

**2<sup>nd</sup> Edition**



# **A Residence Life and Education Framework**

**Three C's: Community, Curriculum, & Care**

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**What’s New In The Second Edition.** The second edition refines some language and includes some additional helpful concepts, but the biggest change is the “third C.” This was changed from “Case Management” to “Care.” Although both concepts are related, customized care is a broader term which nevertheless may still encompass some case management. Upon reflection after the first edition, case management seemed too clinical in nature, not reflecting the broader effort of providing care to all students in an array of situations (not just those that may end up on the radar of a behavioral intervention team or an academic support intervention). The concept as used here remains the same, but the content is more nuanced and the label now seems more appropriate to its mission.

# Introduction

Earlier in my career in residence life, I was sitting in a departmental staff meeting. We were discussing a new initiative, a new approach to a process that just wasn't working. We were excited. We had come up with this "new" idea that seemed to address the shortcomings of our current approach. One of the administrative assistants in the office (who had been working in the office for nearly 20 years) was quietly taking notes during the meeting.

"What do you think about this new model?" we asked the administrative assistant.

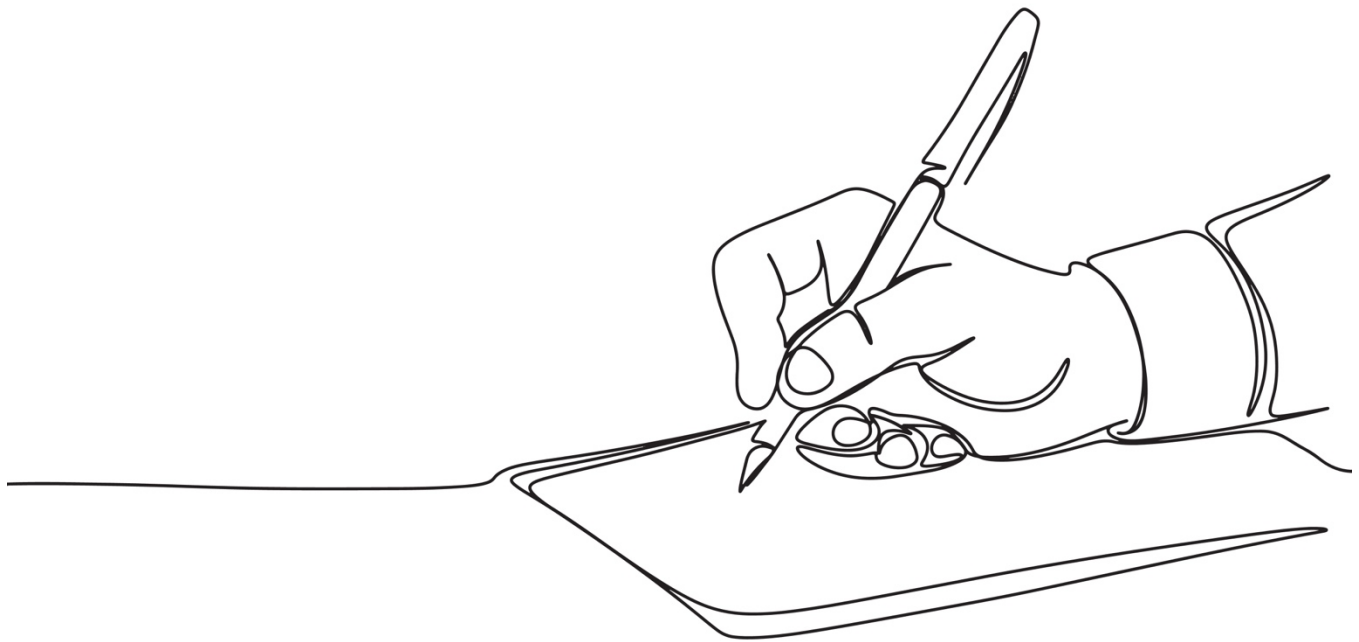
She stopped taking notes, pausing to think. She looked up and said, "I believe this was the approach we took about 7 years ago before we had started the current approach."

I've often found that the "knowledge keepers," the administrative assistants and support staff in a department, have seen all of this before. Under one set of staff and leadership, a department moves in one direction. Under another set of staff, it moves in an opposite direction. Then a third new staff comes in and returns to the way it was done previously. It's a cycle. A pendulum. A back and forth. Certainly, the higher turnover rate in campus housing staff doesn't help this either. Although we may make incremental progress, how can we break this cycle? How can we find a stable path to improvement?

This book attempts to provide a framework for residence life and education work. In developing this framework, I've relied on some the research that supports residence life practice and my own experience working in and with college and university residence life departments across the country. As the Director of the Campus Experience at Roompack, I often have a front row seat to many different residence life departments—all working with different models and at all stages of organizational development and effectiveness. This framework is an attempt to distill my knowledge, observations, and history into something that can provide a guide to campuses.

As a framework, I hope this will provide a basic structure. Some campuses may choose to go more deeply into some aspects of it than others, but the idea here is to present the main ideas one should focus on (and maybe more importantly not focus on). It is also designed as a mutually supporting whole, not as a pick and choose.

I hope you will find it helpful in organizing your thinking and your practice.



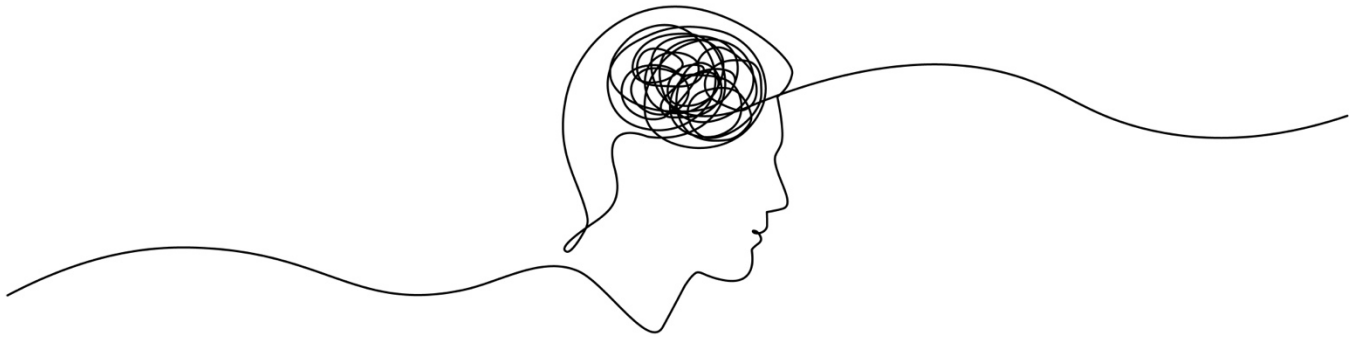
# What Kind Of Model Do We Need?

Before I launch into what a framework could or should specifically look like, I want to take stock of the overall qualities I think we should be seeking.

A framework that...

- Doubles down on the unique strengths of a residence hall environment, and encourages, but does not place at the center, other outcomes for students over which residence life has less direct effect.
- Leverages (and doesn't duplicate) campus resources and offices.
- Focuses both on collective and individual student needs.
- Gives staff a clear purpose and structure for achieving the work.
- Is specific enough to ensure consistency and the ability to assess and track outcome achievement, but flexible enough to empower frontline staff to do what makes sense for their residents and communities.
- Does not overwork staff and allows staff to focus on their positional strengths.
- Is grounded in research and theory but doesn't require an advanced degree to put it into practice.
- Is simple.

Why these qualities? These account for trends in the field including reexamining staff workloads and positional responsibilities, and generational, cultural, and expectations changes in the student body. They also borrow from work on educational design in student affairs work (Kerr, et al., 2020). Finally, they rest on a learned understanding of organizational change and culture that help set up departments for success.



Let's break them down these qualities a bit further...

## Scope & Strengths

**A framework that doubles down on the unique strengths of a residence hall environment, and encourages, but does not place at the center, other outcomes for students over which residence life has less direct effect.**

It's very easy to fall into the trap that residence life is so all-encompassing and touches on so many aspects of a resident's life that it must be all things to all students. This lack of focus can impact a department's effectiveness and is also a recipe for staff burnout. Residence life work should focus on its core. Given the communal living nature of residence halls, the residential environment provides a unique space for the development of certain outcomes that are not easily replicated elsewhere on campus. These residence life specific outcomes often include developing a sense of community and belonging, learning about oneself and how to live with others, and how to develop practical life skills. Furthermore, because residence life often has a large staff and many touchpoints with residents, it is also in a unique position for the early identification of students who may be struggling. In short, residence life can be most effective focusing on its core strengths and partnering with others for other resident needs.

## **Partners & Resources**

**A framework that leverages (and doesn't duplicate) campus resources and offices.**

There are many offices on campus that have expertise in specific areas, rather than re-create these within residence life, we should seek to partner with others to elevate their work. Working with campus partners, residence life can elevate programs and services and help bring them in front of students. Residence life can aid in the achievement of important outcomes, without being responsible for architecting opportunities for students to achieve them. Furthermore, residence life can refer and connect residents into other support networks on campus.

## **The Individual & The Collective**

**A framework that focuses both on collective and individual student needs.**

Traditional program models often adopt a one-size-fits-all approach to student needs. One program, impacting many students, will help address their needs. As students have grown more diverse in their backgrounds and needs, this older approach doesn't work as effectively as it may have in the past (if it did at all). Instead, what is needed is a blended approach, where there are larger scale programs for student needs but coupled with individualized connections and supports for students. Increasingly, students are expecting this. As students grow accustomed to technology that caters and adapts to their needs and preferences, it's only natural they would expect this from their residence hall experience as well. It's not that programs shouldn't exist, but they are only one strategy and not the only strategy.

## **Purpose & Structure**

**A framework that gives staff a clear purpose and structure for achieving the work.**

Staff teams can perform better when there is a clear consistent vision that they are all commonly working together to achieve. Setting a vision and goals is one part of the equation, but staff buy-in is also important. When developing a framework, staff at all levels should be involved and remain involved as it evolves.

In addition to having a clear purpose, a clear structure for bringing that purpose to life is equally important. This structure should strike a balance by offering enough support and guidance without being overly rigid. When putting the structure into practice, micromanagement should be avoided. Excessive administrative burdens and reporting requirements that distract staff from implementing and improving the goals should be avoided.

## **Consistency & Flexibility**

**A framework that is specific enough to ensure consistency and the ability to assess and track outcome achievement, but flexible enough to empower frontline staff to do what makes sense for their residents and communities.**

There's an inherent push and pull between standardizing the student experience across a department and allowing for decentralized, context-specific decision-making at a local level. A heavily centralized approach can lead to rigidity, where staff fall into a "check-the-box" mentality that diminishes the framework's impact. Whereas too much decentralization risks uneven implementation, with outcomes depending more on individual staff capacity, interest, and ability than on a shared institutional vision. Furthermore, students are students, regardless of where the random hosing lottery may have placed them. Their developmental needs don't change based on geography.

