



Residence Life Connections for SU Staff

Here are a couple of thoughts I have when thinking about residence life connected with challenge course experiences. In the mid-1980s I was an RA in Saint Martins, Rm 115. Those were the days when we used Outward Bound for our training each August. Those experiences have truly shaped who I am this day almost 30 years later. I hope these insights offer you value that you can apply not only to your time at SU but beyond. On Belay!

FIRST 3 MINUTES

We circled up: a symbol of equality and that all are welcome.

The colored spots were already laid out ahead of time. I was creating an environment of hospitality showing you that I had prepared ahead of time and I was ready for you.

I spoke to you first by greeting you in a clear, professional and enthusiastic manner.

I oriented you to the challenge course program and told you that we would be doing large group activities, low elements and high elements so that you had a sense of what to expect.

I intentionally set the tone during the first few minutes of the large group activity when I meet a group. I want to establish that I am casually competent, professional and can be trusted. I want to communicate that I truly care about the people I'm working with and how I conduct my program. Nothing I do or say is haphazard or unintentional.

So how can this guidance assist you in meeting your residents for the first time? Think about your first impression. Remember, you don't get a second chance to make a first impression. Will you shake hands, smile, look people in the eye, touch their shoulder, share a high five. Whatever you choose to do or say, know why you are doing what you're doing.

OPENING THE TOOLBOX IN THE FIRST 30 MINUTES

I try to use simple activities that people may have experienced sometime in their lives like, musical chairs, name games, jump rope, hop-scotch, or silly playground games. That familiarity allows me to then attach a teachable moment or educational point when the time is right. Simply stated, I intend to play with a purpose; a purpose that goes beyond just having fun.

The activity called "I Like People" involves the whole person: mind body and spirit. People are thinking, moving and feeling a little bit anxious, excited, and slightly competitive. This is generally a low risk activity and I get to assess if the people in the group can follow simple directions and have a willingness to play and be involved in the process. Clearly SU RA's want to play and be involved in the process.



The concept of change is always important in our programs. That's why we constantly change the rules and up the challenge. We invite you to step out of your comfort zone into the risk zone so that a reasonable amount of learning can occur. Quality learning will only occur if we create a safe learning environment. Pushing to the danger zone, whether physically or emotionally is immature, unprofessional and irresponsible.

The Full Value Commitment is the tool of choice to establish a safe place to learn and operate for a group. There are three simple parts: 1) safety is first, physical and emotional, 2) we ask the people be present to what it is that we are doing that we stay focused on the goal at hand, and 3) practice effective communication, that is giving and receiving honest appropriate feedback.

These concepts can be summarized in one word: respect. However I learned a long time ago I should never assume that all people understand the concept of respect. There is no such thing as common sense anymore; our communities are too diverse in our backgrounds. What a great opportunity this provides for us to lead and positively influence others.

LARGE GROUP ACTIVITIES THAT TEACH LARGE GROUP LESSONS

We played Turnstile and Keypunch during your time on the challenge course for large group activities. Both of these activities typically result in some level of success for a large group. Success at the outset is key to building confidence and hope for the future.

They both involve working through problems that can be frustrating due to the large size of the group.

As a leader it is crucial to be able to invite all people in the group to voice their opinion not just let one person do all the speaking. The one person autocratic leadership style is efficient but comes with many limitations. Having a shared leadership strategy that naturally emerges from the group can typically lead to simple successes and opportunity for people to get to know each other and their behavioral styles.

Large group activities that require problem-solving always produce the effect of paralysis through analysis, where people think more than do. On the challenge course we are trying to teach the lesson that doing usually will get a better result than thinking too long. That's why we put time limits on things.

SU RA's were successful during the challenge course because people gave insights and practiced effective communication, patience, and appreciating other viewpoints.

