

Relational leadership skills prepare students to make a difference on campus and beyond

Nobody would ever mistake Laura Steidl for George Wendt, the rotund actor who played the lovable lush Norm on NBC's popular sitcom *Cheers*. But when the sophomore enters the Warren Hall lounge late one April evening, her resident assistant, Cristina Moore, echoes the TV show's familiar greeting by joyfully calling out Steidl's name and inviting her to have a drink – an Italian soda, in this case, as opposed to Norm's malted beverage of choice.

All evening long, Moore connects with the residents under her charge. Some are invited to come back for a study break. Others get to share an academic or intramural sports triumph. Everyone is reminded that their little corner of the Whitworth community is indeed a place where everybody knows their name.

The same thing is happening all across campus as student leaders entice residents into conversation and community with pre-Cinco de Mayo celebrations, tiki-lounge music and dancing, deep-fried Oreo snacks and a best-left-unexplained activity involving bobbing for chocolate bars in bowls of Mountain Dew.

"A good night," says veteran Baldwin-Jenkins RA Arianna Petersen, "is when you can bring people together who might not otherwise interact. We try to focus not on how many people show up, but on whether even one meaningful connection is made."

The over-arching goal, says Associate Dean of Students Richard Mandeville, is to build a warm and supportive residential community where students have multiple points of contact – with roommates and other residents, with their student leaders, and with the resident directors.

This singular focus on relationship-building influences everything from the number of student leaders Whitworth hires and the diverse roles they assume to how they are trained and how they approach residence-hall programming, commu-

nity building and discipline. It also sets Whitworth apart from most other colleges and universities.

The editor of Reslife.net, an online magazine serving student-life professionals nationwide, heard about Whitworth's unique approach to residence-hall staffing and programming and asked Mandeville to write an article outlining his philosophy. The article was recently reprinted in *Talking Stick*, a magazine for the Association of College and University Housing Officers International.

In the article, Mandeville points out that Whitworth's leadership program, developed in the mid-1980s, employs a greater number and variety of student leaders than most colleges and universities. In addition to the typical slate of RAs, each Whitworth residence hall has ministry coordinators, health coordinators, and cultural diversity advocates – positions that don't even exist at most other schools.

Having these additional positions means that more students with more diverse skills and interests are able to take advantage of Whitworth's student-leadership opportunities and benefit from the personal growth and vocational experiences they provide. However, Mandeville adds, the time commitment is relatively low for most positions, so student leaders also can be involved in other extracurricular activities.

Hiring additional student leaders also results in an exceptionally favorable ratio of residents to leaders in Whitworth's residence halls – about 10-to-1, far better than the 20-to-1 ratio found at most other schools, including private liberal

by Greg Orwig, '91



arts colleges. So it's not blind optimism or brash boasting when Mandeville claims that Whitworth's student leaders really *do* have the opportunity to develop deep relationships with every resident on their floors or in their halls.

One way that leaders make those connections is through "duty" – a rotating nightly assignment to hang out in residence-hall lounges engaging in casual conversations, educational and social programs, and activities that can charitably be described as "energy releasers."

A few of the more memorable duty programs include frozen-cricket-spitting contests, lounge-furniture obstacle courses, and frozen-turkey bowling. But most duty programs focus on helping residents adjust to college life, learn something new or build a sense of community with one another. (See sidebar.) These activities probably sound foreign to folks who went to schools where RAs spend their time checking out vacuum cleaners and busting students for noise violations. When Mandeville hires resident directors who have worked at other institutions, he has to convince them that patrolling the halls is not only unnecessary at Whitworth, it's discouraged.

"I don't know of any other Christian college that gives its students the freedom and responsibility that Whitworth does," says Nicole Boymook, who served as an RD at Whitworth and Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich., before returning last fall as assistant director of residence life and the inaugural RD for Boppell Hall. "We want to keep the RAs and RDs away from playing the role of beat cop in the residence halls. That gets in the way of dealing with more important life issues."

The effort is not lost on students.

"What I've appreciated most about my RA is that she's approachable, someone safe I can talk to," says Steidl, a philosophy and psychology double major who will be an RA in South Warren in the fall. "In a (disciplinary) confrontation situation, you know she's doing it as a friend, with your best interests at heart."

Kyle Gilliam, a sophomore business-management major living in Boppell Hall, views his RAs as friends and neighbors rather than as hall monitors – especially since they looked the other way when he temporarily "borrowed" a plant from the lounge. "If the first time you speak to your RA is when he's

Whitworth's Top 10 Residence Hall Duty Activities

One of the things that sets Whitworth's residence life program apart from programs at other colleges and universities is that Whitworth's student leaders spend 8 -11 p.m. every night on "duty" in the dorm lounges. They use the time to lead educational, social and energy-releasing activities or simply to engage students in conversation.



