



Student Learning in College Residence Halls: What Works, What Doesn't, and Why

Blimling, Gregory S.
Wiley, 2015

Book Review

Tags: administration | residence life | student learning

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In a higher education climate of ever-increasing competition and demand for accountability, what residence halls can contribute toward institutional learning objectives has never been more important. Blimling's comprehensive work takes into account not only this fact, but also the multiplicity of potential philosophies and desired outcomes that may guide residence life professionals' efforts. The result is a nearly exhaustive list of possible approaches to fostering student learning in residence halls, substantiated by results from past studies.

Blimling begins with a review of the history of on-campus housing, followed by a description of the major strands of thought in housing and residence life philosophies. In chapters 2 and 3 he moves on to discuss biological and psychological development in college students and how these and other factors impact learning and cognition. Chapter 4 addresses the effects of different types of residence hall learning programs, while chapter 5 takes a brief digression to discuss key considerations when selecting and training residence life staff. Chapter 6 discusses how the structure (physical and otherwise) of residence halls influences students, and chapters 7 and 8 focus on ways residence life staff may shape the social and academic climate of residence halls to promote learning. Chapter 9 provides an in-depth discussion of assessing residence life programs, including strategies for implementing assessments, using the results, and establishing a culture of assessment. The last chapter presents possibilities for the future of residence halls, based on current trends in higher education and residence life.

The strength of Blimling's work lies in its thoroughness, particularly with regard to evidence. The majority of each chapter is occupied with summarizing findings from the literature on various elements of its subject matter; certainly the book lives up to its title's promise to show "what works, what doesn't, and why," in numerous aspects of student housing ranging from

the effects of over-long hallways to the ideal size for a study group. The consequence of this intense focus, however, is that it occasionally obscures the broader context of the information. Practical applications are discussed for many individual techniques, but rarely are they generalized into more comprehensive strategies for programs and initiatives. This may be by design, to encourage readers to develop customized programs for their own unique contexts. In practice, however, it makes it somewhat difficult at first to identify the potential utility of the wealth of information in each chapter, let alone in the entire book. It is easy to imagine a residence life professional turning to this work to find evidence that a specific strategy will be effective, but more difficult to imagine one finishing the book with a clear idea of what future directions in programming to pursue.

It is also worth noting that this book is written primarily for an audience of residence life professionals, and its usefulness to teaching faculty is limited. The principal exceptions are, as noted in the preface, “higher educational administrators and faculty who work with students in living and learning programs and other educational enrichment programs that operate in residence halls” (xvii-xviii). Faculty in residence will likely find it of interest, as will faculty advisors to, or participants in, living and learning groups in residence halls. For those simply interested in how to better integrate their teaching with residential learning initiatives, however, it will hold less value, as the majority of the work is focused on managing those aspects of student life that affect learning, rather than on designing or delivering educational programs themselves. For these reasons, I would recommend this book to residence life professionals and staff, faculty who participate in student residences, and faculty and graduate students in relevant areas of higher education administration. For all others, however, I would consider it optional.

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