and faculty alike know that their contributions to their college endure and are remembered.

Lastly, an appreciation for genuine human diversity is fundamental to decentralized residential college systems. While it is true that nearly every university today promotes the value of “diversity” in education, the diversity that is promoted is often simple-minded and superficial, and is based on little more than broad ethnic and racial categories. And while universities promote the value of this superficial diversity with one hand, with the other they often actively segregate students according to temperaments and interests, thereby denying those same students the benefits of deep diversity — diversity at the level of individual talents, passions, strengths, and weaknesses. This kind of segregation is most often practiced through the creation of “theme halls” — science halls, arts halls, nursing halls, sports halls — dormitory spaces that encourage students to spend all their time with lots of other people who think just like they do. So much for diversity.

Genuine diversity, and the deep education that comes from exposure to it, flourishes within small residential colleges that are complete cross-sections of the universities to which they belong. Each college contains the teacher, the student, the old, the young, the poetic, the prosaic, the bold, the shy, the clever, the plodding, the careless, the careful, the wealthy, the poor, the cold, the compassionate, the indolent, the industrious, the neurotic, the peaceful, the refined, the vulgar, the emotional, the analytical, the earnest, the satirical — and by bringing all this pied beauty together into the small, stable, academically rich setting of a residential college, week after week, year after year after year, the true promise of educational diversity is realized.

At the moment of its founding in the 1630s, American higher education was given a choice: it could, as some advised, follow what was historically the Continental European path, and just rent halls and hire specialists to give lectures; or it could instead look after the whole lives of students, as the residential college systems of Great Britain did. At that moment, [Cotton Mather tells us](#), “the Government of New-England” decided it was best to have its students “brought up in a more Collegiate Way of Living.” Mather’s turn of phrase has been picked up by many writers on higher education over the years: it appeared at the head of a chapter in Frederick Rudolph’s *The American College and University: A History*, it provided the title for Mark Ryan’s important collection of essays *A Collegiate Way of Living: Residential Colleges and a Yale Education*, and it now serves as the name of my own comprehensive Web site [“The Collegiate Way: Residential Colleges and the Renewal of University Life,”](#) where additional readings and many practical details of residential college implementation are available.

As more and more universities in the United States and around the world rediscover the importance of the collegiate way of living, we would do well to remember not only Mather’s own turn of phrase, but also the lines he quotes in the same setting from the poet Richard Blackmore: the centralized Continental model might succeed in filling students’ heads with facts, but it is in small decentralized residential colleges, “as in furnaces of boiling gold,” that new stars should be dipped, for it is there that they learn, grow, shine, and come away “full as their orbs can hold, / Of glitt’ring light.”

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