These dynamics don't exist in a vacuum. They're shaped by a department's history, culture, and values. A sustainable framework should reflect these realities while guiding intentional, mission-driven choices. The most effective models find a dynamic equilibrium between consistency and adaptability, where structure enables (and does not restrict) meaningful work.

**Pros of a centralized approach:**

- More reliable and consistent assessment data
- Clarity and alignment across the department, enabling continuous improvement
- Clear expectations that support staff accountability and equitable student experiences

**Pros of a DE-centralized approach:**

- Greater autonomy for staff to respond to real-time community needs
- Stronger local ownership, which can boost motivation and creativity
- Encourages context-specific programming that feels relevant and authentic

**Cons of a centralized approach:**

- Risk of reduced meaning if staff perceive the framework as bureaucratic
- Potential for stifled innovation and responsiveness at the local level
- May reduce staff ownership if they feel disconnected from the design process

**Cons of a DE-centralized approach:**

- Inconsistent student experiences across communities
- Success can become overly dependent on individual staff skills or team dynamics
- Assessment and long-term improvement become difficult when goals, strategies, and outcomes vary widely

## **Workload & Positionality**

**A framework that does not overwork staff and allows staff to focus on their positional strengths.**

Residence life work, by its very nature, tends to eat any staff time you will give it. You can always give students more of your time. You can always find additional ways to support your residents. Part of a well-designed system is knowing what to say "no" to. When deciding on a framework, remember that staff time is a finite resource. Look at how much time it will take from your staff and weigh it against the relative benefit to students.

It is also important to use staff's positional strengths wisely. Does having a masters-level professional be responsible for counting keys make sense? Does having a 19-year-old design a complex educational program make sense? Use staff members' backgrounds, strengths, and positionality smartly.

Right-size student staff (and professional staff) workloads. Focus on the things that are (1) the most important, (2) that have the biggest impact on residents. Keep in mind what each staff member is best suited and situated to achieve.

## **Theory & Pragmatism**

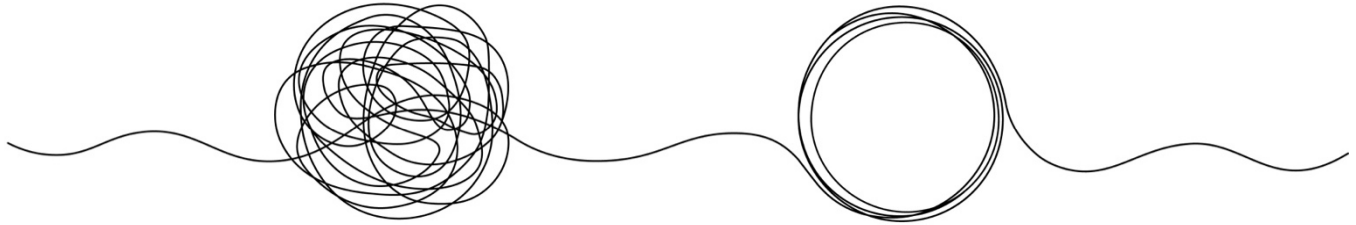
**A framework that is grounded in research and theory but doesn't require an advanced degree to put it into practice.**

As someone who is a self-described nerd about theory and research, I also know that for a framework to be successful, it must make sense to all staff who may be called upon to implement it. Research and theory should absolutely inform a residence life framework but jettison the jargon and complexity. All staff members need to be able to immediately grasp it for it to be practically effective. (Professional development opportunities can enhance their understandings, and it is smart to invest in them, but it should not be a prerequisite for practice.)

## Simplicity

A framework that is simple.

Over-design is a tendency I've been prone to in my professional career. It comes from a good place, a desire to account for all possible outcomes, but it can often lead to an unwieldy system that looks good on paper but fails in practice. If the only people who can execute your residence life model is the people who created it, then you've failed. Keep your structures simple and clear. Focus on the things that have the most impact. The structure should support your "need to haves" and let go of your "nice to haves."



In residence life we've collectively learned many things over time. There is a lot of collective wisdom in our field. Unfortunately, and not necessarily because it's our fault, we get stuck in cycles where we re-learn the same lessons repeatedly. What I attempted to do here was establish some principles, or touchpoints, that can help with the inevitable churn and change that comes with working in residence life. They are reminders to ourselves of what to remember when we approach our work with students. Oversimplifying it somewhat, a successful model for residence life practice should seek consistency (without rigidity), clear goals (including what to focus on AND what not to focus on), and simplicity (but with intentionality), all while making sure that workloads and efforts are balanced for both our students and our staff members.

Conversely, the next section dives into "where we go wrong" or the pitfalls to avoid. You can think of it as the flip side to what we explored above.

If you want to delve deeper into some of these concepts, check out ACUHO-I's Residence Education Conference, ACPA's Institute on the Curricular Approach, some of the books and articles referenced at the end of this book. Much of the content here was influenced by, inspired by, and cites these sources of learning.



Roompack started as (and remains) a family-owned business with a simple idea of helping college students navigate roommate conflict. Since 2013, we have evolved and broadened our scope to help residence life and education professionals with all aspects of their work in helping students. Although we've grown tremendously since 2013, we remain committed to our values, a company that does right by its employees, the campuses it serves, and the field of residence life and student housing. We're not in this to make a quick buck, or to flip our company and sell it to the highest bidder. We're in this for the long haul and seek to develop long term collaborative relationships with campus partners that will improve the experience of students and the educators that work with them.

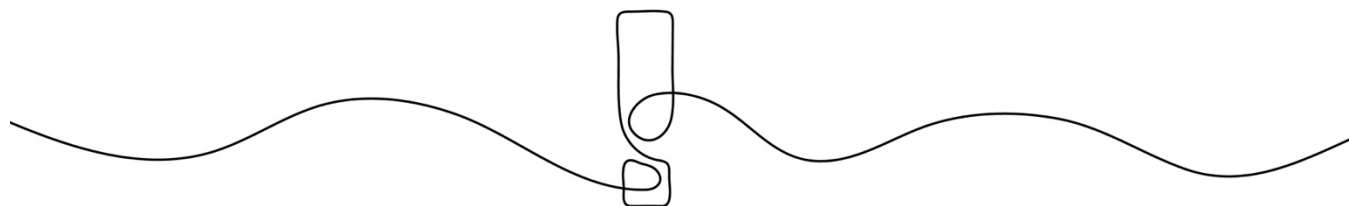
# Where We Go Wrong

In addition to stating what a framework needs, it's also important to examine where current and past practice has fallen short. I've made some of these mistakes and have fallen into these traps many times (and I can still fall into these traps). The following are a few areas where I think residence life practice can go askew:

We go wrong when we...

- Conflate a department mission with resident outcomes.
- Define too many goals and outcomes and make them complex.
- See community building and student learning and success as mutually exclusive.
- Rely solely on the execution of programs as a metric for success.
- Provide disparate one-off events and experiences without a developmentally organized plan.
- Burden staff with unimportant or overly complex processes that they may not be suited for.
- Collect data for only end-of-the-year reports instead of for review and improving practice.

Some of these relate to the 10 essential elements (Kerr, et al., 2020) and some relate to organizational behavior and culture. A main theme here is to avoid over-thinking and approach practice pragmatically. Do not over design and do not over burden your staff.



## **We go wrong when we conflate a department mission with resident outcomes.**

What you do is not the same as what you want residents to achieve. A mission is about you. What you will do. (ex. "Create an environment..." or "Provide great customer service...") Resident outcomes are about your students. (ex. "Students will be able to...") Too often these can be easily conflated. When designing your student experience make sure the distinction is clear. What are your goals for your residents and what are your departmental goals that will help enable this?

## **We go wrong when we define too many goals and outcomes and make them complex.**

If you try to be everything to everyone, you're setting yourself up for failure. Over-design is as much of a problem as under-design. Saying no to something is as important as saying yes to something. Good models are straightforward and succinct.

## **We go wrong when we see community building and student learning and success as mutually exclusive.**

Imagine you're a teacher in a classroom. You've got great plans to help the students learn about the lesson for the day, but when you arrive to teach, you find the HVAC system isn't working, the desks are falling apart, and the ceiling leaks. In this scenario, no matter how good of a teacher you are, *the state of the facilities* is likely to make you less effective than you could be. Similarly, maybe your students don't know each other, don't feel comfortable sharing with each other, or maybe even have a conflict that wasn't resolved from their last group project. In this case *the classroom dynamic* is likely to make you less effective than you could be.

The lesson here is that community building and student learning are BOTH important for your residents. Too often, I see departments go down the path believing they can only focus on one or the other. The truth is, you can and should focus on both. It's not one or the other. It's a false choice.



**We go wrong when we rely solely on the execution of programs as a metric for success.**

Programs are only one tool in the toolbox of residence life. There are many ways of engaging residents, and some may be better suited to achieving certain outcomes than others. Additionally, in executing programs, it is more important to think about outcomes achievement than who gets “credit” for the event. Residence life does not need to create all the programs its residents engage in but can support the programmatic efforts of other organizations and departments. This “counts” especially when there are shared goals for students.

**We go wrong when we provide disparate one-off events and experiences without a developmentally organized plan.**

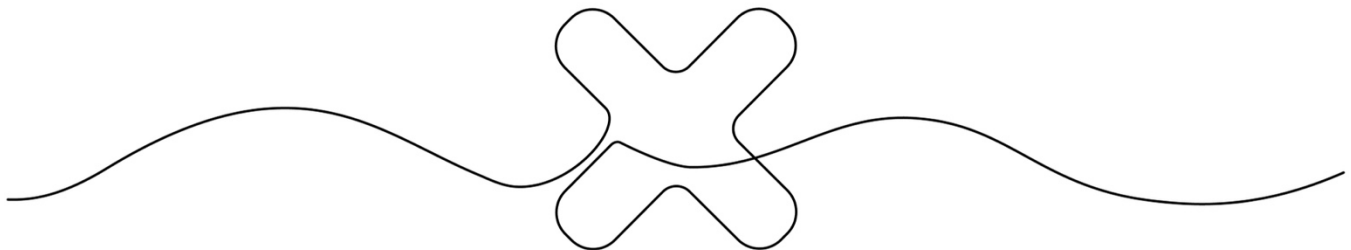
Throwing a bunch of unrelated events on a calendar is not the same as creating a meaningful student experience. Without intentional sequencing or connection to outcomes, programs risk becoming random noise rather than impactful touchpoints. Think about the student journey: What do students need at the beginning of the year? Midterms? Spring semester? Design engagement opportunities that build on each other, reinforce key themes, and scaffold learning over time. Developmental planning brings coherence to the resident experience; one-off efforts rarely do.

