At University of Dayton, Your Hallmates are Your Classmates, All First-Year Students Will Reside in 'Learning-Living Communities'

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(Editor’s Note: First-year University of Dayton students move into their residence halls on Thursday, Aug. 17. Classes begin Monday, Aug. 21.)

AT UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON, YOUR HALLMATES ARE YOUR CLASSMATES, ALL FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS WILL RESIDE IN ‘LEARNING-LIVING COMMUNITIES’

DAYTON, Ohio — When first-year student Julie Smith moves into a University of Dayton residence hall this month, she'll live in a "writing and the arts" learning-living community and share a floor with other students taking the same composition courses.

Her hallmates will be her classmates.

"To be absolutely honest, I figured I'd have to write a lot of papers in college and if I lived with English majors, they'd help me out," said Smith, 18, of Beavercreek, Ohio, with a laugh. "I'm majoring in pre-physical therapy, but my roommate is into the arts. It's good to room with someone of different interests. We'll complement each other."

This fall, the University of Dayton's strategy for blurring the lines between learning and living will shift into high gear when all entering first-year students take up residence in learning-living communities linked with their interest or major. As part of the second year of a pilot program, approximately 1,750 incoming students will live in one of 18 learning-living communities, with focus areas ranging from business, education and engineering to social justice or energy and sustainability.

It's all part of a new residential model of education that focuses on intentionally relating students' learning in the classroom to their residence hall communities. Research shows that such learning-living communities help improve grades and study habits and contribute to greater student retention.

Learning-living communities are becoming more common in higher education, but UD officials believe this initiative may be one of the most ambitious in the country because of the.

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extensive collaboration between tenured faculty and student development staff, according to Mary Morton, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

"What started as a faculty development opportunity has turned into a new way for the University of Dayton to look at our commitment to learning and living in community," she said.

University of Dayton administrators say the first-year learning-living communities grow out of the Marianist philosophy of education. The Marianists, the Roman Catholic teaching order of brothers and priests who founded UD, focus on educating "the whole person in a community of challenge and support."

Last fall, the University of Dayton piloted four learning-living communities and conducted focus groups to hear the students' thoughts. They overwhelmingly liked the experience, noting that they easily formed study groups to discuss course material, appreciated access to their professors and formed friendships quickly.

For instance, students in last year's social justice learning-living community were treated to weekly movie nights in their residence hall followed by discussion groups where they talked about social justice issues raised by films like Boondock Saints, Prince of Egypt and Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith. In addition, they performed at least 12 hours of community service each semester, often together.

It's not the first effort to integrate learning and living on the highly residential campus. In 2004, the University of Dayton opened ArtStreet and Marianist Hall. Located in the heart of the University neighborhood, ArtStreet is an innovative housing and arts complex for arts and non-arts majors. Marianist Hall looks like a traditional residence hall, but on the inside, college living quarters share space with technology-rich learning spaces, faculty and campus ministry offices, a spacious two-story bookstore, post office, credit union, food emporium and a 60-seat chapel. Every floor features living rooms, and there's even a dining room table for small groups of students to enjoy dinner with professors.

"We're trying to be more intentional about ensuring that students, particularly in their first year, experience integrated living and learning. We're taking what has been an essentially random housing assignment in the first year and intentionally trying to complement the curricular experience," said William Schuerman, vice president for student development and dean of students.

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