10. What's My Name-San? Whitworth's Japanese students write the names of their fellow residents in Japanese characters and explain their meanings. This is a great way for Whitworth's U.S. and Japanese students to get to know one another.

9. Understanding Eating Disorders Health coordinators help students understand what's behind these self-destructive conditions and how to identify warning signs that someone may be suffering from an eating disorder.

8. Frozen-Cricket Spitting Low participation holds this one down in the rankings, but it does attract some residents who rarely participate in more conventional duty activities and programs.

7. Free Haircuts They're not always the best cuts, but they're definitely the cheapest. Curiously, guys line up for them in far greater numbers than do their female counterparts.

6. Agape Feast Ministry coordinators lead residents in singing and praise, then serve a feast of home-cooked food donated by the families of Whitworth faculty and staff and Spokane students. This event has helped many frazzled students survive Finals Week.

5. At Your Service Student leaders go door-to-door through the residence hall offering to take out residents' garbage or vacuum their rooms, modeling the kind of servant attitude encouraged in Whitworth students and connecting with residents who may not hang out in the lounge very often.

4. Obstacle Course of Doom This mother of all energy-release activities uses lounge furniture to test the agility, endurance and courage of students who are up for making spectacles of themselves.

3. Flatbread Cooking Inspired by a student who learned to make this traditional Native American staple on a mission trip, this is one of many activities led by Whitworth's dedicated cultural diversity advocates.

2. Go Nuts! An annual program that covers what all men need to know to check themselves for testicular cancer. It has helped several Whitworth students detect tumors in early stages.

1. Worthwhile Conversation Any night when even two students make a meaningful connection that might not have happened if a Whitworth student leader hadn't been there to create a warm and comfortable atmosphere.

Way

writing you up for something, that would hinder the relationship for later on,” he says.

Helping students build healthy relationships with one another and a strong sense of community in the dorm is just as important as making sure they can relate to their RA. Ashley Hamilton, a freshman physics major living in Baldwin-Jenkins, was nervous about coming to Whitworth, not only because she was leaving behind friends and family but because she knew that as a Catholic she would be in the minority on campus.

She appreciated that her ministry coordinator, Pam Luke, and RA, Ariana Petersen, organized a number of social events at the beginning of the school year that enabled her to connect with her fellow residents before denominational differences had a chance to become barriers. While Hamilton still feels as if she doesn't always speak the same religious language as some of her hallmates, she says they have connected socially and intellectually.

“Ariana and Pam made sure we all got to know each other as individuals and friends before we learned about people's denominational backgrounds or religious beliefs,” Hamilton says. “When I first got here, I was really nervous about being in college, and Ariana helped me to keep things in perspective.”

Mark Baker, a ministry coordinator in The Village, adds, “Really getting to know people – seeing them as individuals – has to be the first step in getting anywhere spiritually. I think Whitworth is doing a good job of helping students form positive relationships and trying to make sure nobody feels marginalized.”

Relational leadership is at the heart of the intense training all student leaders receive during the week before residence halls open in the fall. Each morning, participants are trained by student-life professionals for the specific roles and responsibilities they will carry out in their leadership positions.

The roughly 45 RAs assigned one per residence-hall floor or theme house work with Mandeville and his six resident directors on strategies for building community – basically making sure residents feel welcome in the dorm and have opportunities to know and be known by their leaders and fellow residents. The training also covers the leaders' responsibility to confront residents for behavioral violations and explores ways in which to do this that preserve relationships for the long term.

Campus Pastor and Dean of the Chapel Terry McGonigal works with ministry coordinators, whose numbers have expanded in recent years to more than 30 and who are assigned roughly one per residence-hall floor. Their focus is on creating a residential climate that nourishes spiritual growth while encouraging respect for students of diverse religious backgrounds. One of their most common approaches involves the creation of “S” groups for seekers, skeptics, studies or support – whatever best characterizes the needs and interests of the group members.