**We go wrong when we burden staff with unimportant or overly complex processes that they may not be suited for.**

Your student staff are capable, but they’re also students first. If your processes require them to navigate overly bureaucratic systems or spend hours completing reports that don’t result in actionable change, you’re setting them up for burnout. Keep systems as simple and relevant as possible. Ensure training aligns with expectations, and that responsibilities match the developmental level of your team. If staff are spending more time trying to navigate a convoluted process than engaging with residents, it’s time to reassess.

**We go wrong when we collect data only for end-of-the-year reports instead of for review and improving practice.**

Assessment should serve learning and growth, not just check a box or fill a slide in a PowerPoint deck. If the data you collect isn’t shaping decision-making or informing mid-course corrections, you’re missing the point. Use data to tell you what’s working and what isn’t *while you still have time to adapt*. Share results with your team and use them to celebrate wins and identify areas of growth. Reports are important, but they should be the byproduct of a reflective practice, not the only reason you’re asking questions in the first place.

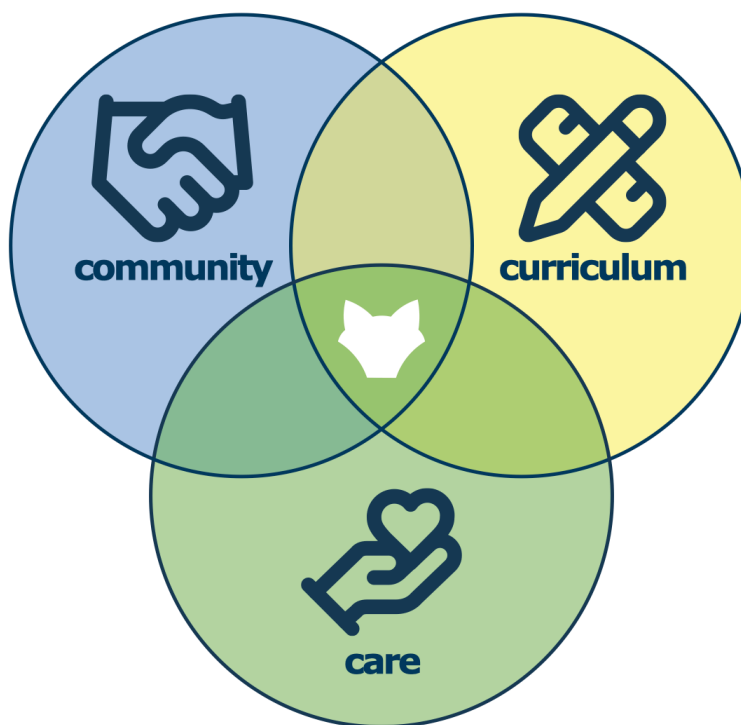


## Developing A Framework

With all these considerations in mind, the following “Three C Framework” attempts to better focus and frame thinking about what residence life is and could be. It is a heuristic tool that can be used to organize thinking. A starting point to begin discussions about what residence life should be at a particular institution. The framework is not intended to be rigid, but instead provide space where departments can choose to go more or less deeply in a particular area and refine outcomes and language that fit with their and their residents’ needs.

The Framework is organized around the “why, what, and how” of residence life work. It is named for the three C’s of residence life practice (Community Development, Curriculum, and Care).

<b>Why</b>	<b>Residence Life Purpose</b>	Why is this work important? Why does residence life focus on this?
<b>What</b>	<b>Residence Life Goals</b>	What is residence life in service of? What will residents achieve?
<b>How</b>	<b>Residence Life Practice</b>	How can this be achieved? How can staff and work be organized?



Roompack’s software is the only software package available that focuses solely on residence life and education student outcomes. Because we only focus on this, we build specialized tools that go deeper for schools that want to take their resident community, education, care to the next level. We also provide resources and services (like this book) to help you improve. Go to [www.roompack.com](http://www.roompack.com) to find out more.

## The Residence Life “Three C” Framework

Belonging & Engagement	Learning	Individualized Support
Help residents build relationships, get engaged, feel a sense of belonging, make memories, and have fun.	Help residents learn about themselves, how to live and work with others, and how to achieve personal goals.	Help residents who are struggling overcome obstacles and help residents who are thriving to reach higher levels of success.
Goals	Goals	Goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Residents will establish relationships and community.</li> <li>Residents will engage with community and campus activities.</li> <li>Residents will feel a sense of inclusion and belonging.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learning About Self <i>Residents will have a sense of identity and purpose.</i></li> <li>Living &amp; Working with Others <i>Residents will peaceably live and collaborate with others.</i></li> <li>Life Skills <i>Residents will develop practical life skills to navigate life challenges.</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Residents will receive proactive support when they encounter difficulty or to further enhance their success.</li> <li>Residents will be connected to offices and support services according to their needs.</li> </ul>
Community	Curriculum	Care
<p><b>Student Staff</b> offer social activities and connect residents to on campus opportunities at regular intervals. Some could be predefined (ex. community meetings), spontaneous (ex. floor dinners), or campus-based (ex. a lecture).</p> <p><b>Professional Staff</b> check-in and advise to ensure healthy communities and engagement.</p>	<p><b>Student Staff</b> help in the execution of strategies such as: Agreements, Campaigns, Centralized Events, etc. in service of the above identified learning goals.</p> <p><b>Professional Staff</b> help design and guide those strategies.</p>	<p><b>Student Staff</b> meet for intentional/mentorship conversations at regular intervals and check in with supervisors about individual residents.</p> <p><b>Professional Staff</b> do escalated outreach and refer to behavioral intervention teams, academic support teams and other offices as appropriate.</p>

*Although presented separately, all aspects of the framework inter-relate and are mutually supportive of each other.*

## Why: The Purpose of Residence Life

The purpose is our *Why*. In the Framework, broadly speaking, the purpose of residence life is threefold. Although presented here as three distinct components, all three purposes mutually support each other as a whole. Let's break them down.

Belonging & Engagement	Learning	Individualized Support
Help residents build relationships, get engaged, feel a sense of belonging, make memories, and have fun.	Help residents learn about themselves, how to live and work with others, and how to achieve personal goals.	Help residents who are struggling overcome obstacles and help residents who are thriving to reach higher levels of success.

### Belonging and Engagement

Residence life is uniquely situated of all the departments on a college or university campus to help students develop a sense of belonging and begin getting engaged on campus. Residence halls are a place where most first-year students start their college journey, where students will likely spend an overwhelming majority of their time, where students' first relationships are developed and nurtured, and are a significant contributor to alumni's most enduring memories. Residence halls are an introduction to campus, a tone setter, and a springboard.

There is significant research that supports that living on campus produces students who are more connected to their institution, have better grades, and are more likely to persist to graduation. There is more to this, however, than the mere fact of living in a shared space. Residence life staff can support, deepen, and further these outcomes. Creating community and a sense of belonging is akin to setting up a classroom for learning and growth. If the classroom is falling apart, if the plumbing is leaking, if the desks are old, it can impede the learning environment for the students. Community sets up a residence hall to be a better learning environment and engagement space. Relationships are the glue that creates a space for fun, learning, and growth. Relationships, engagement, and belonging are foundational to residence life work.

### Student Learning

Learning doesn't just occur in the classroom. Students also learn about themselves and others in the residence halls. Some of this learning will occur naturally. Throw a few hundred or thousands of students in a shared living environment, and learning will happen. It may not be the learning one would hope, but learning will occur. Staff, however, through careful planning and guidance can help enhance this learning and ensure it reaches towards important outcomes.

The Residential Curriculum Institute (which started in 2007 with a focus on residence life before evolving to student affairs divisions) did some groundbreaking work in this area. It exposed ways that past practices impeded student learning and provided structures to enhance student learning. Having worked with curriculum for several years, I often overhear pushback on the idea of calling our work "curriculum." "Curriculum" just means borrowing proven techniques from the classroom and applying them to out-of-classroom contexts. And as teachers in the out-of-classroom environment, there can be "good" curricula and "bad" curricula, just as there can also be "good" teachers and "bad" teachers.

The Framework here attempts to address one of the shortcomings of many curricular implementations: the tendency for overdesign. Sometimes the way curriculum is taught or put into practice (often by well-intentioned very smart people), makes the process so complicated that staff cannot connect to, understand, and enact it. The Framework presented here provides a common set of goals, outcomes, and rubrics that nearly all residence life departments could adopt *as is*. It also allows a campus to customize it as it sees fit. Using the provided Framework encourages you to keep it simple and succinct and thus more easily understood by the staff putting it into practice... and the residents themselves.

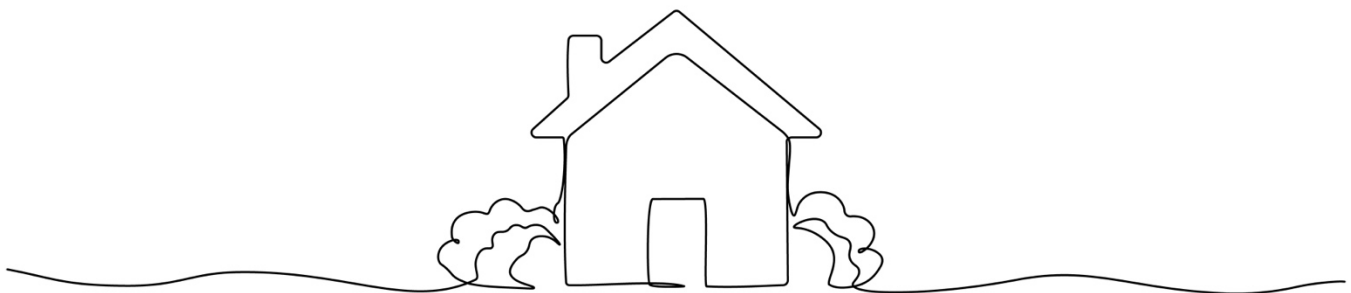
## Individualized Support

Students today are used to technology customizing everything in their lives. The algorithms that power their social feeds, the smart assistants that help them get tasks done, and the AI chat bot that answers specific questions they have. The globalized world of today is also infinitely more complex than the world of 10 or 20 years ago. Students expect, and rightly so, to have a college experience that is customized and flexible for their needs, wants, and goals.

In simpler times classes could all be lectures and residence life could put up a simple poster to advertise events. Today, however, the competition for student time and attention is different. Classroom techniques have moved beyond the one-to-many lecture style, offering group work, experiential activities, and more. Previous approaches in residence life relied on a captive audience and used similar approaches. This no longer works like it used to.

Additionally, more than ever, colleges and universities are focusing on student retention as a key goal. Even raising retention by 1 percentage point can have a big impact on an educational institution. Residence life has a key role to play in helping with student persistence. Through research, it is already known that students who live on campus are more likely to be retained. Residence life, however, can help further this through intentional efforts.