SMALL-GROUP ACTIVITIES

These intimate experiences involve 8 to 12 people over short periods of time that require problem-solving and negotiating various types of obstacles. All of the major team work components are required: communication, collaboration, planning, time management, decision-making, conflict management, dealing with failure, adjusting the strategy, reassessing the mission, etc.



These low element activities are a microcosm of what really happens in day to day teams. More than anything as an RA you need to be aware that students deal with these things throughout their college experience. You do not need to be an expert you just need to have your own experiences so that you can enter into the relationship with your residence to start the conversations about their successes and struggles.

SMALL-GROUP HIGH ELEMENTS

We climb high because we have an opportunity to learn skills in a safe and challenging way. The primary skill we try to teach climbers is how to set goals, how to take advice and follow very specific directions while asking for what you need.

Of course when it comes to setting goals we use two primary statements: what is your 100% guaranteed goal and what is your challenge goal. The process also involves asking you how can the team support you. The underlying point of this question is to get you to think about asking others to support you, a skill that most people pay no time. This is not a sense of weakness in fact it is a sign of strength and appreciating the power and diversity of the team.

Coaches and facilitators give very specific directions and advice that help you move toward your goals such as breathing, staying focused on the task at hand, and making decisions that prevent you from getting distracted.

Practicing using your voice is key. Asking for tension or slack on the rope helps you as you climb. Telling the facilitator you're ready to come down, encourages good decision-making when you know that you are at your limit or you have completed your challenge.

People on the ground need to listen to your goals and what type of support you ask for. Then they need to follow through and do what you asked. Listening to your residents is key to your leadership and influence on your floor. If it's all about you it will never be about them.

AT THE END OF THE DAY

As our program draws to a close we “process the experience to determine what was learned.” Once again we are in a circle and facilitators ask intentional questions to get you to reflect on the experiences of the day. Some questions are centered around something you are proud to have accomplished, or pointing out something someone did to help your team be successful. As people answer these questions or think about them, facilitators ask you to further clarify your responses trying to get you to be more specific and drill down into your answer. Can you name names of people, can you tell me exactly what they said, how exactly did they help you. Was it physical, emotional or spiritual help that they gave. The details matter.

Finally we ask you to give gold nuggets to other people, that is affirmations. The number one reason people leave their job is because of lack of affirmation, not insufficient pay or even not knowing their purpose or job dissatisfaction. It's all about other people recognizing them for the work they are doing.



What an opportunity you have to give affirmation to your residents if you pay attention to what they say and what they do. Get to know them and ask them questions, ask them how you can support them, ask them what they need. And most importantly make sure you support your fellow staff members. Once you have that trust built you get to ask them for their support toward your goals. Trust takes a lifetime to build and a minute to lose.

This collection of thoughts can connect your experiences with us to interactions you have over the rest of your life. The challenge course experience is one big metaphor that will remind you of skills and tools that you have at your fingertips. So, use it or lose it.

- Safety is always first, physical and emotional.
- All people matter.
- Your position gives you the ability to...empower others.
- Live out challenge by choice by stepping out of your comfort zone.
- Inviting is more long-lasting than commanding. Coercing and forcing are fairly ineffective.
- Fully value all those who you make commitments with, both at school, work and in relationships.
- Mission first, people always. Life is about forming and sustaining quality relationships.
- Life isn't all about you. The most successful people realize early that serving others is central to happiness.
- Intentional smiles and authentic laughter are more useful than sarcasm, cynicism and gossip.
- Ask for what you need.
- Belay ropes offer safety and support. What metaphorical belay ropes do you have?
- If we have two ears and one mouth, then what should we do twice as much as we...?
- Pay attention to that which matters. Listen, notice, remember, affirm. Affirm specifically and often.

May these years teach you many useful things. May these years set you on a course of success so that you can truly serve others across your lifetime. May you bear many fruits so that other may enjoy the wisdom you have gained and pass along. May you be successful in your time at Salisbury.

All my best,

Dan Ashe
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