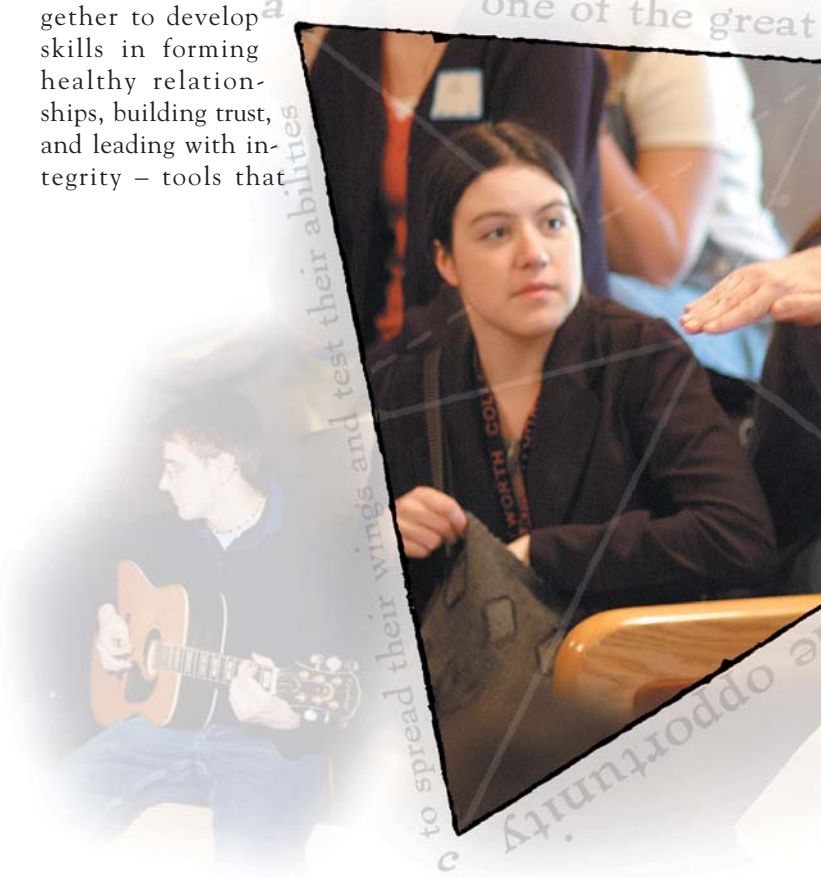
The eight to 10 health coordinators and emergency medical technicians, who are assigned one or two to each living area, work with Jan Murray, director of the campus health

center, on programs to promote wellness and address health-related issues. They receive special training in first aid to be initial responders to medical emergencies in the halls and are also called on to treat colds, headaches, cuts and lacerations. In addition, health coordinators work in the health center assisting professional staff with a variety of services. This experience has helped launch a number of students' careers in the medical profession.

The college's eight to 10 cultural diversity advocates are assigned one per living area. They work with Esther Louie, assistant dean for programming and diversity, on strategies for building connections between international students, domestic multicultural students and majority-culture students. They help organize and run orientation for international students at the beginning of the year and are in a unique position to help these students adjust to life at Whitworth. CDAs receive training in cross-cultural communication and create programs designed to educate majority students on diversity and cultural awareness.

The 30 or so ASWC executives, dorm representatives, activity coordinators and student-media leaders who form Whitworth's student government also participate in the training. A week prior to the training, Assistant Dean of Students Dayna Coleman works with the three ASWC executives on setting a vision for the year and on ways to lead the student government in framing and accomplishing the goals to meet that vision. “Then I step back and the ASWC executives actually lead the training process,” Coleman says. “It is, after all, the *student* government.”

After the morning sessions, all participants come together to develop skills in forming healthy relationships, building trust, and leading with integrity – tools that



Mandeville believes all leaders need in order to be successful. In the evening, participants break into their respective residence-hall groups to work with their RDs on team building and programming for the year ahead.

But the young leaders and student-life staff spend more time than anything else on telling their personal stories.

"In terms of learning how to be relational, we get further in two days of sharing our stories than we'd get in two years of just working together; it's probably the most important thing we do in training," Mandeville says. "We're trying to instill in our residence-hall staff that leadership is all about relationships. Everything they do will be influenced by the quality of the relationships they have with the people they're working with."

This concept appears to be just as relevant to leading a church, a business or an army unit as it is in leading a residence hall. A remarkable number of former student leaders have gone on to graduate school or seminary and are leaders in fields ranging from education and youth ministry to high-tech industry, international business and the military. Many cite the training and experience they received as student leaders at Whitworth as major factors in their success.

Holly S. (Grimm) Renfrow, a 1994 graduate in psychology, is marketing director for a regional retirement community and aspires to be a senior manager of a Fortune 500 company. She said she has been to expensive corporate training seminars that taught her nothing she hadn't already learned in her two years as an RA in Warren.

"I developed relational skills, problem-solving skills and conflict-resolution skills that I use every day in my personal and professional life," Renfrow says. "When I was hired as an RA, I questioned whether I had what it would take to do the job. But Dick Mandeville and (former RD) Stephanie Halton saw something in me that I didn't even see in myself and gave me the opportunity. I gained the confidence that has enabled me to be successful in the corporate world."

While Renfrow and others lit up the room with their potential before they were even hired, Mandeville admits that he and his staff haven't always recognized the potential of individuals who have gone on to become Whitworth's most successful student leaders. He can't help but smile when he remembers some of the students he thought he was taking a chance on hiring for leadership positions.

"We weren't sure they could lead a group of two in silent prayer when we hired them, but they turned out to be real world-changers," he says. "We have magnificent students, and one of the great things about our leadership program is that it gives more students the opportunity to spread their wings and test their abilities. Something special happens when you give someone the mantle of leadership." ▲