Residence Life departments are perfectly positioned as early warning systems for students who may be struggling. Residence life has an opportunity to work with students who may fall through the cracks of our current systems. Residence life can act as a feeder for our behavioral intervention teams, CARE teams, and academic support services. Beyond that, residence life is also its *own* network of support for students who don't exhibit the more severe concerns. A student who has a GPA that is not at a formalized warning level, but not high enough to be considered thriving, can use additional support. And it's not just students who are struggling who can benefit from this attention. Students who are succeeding can reach even higher levels of success. Any effective residence life framework needs to include some form of individualized support. This starts from the on-the-ground level with a student staff member or mentor and extends to systems that can elevate students to higher levels of support as necessary.

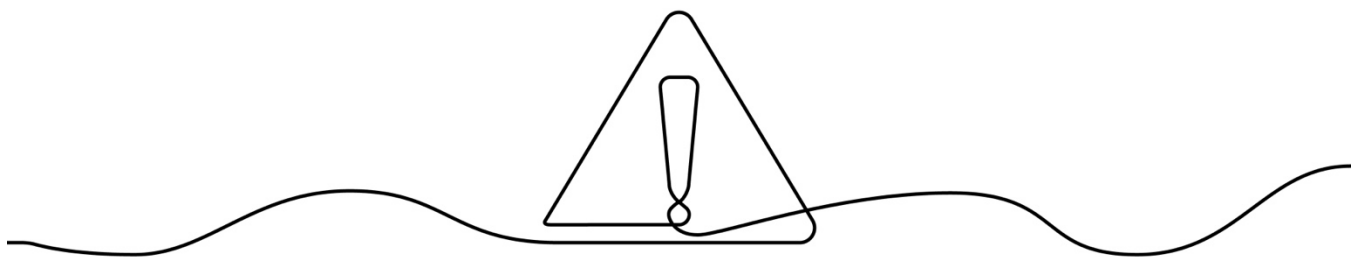


## What: The Goals of Residence Life

The goals represent the *What* of residence life. Residence life touches on so many aspects of a resident's life that it can be difficult to distill down its goals. In the Framework, there are three main categories of goals. They are the goals that residence life has the most direct effect over and can have the biggest impact on the residents and the goals of the university.

Belonging & Engagement Goals	Learning Goals	Individualized Support Goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Residents will establish relationships and community.</li><li>Residents will engage with community and campus activities.</li><li>Residents will feel a sense of inclusion and belonging.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Learning About Self <i>Residents will have a sense of identity and purpose.</i></li><li>Living &amp; Working With Others <i>Residents will peaceably live and collaborate with others.</i></li><li>Life Skills <i>Residents will develop practical life skills to navigate life challenges.</i></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Residents will receive proactive support when they may encounter difficulty or to further enhance their success.</li><li>Residents will be connected to offices and support services according to their needs.</li></ul>

These goals are not mutually exclusive. They all work to support one another. When designing experiences for students, one strategy can further multiple aims. For example, you may require student staff to connect with all their residents and have an intentional conversation. This conversation can check in to see if they are connected and engaged in their community, help the resident process and learn about their experiences, AND identify if the resident needs additional support or encouragement.



### Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Implicit throughout this entire model is that residents are provided with a clean, well-maintained living environment. Remember that Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs recognizes that basic physiological and safety needs need to be met before one can focus on higher order needs. Operations and facilities staff play a crucial role in ensuring residence life, and by extension the residents, are set up for success.

## Belonging and Engagement Goals

When one thinks of residence life work, community is likely the first thing that comes to mind. In many ways, this is the core of residence life work. By merely placing residents into communal living situations, some level of community will develop. With intentionality, however, these communities can be strengthened and built towards positive outcomes and behaviors. Community development is driven by the establishment of relationships, helping students engage in their community and the broader campus, and cultivating a sense of belonging.

### **Residents will establish relationships and community.**

Fostering friendships and peer connections helps residents feel more anchored on campus. This is particularly important for new students on campus. In addition to their peers, it's important for students to develop relationships with faculty, staff, and offices on campus to feel a deeper sense of connection.

### **Residents will engage with community and campus activities.**

Alexander Astin and George Kuh taught us long ago that students who engage (whether through hall events, campus organizations, intramurals, or leadership roles) are more likely to feel connected and persist in college. Engagement helps students feel like they matter, that their presence is valued, and that they are a part of something bigger. Provide students an on-ramp to community and campus engagement.

### **Residents will feel a sense of inclusion and belonging.**

This may be difficult to assess, as it represents a feeling. Do your residents feel included and that they belong? Ask them. Look at campus climate survey data. Actively remove impediments to residents feeling like they belong. Train staff in techniques to make sure their residents feel included. Developing a more inclusive environment is a constant practice that examines structures, policies, and actions.

One of the paradoxes of residence life is that success sometimes looks like your residents needing you less. If students begin seeking engagement beyond the residence halls (joining student orgs, forming study groups, attending campus events) that's a sign that your foundational work has taken root. This doesn't mean residence life becomes irrelevant. It means the community has done its job. It's launched students into broader networks of support and belonging. For campuses with multi-year residential models, it's natural for upper-division students to require different kinds of support (and often less support) than first-year residents. This shift should be celebrated and anticipated. Don't force a complicated upper-class student experience.

*The folks at Texas Christian University have been experimenting with a model rooted in relationships and belonging. Check out their "Knowing, Connecting, and Empowering" (KCE) model for more ideas on how to develop your work in this area (Allen, 2025). Also check out the symposium they hold on the model.*

When planning community engagement, don't fall into the trap of just counting the overall number of programs or touchpoints. Instead, consider pacing and sustainability. Fifty social events sound impressive, but if they all occur in one week at the end of term, they will not be effective in reaching your goals (and will also lead to burnout for staff and students alike). Fifty meaningful opportunities spaced throughout the semester offer consistency, allow for reflection, and give students something to look forward to. And don't overcomplicate it. Sometimes simplicity is the best strategy. Remember that the goal is trying to develop relationships, a sense of belonging, and, yes, even just have fun.

Community and belonging do not just happen through programs, either. Fostering belonging also happens through other actions: a resident advisor knocking on a student's door just to check in, physical signage and decorations, or a policy change that signals inclusion and care. Community is shaped just as much by actions, systems, and structures as by events and initiatives. Support your staff in understanding how to foster this. Train staff to recognize when students are withdrawing and how to approach conversations around marginalization or loneliness. Intentionally check-in on the health of communities during supervision meetings.

## Learning Goals

In addition to building community and making students feel like they belong, residence life also presents opportunities for residents to learn. The following three learning goals are key objectives that residence life is uniquely positioned and equipped to help residents learn. These goals are the core of most residence life learning objectives for their residents.

### **Learning About Self:**

#### **Residents will have a sense of identity and purpose.**

Residence life professionals aim to support students in their personal growth, which is central to student development theory. Understanding one's identity, values, beliefs, background, and future goals is foundational to success in college and beyond. Helping residents explore and solidify their sense of self ensures that the residential experience contributes meaningfully to their long-term development. Helping them find purpose will enable them to set and achieve goals.

#### **Examples of how residents learn this:**

- Attending identity-based workshops (e.g., “Who Am I?” or “My Values Journey”).
- Participating in roommate agreements and guided conversations that ask residents to reflect on their needs and communication styles.
- Engaging in one-on-one conversations with student staff that explore their goals, values, and sense of belonging.
- Career services workshops that focus on career exploration, planning, and goal setting.

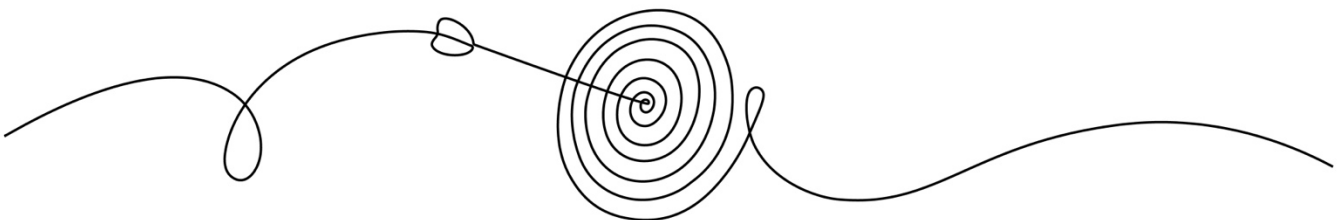
### **Living & Working With Others:**

#### **Residents will peaceably live and collaborate with others.**

Teaching residents how to interact respectfully and effectively with others is essential to creating a positive and inclusive living experience for all. Many students are living with non-family members for the first time. The ability to communicate, compromise, and handle differences constructively is critical not only to residence hall success but also to professional and personal life post-college. No other campus department integrates students so closely as residence life in communal living environments. Residence life staff can address conflicts in real time, model healthy interpersonal behavior, and facilitate programs that encourage understanding across difference.

#### **Examples of how residents learn this:**

- Participating in roommate/suitemate mediation facilitated by student staff.
- Engaging in community agreements during the first weeks of the semester.
- Attending workshops on conflict resolution or communication skills.
- Taking part in team-based service projects or hall competitions that require cooperation and collaboration.





## **Life Skills:**

### **Residents will develop practical life skills to navigate life challenges.**

College students often struggle with managing time, money, and other responsibilities. Without the skills to navigate these stressors, their academic performance and personal well-being can suffer. Learning to overcome challenges improves independence, confidence, and resiliency. Residence halls provide a unique living-learning laboratory where students can practice and refine these skills daily. Equipping residents with practical skills supports their success in college and in life afterward.

#### **Examples of how residents learn this:**

- Attending workshops on budgeting, meal planning, or stress management.
- Managing their own laundry, cleaning, and time for the first time.
- Learning through informal mentorship from older peers and student staff.

## **Outcomes and Rubrics**

The above are the goals and narratives for a residence life curriculum. On the next page each of these goals are broken out into sub-outcomes along with rubrics for each of those sub-outcomes. If you're familiar with designing a curricular approach, these are the final pieces of outlining an objectives cascade (Kerr, et al., 2020).

**Outcomes** provide greater specificity, and thus measurability, for your practice and assessment efforts. In the Framework, each of the three goals has two outcomes, for a total of six. As with the goals, having fewer outcomes is better. This forces staff to focus and provides more clarity as to what's most important.

**Rubrics** break each of the outcomes down into a series of successive stages. This will be useful in later sections when trying to put the Framework into practice and constructing a student journey. The rubrics have four stages and are outlined for a traditional four-year college experience—from “entering” through graduation. Years 3 and 4 are combined as residence life is less likely to have third and fourth year residents on campus. Additionally, these residents will be increasingly independent and thus less reliant on residence life experiences as a source of learning.

## **About These Learning Objectives**

The proposed set of goals, narratives, outcomes, and rubrics are designed to be universal to residence life departments in the United States that work with traditionally aged four-year-degree seeking colleges students. They are also designed to represent the core of residence life work. The areas residence life is best positioned to teach. I encourage you to tweak the language to better fit your campus culture. I encourage you to adjust/shift the rubrics if they don't fit your residents. I also encourage you to increase areas of emphasis in your practice if your students struggle with some outcomes more than others and even remove goals and outcomes if they're not relevant. What I would *not* encourage you to do is add additional goals and outcomes beyond this number. Or, if you do want to add a goal or outcome, have it replace one of those here. Having too many goals and outcomes increases complexity and has the potential to decrease your focus and effectiveness. Don't get bogged down.

**A Note About “Rubrics.”** Rubrics are a heuristic. A tool. Learning is messy and although the rubrics show neatly defined stages in boxes, not all students will start in the same place nor end in the same place. Students won't progress through the stages in an orderly fashion. The utility of rubrics is how they can help in your overall educational journey planning, design, and practice. Individualized student support (the third “C” of care) allows for situating learning uniquely to a student.

**A Note About “Curriculum.”** Some professionals object to the using of the word curriculum to describe this work. Curriculum merely means borrowing techniques of educational design and applying them to the opportunities creates for students. If the use of the word “curriculum” presents a barrier, consider it a learning plan, or engagement plan. It's merely educational design.

# Residential Student Learning Goals

## 1. Learning About Self: Residents will have a sense of identity and purpose.

**Outcome 1-1:** Students will be able to define who they are and what they believe.

Entering	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3 & 4
Student may not have explored or critically examined their identities or beliefs.	Student will be exposed to and learn about different beliefs and people with different backgrounds and identities.	Student will begin to define or redefine who they are and what they believe.	Student will develop a firmer definition of who they are and what they believe.

**Outcome 1-2:** Students will be able to act towards their goals and who they want to be.

Entering	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3 & 4
Student may not have goals or the goals may be ill-defined. The student may not be committed to their goals.	Student will define, explore, and revise goals.	Student will begin to make commitments to goals and develop plans for achieving them.	Student will actively pursue opportunities to help them achieve their goals.

## 2. Living and Working With Others: Residents will peaceably live and collaborate with others.

**Outcome 2-1:** Students will be able to navigate conflict in pursuit of resolution.

Entering	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3 & 4
Student may not have encountered significant conflict or have skills for navigating or resolving it.	Student will recognize conflict and begin to develop skills to forestall or mediate conflict.	Student will actively apply skills to forestall or mediate conflict.	Student will adapt to different conflict situations and further develop skills.

**Outcome 2-2:** Students will be able to live and work with people who are different from them.

Entering	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3 & 4
Student may not have been exposed to others with diverse backgrounds.	Student will gain knowledge about others from different cultures, backgrounds, and identities.	Student will engage with and actively connect with others from different cultures, backgrounds, and identities.	Student will be able to adapt to collaborate with others from different cultures, backgrounds, and identities.

## 3. Life Skills: Residents will develop practical life skills to navigate life challenges.

**Outcome 3-1:** Residents will be able to integrate their own definition of holistic wellness into their lives.

Entering	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3 & 4
Student may not have thought about wellness or defined wellness goals for themselves.	Student will define wellness goals, gain knowledge about the goal areas, and begin to act.	Student will apply and adapt strategies in furtherance of the wellness goals.	Student will adapt wellness goals, and their knowledge and strategies as circumstances change.

**Outcome 3-2:** Residents will be able to navigate practical life challenges

Entering	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3 & 4
Student may not have developed practical life skills or been responsible for living independently as an adult.	Student will identify practical life skills they need to develop, gain knowledge in those areas, and begin to act.	Student will exhibit habit and practices that allow them to lead more independent lives.	Student will adapt, gaining new knowledge and skills for practical life concerns as they evolve.

## Individualized Support Goals

So far, this book has outlined goals for for community and engagement and what residents can and should learn during their residential experience. The final set of goals, called individualized support goals, are how residents can be supported more uniquely in their journeys. This is where the student experience can be more tailored to an individual resident's needs.

### **Residents will receive proactive support when they encounter difficulty or to further enhance their success.**

College life comes with both predictable and unexpected challenges: academic stress, mental health concerns, homesickness, roommate conflicts, identity development, and more. Waiting for students to ask for help can mean missing crucial intervention windows. Many students (especially first-years, first-generation students, or those from marginalized backgrounds) may not know when or how to seek help.

#### **How residence life can put this into practice:**

- **Early check-ins and outreach:** Student and professional staff can regularly check in with residents, especially during high-stress periods (e.g., midterms, the first 6 weeks, holidays).
- **Wellness or success plans:** Staff can co-create individualized plans with residents who are struggling or want to meet specific goals.
- **Behavioral or academic early alert systems:** Collaborate with campus partners (e.g., advising or counseling) to identify and reach out to students showing signs of concern.
- **Celebrating progress:** Proactive support also means lifting up residents' successes. Recognizing achievements, resilience, or growth can build confidence and motivation.

### **Residents will be connected to offices and support services according to their needs.**

Students often face complex challenges that no single office can fully address. Many students don't know about the full range of campus resources (academic tutoring, food pantries, identity-based centers, disability services, career offices, etc.). Personalized guidance makes it easier for students to get the right help at the right time.

#### **How residence life can put this into practice:**

- **Resource training for staff:** Ensure student and professional staff are knowledgeable about what services are available and how to refer residents effectively.
- **Needs-based referrals:** During conversations, student staff members can ask about specific barriers (e.g., "Have you been eating regularly?" "Have you spoken to your professor?") and guide residents toward appropriate offices.
- **Information campaigns:** Use bulletin boards, newsletters, and social media to promote specific offices during peak times (e.g., financial aid deadlines, mental health awareness month).
- **Personalized follow-ups:** After connecting a student to a service, check back in to see if the connection was successful and if further support is needed.

Together, these goals highlight a resident-centered approach to residence life work by anticipating needs, building strong staff-resident relationships, and integrating the residential experience into the broader student support network. When done well, these practices contribute significantly to retention, well-being, and student success. It represents the third and final category of the goals of residence life work.

This is one area where Roompack's software is unmatched. It is purpose-built for this kind of work. Working in tandem with the software you have for tracking students of concern and care team efforts (ex. Maxient), Roompack functions as an informal system for early detection and coordinating proactive interventions. Together both pieces of software can help you extend your web of support for students. Roompack's AI tools and Insights reports can be particularly useful. This is why Dean of Students offices, although not primary users of our software, often have a deep interest into integrating it into their overall systems.

## How: Putting Purpose & Goals Into Practice

This book started with the *Why* or purpose of residence life, set goals through the *What*, and now it's time to put it into practice with the *How*. For each of the “Three C’s” outlined below, examples of the work staff would engage in are provided. This has implications for job expectations and supervision.

Community	Curriculum	Care
<p><b>Student Staff</b> offer social activities and connect residents to engagement opportunities on campus at regular intervals. Some could be predefined (ex. community meetings), spontaneous (ex. floor dinners), or campus-based (ex. a lecture).</p> <p><b>Professional Staff</b> check-in and advise to ensure healthy communities and engagement.</p>	<p><b>Student Staff</b> help in the execution of strategies such as: Agreements, Campaigns, Centralized Events, etc. in service of the above identified learning goals.</p> <p><b>Professional Staff</b> help design and guide those strategies.</p>	<p><b>Student Staff</b> meet for intentional/mentorship conversations at regular intervals and check in with supervisors about individual residents.</p> <p><b>Professional Staff</b> do escalated outreach and refer to behavioral intervention teams, academic support teams and other offices as appropriate.</p>

Again, although these three are represented as separate categories, they all inter-relate. For example, fun community events are also spaces where students can learn, and staff can identify students who are struggling or thriving. Learning opportunities are also spaces for residents to connect with each other and a space for staff to help individual residents. Intentional conversations, as a part of customized care, are also learning opportunities and an opportunity to encourage connections and community.

### Community

At its core, community development is about fostering connection. But the word *community* can get thrown around so often and so loosely it loses meaning. Community is often a feeling, but it also has some very clear signs it is present. Community in residence life is about cultivating a culture of care where students feel safe, seen, connected, and supported.

**Student staff are on the frontlines.** Their job isn't to run the most elaborate event. It's to create regular, accessible, meaningful opportunities for residents to show up and connect. Student staff should know their residents by name, know who's showing up (and who's not), and create low-barrier entry points to engagement. They also intervene to “pick up” a resident who may be falling through the cracks.

**Professional staff are the system builders.** Their job is to guide and support student staff in doing this work effectively and sustainably. That includes coaching student staff around community dynamics, identifying early signs of disengagement or conflict, and providing scaffolding when students struggle. The best professional staff community builders not only demonstrate these values in their own practice, but use 1-on-1 and supervision time with student staff to regularly check in on the health of communities and coach and guide them in developing their communities. Engaged supervision is critical.

Community isn't a checklist. It's a mentality. The best community builders aren't necessarily the busiest program planners. They're the ones who are intentional, observant, and consistent. They recognize that small acts (a follow-up conversation, a hallway birthday celebration, a door note after a tough exam) often have a big impact. Our measurement of success in this area should also reflect this. The number of community programs occurring is an imperfect and maybe poor measure of success.

## Curriculum

This is where residence life transitions from simply providing opportunities to designing them. Curriculum is about being proactive, not reactive. It's about asking: *What do we want residents to learn? How can we design experiences that make them more likely to learn it? How do we sequence these experiences to make that learning timely?*

**Student staff are implementers and facilitators.** Their job is not to design learning outcomes from scratch, it's to deliver the strategies developed by the professional team in a way that feels natural and authentic. This might include facilitating community agreements, guiding reflective conversations, or leading campaigns and programs designed around identity development, communication skills, or wellness.

**Professional staff act as designers and coaches.** They take the broad learning outcomes (e.g., "Residents will have a sense of identity and purpose") and build a developmentally appropriate plan that translates into strategies student staff can execute. This means pacing learning opportunities over the semester, providing content scaffolds, and supporting student staff in understanding the "why" behind the "what." It's similar to what new student orientation programs do, but over a longer period of time.

Curriculum doesn't mean rigid. It means intentional. Think less about a binder full of lesson plans and more about a map. A map that guides residents from entering to emerging adulthood, through experiences that help them reflect, grow, and connect. It should be simple, flexible, and staff-friendly. The best curriculum is one that student staff can engage with and feel ownership over.

## Care

The third "C" is about customizing a student's experience and providing individualized support. All students come to the residence halls with a diverse background of life experiences and identities. This is an opportunity to support them individually, especially when our broader-based approaches may fail. It's also an opportunity to catch students who are slipping through the cracks. It's where residence life functions not just as a programming and engagement office but as a student support network.

**Student staff are observers and connectors.** Their most important tool? The intentional conversation. Through one-on-ones, casual check-ins, and community engagement, they notice who's thriving and who's withdrawing. They don't need to solve every issue, but they need to listen, ask the right questions, and know when (and how) to elevate or refer concerns.

**Professional staff are case managers and referral experts.** They take what student staff notice and provide follow-up, triage, and connection to additional resources. Sometimes this means working with behavioral intervention teams or counseling services. Sometimes it means a series of quiet check-ins and coordination behind the scenes. Their role is to ensure that no student slips through unnoticed.

Care and case management isn't just about when students reach a crisis point. It's about catching the in-between and the before. It also isn't just about helping students who are struggling. The student who's thriving might need help stretching to the next level, just as much as the student in distress needs help. Individualized support is what makes the residence life experience feel truly personal.

# Implementing The Framework

In implementing the “Three C” Framework, rather than start with what you currently do and adapt it, start with a clean slate. This is known as backwards design. Start with your goals and outcomes in mind and then build the structures to achieve those objectives. This will allow you to build something new, from the ground up, without being beholden to previous structures or baked in assumptions. It’s likely you may keep some aspects of your current practice, if they are effective, but weigh those (or even redesign those) against your outcomes.

## Mapping

Although not purely backwards design, one strategy I find effective is to begin with a time-based mapping exercise. This is similar to how one may map out a syllabus. The purpose of this exercise is to begin with some structure and to balance staff time and resident time. Mapping helps find the sweet spot where experiences are spaced out, aligned with developmental moments (midterms, transitions, holidays), and realistically doable by the staff charged with implementing them.

### When creating your map, consider:

- Are we distributing workload across the term in a way that honors staff capacity?
- Do students have predictable and meaningful opportunities to connect, reflect, and receive support?
- Are we maximizing synergy between the “Three Cs” so one activity can accomplish multiple goals?

### Center the Student Experience

The best implementation strategies are those that keep students at the center. Ask yourself: What does a first-year resident actually *experience* over the course of a semester in our halls? Is it coherent? Is it scaffolded? Is it inclusive? This is where reflection becomes critical. Gather feedback. Observe participation trends. Listen closely to staff who are closest to the students. What you hear may not always align with what’s written on your strategy documents. That’s valuable information. A strong implementation plan doesn’t just push information *at* staff or students, it creates space for dialogue, feedback, and responsiveness. It encourages staff to meet students where they are, not just where we hope they’ll be.

### Consider these guiding questions:

- What does it feel like to be a student moving through our system?
- Are there barriers to engagement, learning, or support that we’ve unintentionally created?
- How are students invited to co-create their experience, rather than just consume it?

### The Process of Mapping

You can find an example of a map on the next page. Mapping is a process, which is hard to convey in a printed final page. The process of adding, moving, and adjusting allows you to work through balancing time and sequencing/scaffolding experiences. The learning you gain during this process will be useful in the next stage which is developing the content.

- **Step 1:** Create a four-column chart with each week of the term along the left, and each of the next three columns representing the Three Cs.
- **Step 2:** Enter in your “immovables.” These are the events and dates in your calendar that you do not have control over. These include the start date of the academic year, important campus events (ex. homecoming, student organization fairs, career fairs), holidays, and local/state/national events like election days. Place these into your map first.
- **Step 3:** Add in placeholders into the cells of the table. These can include specific strategies you know you will utilize to help achieve your goals and outcomes or strategy placeholders. These act as “containers.” We’re not concerned with the content of these containers just yet, that will come later. **Resist the urge to fill every cell. There does not need to be something in every cell. Give yourself some breathing space.** Keep balancing these as you place them to consider staff and resident time: *How much is too much to expect of staff? Are residents experiencing consistency week-to-week and are we overloading too many competing opportunities? Are our strategies happening at a developmentally opportune time?*

# A Sample Residence Life Map Utilizing the Framework

## First Year First Semester

	Community	Curriculum	Care
<b>Week 0</b> <i>Pre-Opening</i>	Learn Resident Names & Backgrounds	Hang Bulletin Board or Distribute Newsletter	<i>Informal Check-Ins</i>
<b>Week 1</b> <i>Welcome Weeks</i>	Community Meeting	Roommate Agreements	<i>Informal Check-Ins</i>
<b>Week 2</b> <i>Welcome Weeks / Org Fair</i>	Welcome Weeks	Roommate Agreements	<i>Informal Check-Ins</i>
<b>Week 3</b>	All-Hall Planned		Intentional Conversation Round 1
<b>Week 4</b> <i>Homecoming</i>	<i>Spontaneous, Planned, or Take-To</i>	[Strategy?]	Intentional Conversation Round 1
<b>Week 5</b> <i>Mid-Terms Grades</i>	<i>Spontaneous, Planned, or Take-To</i>	Hang Bulletin Board or Distribute Newsletter	Intentional Conversation Round 1
<b>Week 6</b>	<i>Spontaneous, Planned, or Take-To</i>		Intentional Conversation Round 1
<b>Week 7</b>	<i>Spontaneous, Planned, or Take-To</i>	[Strategy: Election Related?]	<i>Informal Check-Ins</i>
<b>Week 8</b>	Community Meeting		<i>Informal Check-Ins</i>
<b>Week 9</b>	<i>Spontaneous, Planned, or Take-To</i>		Intentional Conversation Round 2
<b>Week 10</b> <i>Election Day</i>	<i>Spontaneous, Planned, or Take-To</i>	Hang Bulletin Board or Distribute Newsletter	Intentional Conversation Round 2
<b>Week 11</b> <i>Course Registration</i>	<i>Spontaneous, Planned, or Take-To</i>	[Strategy: Course Registration?]	Intentional Conversation Round 2
<b>Week 12</b>	<i>Spontaneous, Planned, or Take-To</i>		Intentional Conversation Round 2
<b>Week 13</b> <i>Thanksgiving</i>	<i>Spontaneous, Planned, or Take-To</i>	[Strategy?]	<i>Informal Check-Ins</i>
<b>Week 14</b> <i>Finals</i>	All-Hall Planned		<i>Informal Check-Ins</i>
<b>Week 15</b> <i>Campus Closing</i>	Community Meeting		<i>Informal Check-Ins</i>

The example is for a first-year student in their first term. This mapping can be extended to an entire residence hall experience incorporating maps for every term and/or year you're likely to have a student on campus. Naturally, these maps may become lighter and less full as you reach further into a resident's journey and residents become more independent and less reliant on residence life for goals and outcomes achievement.

## Why This Mapping Matters

Beyond scheduling, and beyond task delegation, the deeper value of implementing this framework lies in coherence. When done well, implementation provides students with a throughline. It creates a sense that the things happening around them are intentional, connected, and designed with their success in mind. It builds a culture where engagement isn't random, and support isn't reactive. And for staff members, clear implementation reduces burnout, increases confidence, and fosters a sense of purpose. It helps every team member, from a student staff member to a director, understand the "why" behind their work and see how even small actions feed into a larger impact. Ultimately, implementing the Three Cs is about creating an ecosystem where student development can thrive, and where staff are equipped to make that happen with clarity, care, and confidence.

## Anticipate (and Embrace) Adaptation

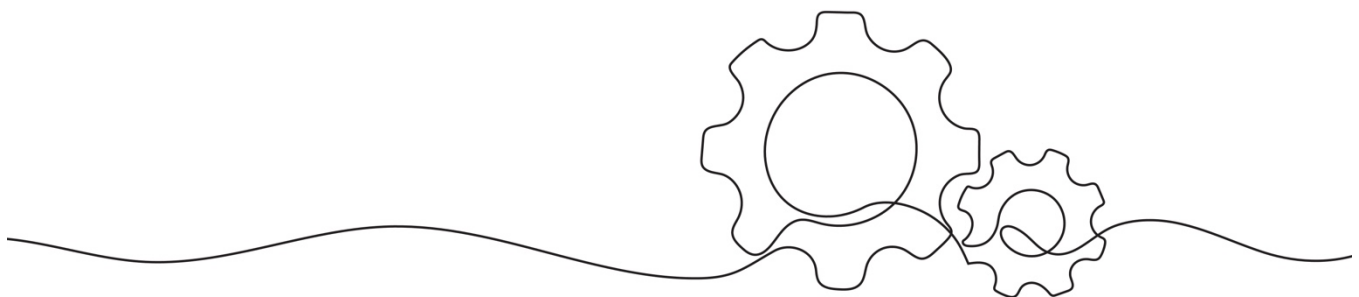
No implementation plan survives first contact with a residence hall full of actual students. And that's okay. The goal of the Framework is not rigidity, but responsiveness. As your team begins to implement the Three Cs, give them permission (and encouragement) to adjust, iterate, and evolve.

Create a culture where learning from implementation is valued:

- Hold regular debriefs after major initiatives and at staff meetings to ask what worked, what didn't, and why. Capture this feedback.
- Create space for staff to propose changes based on what they're seeing and hearing. (And make those changes to your guides *now*, don't wait until a crunch time next year.)
- View initial implementation as a pilot, and subsequent changes as iteration, not as a permanent fixture.

The strength of this model lies in its adaptability. What works for a high-rise first-year hall might look different in a suite-style upper-division community. Your map, your strategies, and your pacing should reflect the needs and rhythms of your unique campus culture and student population.

**About Mapping.** Mapping can be used in numerous ways in educational design and assessment. The example provided here is merely one. Other maps can help you determine if learning objectives are being met by your curriculum, where and how often. If you want to do a deeper dive into maps (and inventories) check out the work by Peggy L. Maki (2004).



**A “vivid vision”?** If you lead a department, you might want to check out *Vivid Vision: A Remarkable Tool For Aligning Your Business Around a Shared Vision of the Future* (2017) by Cameron Herold. Ardell Sanders and Amanda Knerr introduced me to this work and it can help provide strategic clarity in your thinking and a tangible roadmap for your staff.



## Strategies

Now that the mapping has occurred and areas have been identified for content, the next step is to figure out what content should be conveyed, where, and through what vehicle. This is where strategies come into play. They are the various engagement opportunities and connection points provided to residents. Programs are the most easily identified form of strategy, but there are many more. Under a classroom analogy, this is akin to a teacher deciding if the content is best conveyed and learned through a lecture or a discussion, in group work or solo work, with required or optional readings, etc. This is the same process one would undertake with learning-centric design (Kerr, et al, 2020).

On the next page are some examples of strategies you may utilize along with suggestions about how they may fit into the Framework. Don't think of these as neatly defined. Some approaches a department may use will be hybrids of a few of these strategies. You may even have strategies that aren't even on this list. You could also leverage other opportunities on campus to create your strategies. For example, if your campus rec center offers intramurals, rather than create your own in-house intramurals, have staff take the lead in organizing teams. It's not about what department gets "credit" for putting on the event, but the engagement. Build off the work of your partners. Furthermore, there might be other ways to enhance this partnership. This is a great way to look for goal alignment with other departments and leverage residence life's access to students in a smart collaborative way as opposed to a transactional way.

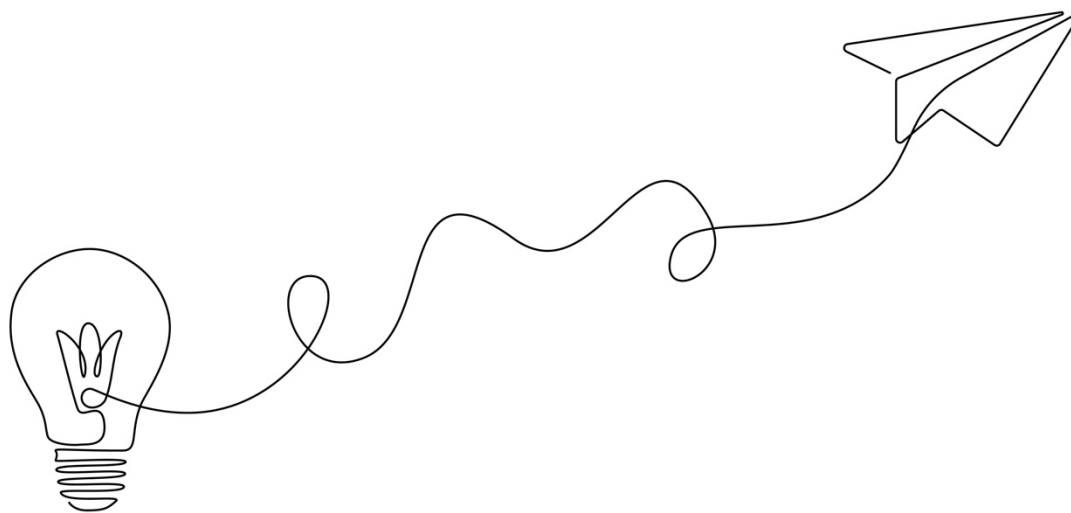
### Revisiting Mapping

Now that you've begun to identify strategies it's time to revisit your original map. Revisiting your map allows you to refine the balance between staff capacity, student developmental moments, and learning progression. You're no longer mapping based only on time and workload. Now, you're layering in intentionality.

#### Ask yourself:

- Where does this strategy best fit in a resident's journey?
- What needs to come before this for it to make sense or have maximum impact?
- Are we stacking too many strategies in one week and then leaving gaps later on?
- How are we integrating outcomes throughout the term, not just clustering them in silos?

In this second pass, you're starting to build a narrative arc for the resident experience. You're moving from a calendar of activities to a scaffolded developmental plan. This is also the time to cut or adjust. Not every good idea needs to make the map. The right number of experiences is the number your staff can deliver well and your students can absorb meaningfully. Think quality, not quantity.



## Sample Explanation Of Strategies From A Student Staff Member Viewpoint

**Social Activities** – There is an expectation that student staff have some type of social activity for their residents each week. This does not need to be a complicated program. Meeting to go to dinner together in the dining hall counts. Baking cookies and sharing them door-to-door counts. Watching a movie together counts. Of course, you can make a more complicated social program if you wish, but this is beyond expectations. For some weeks, holding a community meeting (required) will count as the social activity. And some of the weeks must be a “Take-To.”

**Take-To's** – Take-To's are opportunities to go together with your residents to an existing campus event. A Take-To list has been generated with vetted programs that fit with the learning goals we have for students. If you want to propose an alternate event not on the approved list, talk to your supervisor. Your residents may be particularly interested in a specific topic, or maybe have a specific need. (Don't just pick events you are interested in, think through what your residents would be interested in and benefit from.)

**Community Meetings** – There are two predefined community meetings (required) at the beginning and end of the term. We will give you sample agendas with the information that needs to be covered, but beyond that, you can personalize it and make it your own. If you feel like your community needs additional meetings, you can hold those and it will count as your social activity for the week. Make sure to log attendance for this through Roompack.

**Campaigns** – Sometimes called “passive programming,” there will be a series of educational campaigns going on throughout the year. This may require you to hand out newsletters, put up pre-designed bulletin boards, table in the lobby, etc. Don't worry too much about these. We'll give you all the information and materials you need. Although it appears in the schedule that these happen at specific times, in reality they are ongoing and multiple themes and topics can be going on at once. (For example, our residents don't just experience mental health issues during “Mental Health Week” so this is an ongoing effort throughout the year and will show up in multiple places at multiple times.)

**Agreements** – Student staff will meet individually with each roommate or suitemate pair/grouping to guide them through the completion of the roommate agreement. This also acts as a form of intentional conversation to learn more about your residents and an opportunity for you to develop a relationship with them. Be prepared to talk about each room/suite in your one-on-one with your supervisor. You're the expert on your community. Log notes in Roompack for potential future reference.

**Centralized Events** – These are organized by the professional staff, sometimes in partnership with other offices. They are larger-scale hall-wide, area-wide, or campus-wide events that focus in on some of the important learning goals we have for students. We'll ask for you to sit on committees to provide feedback and input on the planning process. We need your help.

**Intentional Conversations** – This is a key component of the work. Each student staff member will meet with residents twice per term to have a conversation with residents about how they are doing. We'll give you some guidance on topics you might want to probe around (this is what makes them “intentional” and not just “conversations”), but they are not meant to be formal robot-like discussions. This guidance is a starting point and includes things to look out for. The goal here is to help residents think through situations and issues they may be confronting and look for opportunities to provide support and make referrals. You'll log these via a form in Roompack and review these at your 1-1s with your supervisor each week as you talk through your community and residents. You might be asked to do some follow-up!

## Sequencing for Learning

As you tweak your map, think in terms of sequencing. Just as a formal course is organized around building skills and concepts over time, your map should do the same. Some learning outcomes naturally precede others. Use the rubrics as a guide here. If the learning outcomes move from exposure → engagement → application → integration, then your strategies should too.

### For example:

- **Before a resident can act toward their goals**, they need time and support to define them.
- **Before residents can resolve conflict**, they need exposure to diverse perspectives and opportunities to reflect on their own communication style.
- **Before a student can feel like they belong**, they need someone to know their name.

### Ask yourself:

- What do students need first?
- What scaffolding do we need to build toward more complex learning?
- Where do our intentional conversations fit within this arc and what should we be asking at different points?

This is also where the “Three Cs” come into focus as an integrated whole. A social activity can build community (Community Development), but with the right prompts, it can also reinforce learning (Curriculum) and provide moments of observation and connection (Care). Mapping isn't just planning. It's akin to storytelling. It's building an experience where each week builds on the last.

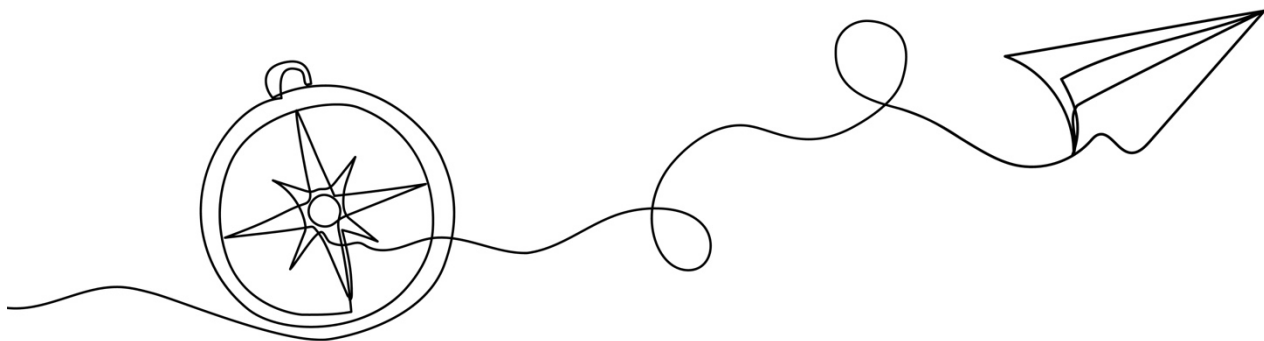
## Bringing the Map to Life

Once your map is revised, it becomes a tool for planning, communication, training, and assessment.

### Use the final map to:

- **Train staff:** Help them see the rhythm of the term and when/why different strategies are used.
- **Guide supervision:** Use the map in 1:1s to talk about pacing, stress points, and learning goals.
- **Support assessment:** Your map becomes a timeline to measure against. Did the strategies land at the right moments? Were there bottlenecks? Gaps?

Encourage staff to use the map not just as a schedule, but as a compass. It's not just about delivering tasks and checking boxes. It's about knowing what they're trying to achieve, when, and how it fits into the broader journey. Maps are living documents. Leave room for updates based on feedback. Leave room for the unforeseen events that inevitably impact residence life practice. Also invite staff to contribute insights. As they bring the strategies to life, they'll notice where the plan works and where it stumbles.



## Guides

Guides aid in providing guidance to staff and open the possibility for continuous improvement. Unlike other models where activities, events, and initiatives are individually staff-driven and subject to change as staff change, guides provide baseline consistency that allows for better assessment and iterative improvement over time. They also give guidance to staff. They make planning easier and reduce workload burdens. Just as a teacher prepares a lesson plan, guides outline the “what,” “why,” and “how” of initiatives. This reduces the need to “reinvent the wheel” every year and allows for staff to iterate and improve the student experience year-over-year.

Guides serve multiple functions:

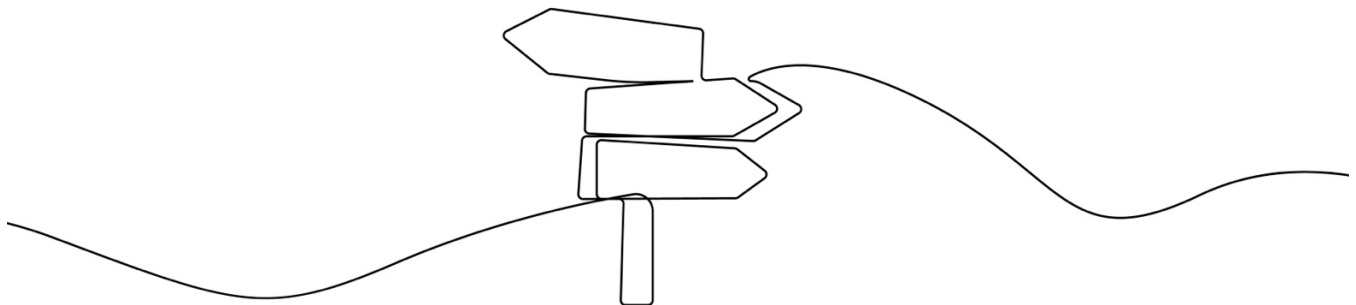
- **They onboard new staff** into their roles more effectively.
- **They maintain consistency** across teams and buildings.
- **They preserve institutional memory** across staff transitions.
- **They allow for reflection and iteration**, enabling departments to improve over time.

A well-crafted guide should walk the line between being structured and flexible. It should provide enough detail for someone unfamiliar with the topic to lead confidently, but not so much that it becomes a rigid script. The goal is to create a framework for success that still leaves room for authenticity and adaptation.

Each guide typically includes:

1. **Purpose and Outcomes** – What this activity, meeting, or conversation is designed to achieve.
2. **Context and Timing** – When in the semester this strategy should occur and why it’s developmentally relevant.
3. **Materials and Setup** – What staff need to prepare and what resources are required.
4. **Facilitation Tips** – How to create a welcoming space, manage group dynamics, or handle sensitive topics.
5. **Suggested Prompts or Activities** – Specific language, questions, or exercises that anchor the experience.
6. **Debrief and Reflection** – How to close the experience and connect it back to the resident’s journey.
7. **Feedback Loop** – How and where to record what worked and what could improve for future iterations.

Guides should be treated as living documents. Encourage staff to provide input on what resonates with students, what feels forced, and where they need more support. Over time, these documents become stronger. When staff feel equipped and supported in their role, they show up with more confidence and consistency. And when residents encounter that kind of intentionality, the outcomes are deeper and more meaningful.



# Assessment

Assessment drives reflection, refinement, and improvement in residence life practice. Without it, departments risk operating on assumption or inertia, continuing programs and processes out of habit rather than evidence of impact. In the Three Cs Framework, assessment is not an end-of-year checkbox. It is a continuous loop of learning that informs everything from daily decisions to long-term strategy. (Check out Kennedy, 2016's great work on "Double Loop" Assessment to learn more.)

**There are three core questions every residence life assessment strategy should address:**

1. Are students achieving the intended outcomes?
2. Are our strategies effective in producing these outcomes?
3. Are there gaps in our support, engagement, or educational design?

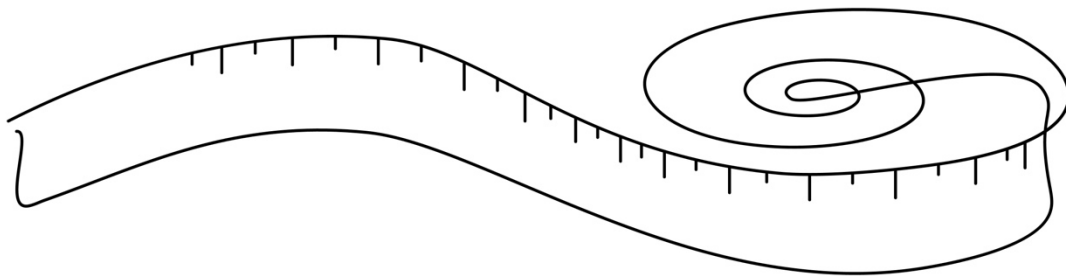
**To answer these questions, assessment should happen at multiple levels:**

- **Strategy-Level:** Did a specific workshop, campaign, or initiative resonate? Did it reach its intended audience? What qualitative and quantitative feedback can we gather?
- **Outcome-Level:** Are students progressing along our rubric-defined goals for learning, engagement, and support? Where do we see development? And where is it stalling?
- **Program-Level:** How does our overall residential experience map to student satisfaction, retention, and success?

**Tools for assessment can include:**

- Resident surveys
- Reflection activities or journaling prompts
- Focus groups
- Tracking attendance and engagement trends
- Learning rubrics (to assess student growth over time)
- Student and professional staff reflections
- Follow-ups on referrals or support interventions

Efforts here don't matter if the data just sits in a spreadsheet. Assessment must be *used*. Encourage your team to share what they're learning. Use it to adjust maps, tweak strategies, revise guides, or recalibrate expectations. Celebrate successes and name areas for growth without shame. Assessment should fuel curiosity, not compliance. Start small and build a culture of reflection rather than a bureaucracy of data. Assessment should feel like a conversation, not a report card.



This is where Roompack's software shines. Roompack's tools help facilitate processes, not *just* collect data. You can view that data from different angles and use that data in real time. In-app AI tools can also help you make sense of the data quickly. This is what sets Roompack apart from other software products that design a data collection tool just to check a box that says they "have a feature."

# Conclusion

Residence life work is both simple and complex at the same time. Its core is about building relationships, helping students learn, and creating a supportive environment that helps them thrive. Returning to the story that began this book, too often it feels like the field of residence life ping-pongs from one model to the next without intention. One group says, “We should focus on community!” while the other says “We should focus on student learning!” The truth is, we should focus on both and do so in the context of a community of care. You don’t need to choose one or the other. It’s a false choice.

There is also not one singular “magic model” that is THE answer for residence life or for specific departments. There will never be a completely clean and neat textbook of what to do. Human behavior is too complex. Society and our students evolve. Higher education is too decentralized. (those are strengths, not weaknesses.) But that is not to say that there aren’t things we have learned over time. There are principles and concepts that are durable and can guide our practice. What this book has attempted to do is offer a framework that is sturdy enough to provide consistency and clarity, while also being flexible enough to adapt and evolve. The “Three C’s” Framework is built off what’s been learned and provides a foundation. It helps define the purpose of residence life (our *why*), the goals (our *what*), and the strategies to put them into practice (our *how*).

It’s also important remain humble in this work. That means being open to feedback, willing to revise, and committed to learning alongside students. No model is a final product. It’s a living, breathing approach that should shift with time, culture, and context. Take this framework and adapt it for your campus. Use it to remain grounded in the core purposes of residence life.

## Re-centering Our Purpose

This is one of the central messages of the Framework. The importance of getting clear on residence life’s purpose. In a field that’s prone to mission drift, where well-intentioned professionals often take on more than is reasonable, purpose acts as an anchor. Residence life should focus on what it can do best: building belonging and engagement, facilitating meaningful learning outside the classroom, and providing individualized support when students need it. This focus allows staff to direct their energy where it can have the greatest impact. It reminds us that saying “no” to some things creates the space to say “yes” to what matters most.

## Why Simplicity Matters

Throughout this book there has been a consistent theme of simplicity. Clear accessible models set up success. A model that only lives in a policy binder, or that requires a graduate seminar to decipher, isn’t helping anyone. The more complex the structure, the harder it is to implement, especially across a team that includes undergraduate staff, entry-level professionals, and seasoned administrators (all of whom are changing and coming in and out of their positions over time). Simplicity doesn’t mean superficiality, either. It means clarity. It means cutting through the noise and focusing on the practices that create results. It’s about helping staff at all levels understand what the goals are, how their role contributes to those goals, and what tools they have available to achieve them.

## Holding the Tension: Standardization and Flexibility

One of the ongoing tensions in residence life work is between consistency and flexibility. How much should be standardized across buildings, areas, or campuses? How much should be left up to the discretion of staff who are closest to the students? The answer is both.

A strong framework offers a set of shared expectations and goals so that no matter where a student lives, they can count on a baseline of support and engagement. But it also creates space for staff to use their judgment, creativity, and connection with their community. The role of a professional is not to dictate every action, but to ensure that all roads lead back to the same student-centered outcomes. When this balance is struck well, staff feel both empowered and supported. Students feel both seen and guided. And the department builds a culture of trust and shared accountability, rather than compliance and micromanagement.

### **Staff Support is Student Support**

The way we treat our staff is inextricably linked to the experience of our students. Overworked, undertrained, or unclear staff cannot create thriving communities. Our ability to retain and grow talented residence life staff depends on our willingness to right-size expectations, streamline systems, and value staff time as much as we value student outcomes. The Framework isn't just about students. It's about giving staff a map. A well-designed model helps staff know what's expected, why it matters, and how to execute their responsibilities without burning out. It makes room for developmental growth, for building expertise over time, and for finding joy in the work.

### **Good Supervision is Key**

Although not explicitly discussed in this book, an undercurrent of the importance of good supervision runs throughout this work. The Framework cannot be successful if staff are not providing the right challenge, support, and guidance as supervisors. It's worth talking through what supervision looks like within this Framework. Being a "chill" supervisor isn't going to work. Engaged supervision that is resident-centered as much as it is staff-centered can ensure the accountability mechanisms are in place to set the Framework up for success.

### **Assessment as a Tool for Growth**

Assessment needs to be seen as an opportunity to explore, learn, and improve (not as a bureaucratic hoop to jump through). Additionally, for assessment to be useful, it must be manageable. Developing a culture of assessment means creating systems where the data that is collected feeds back into decision-making, training, and strategies. It is not *just* for annual reports. I've learned to take this to heart during my years working at Roompact. This is where a lot of my time working campuses has been spent. It's one of the reasons I often say you're not just buying software; you're buying into a system of support for your practice. Just collecting data isn't enough. You need to do something with it and integrate feedback loops into your practice.

### **Looking Forward**

The world students are entering is complex, uncertain, and rapidly changing. Our residence halls can be places that ground students in community, equip them with the skills they need to succeed, and support them through the inevitable ups and downs of college life. This only occurs if we're clear about what we're trying to achieve and disciplined in how we achieve it.

This Framework is a tool. A starting point. A way of organizing thinking, aligning actions, and building better systems. Take it and make it your own.

Keep it simple. Keep it intentional. Keep it student-centered. Keep adapting. Keep going.

And thank you for doing this work.



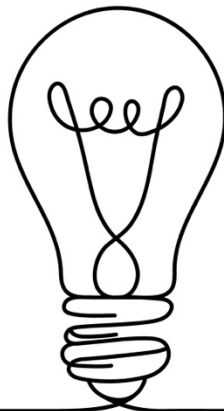
## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to the faculty of the Institute on the Curricular Approach for their knowledge and contributions, many of which have informed this book. I want to give blanket credit to all of them for where I cannot give specific credit as it is lost to time. If you want to delve deeper into the curriculum concepts explored in this book, check out the readings included in the reference list and consider attending ACPA's Institute on the Curricular Approach offered annually. ACUHO-I also has many conferences and resources specific to college student housing.

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AI tools were used to help in the refinement of the writing, but not content of this book.



## About The Author

Dr. Paul Gordon Brown (he/him/his) is a scholar, consultant, and speaker specializing in residential curriculum and curricular approaches to student learning outside the classroom. Paul has 25 years of professional experience in higher education and student affairs, holding positions within residence life ranging from Resident Assistant to Dean of Students. Paul holds a PhD in Higher Education from Boston College and has taught in the Higher Education Programs at Boston College and Merrimack College. Paul currently serves as the Director of the Campus Experience for the residence life and education software company, Roompack. An experienced presenter, Paul has had accepted and given over 100 refereed presentations at international and regional conferences. He has also offered residential curriculum and curricular approach workshops at nearly 50 different institutions. Paul served as a faculty member for the Institute on the Curricular Approach (formerly the Residential Curriculum Institute) for 14 years, was a faculty member for ACUHO-I's Professional Standards Institute, ACUHO-I's STARS College, and is a graduate of ACUHO-I's National Housing Training Institute. Paul is a prolific author, writing self-published work on residential curriculum and numerous peer-reviewed book chapters and articles on technology and student learning. Paul currently serves as a reviewer for the *The Journal of College and University Student Housing*.