

nurture

Man by Nature Desires to Know - Aristotle

BY VIRGINIA MURPHY

The Residential College emerged in 1967 in a time and a world dramatically different and remarkably similar to our own.

Fifty years ago the environmental movement brought together a Nation torn apart by civil rights activism, the Vietnam War, and women's liberation around the common goal of ending pollution and protecting threatened species. Through a series of groundbreaking laws passed during the 1970s and 1980s, those challenges were met, only to yield to a new and profound set of challenges that call into question how future generations will survive on the earth.

Today's students recognize that they must find a way to live in harmony with an ecosystem that is in jeopardy. The immediate challenge is climate change, which threatens to make the world uninhabitable by the next century; the broader context is sustainability. New and innovative approaches to

energy and water use, as well as ways to mitigate the planet's rising temperatures, are being explored across all academic disciplines.

Fifty years ago the anti-war movement joined students from across the country in large-scale demonstrations against the Vietnam War and the chemical warfare waged against the Vietnamese people. At the same time, race riots consumed Tampa, Buffalo, Newark, Milwaukee, and forever changed the city of Detroit. Human Be-Ins began in San

Francisco, moved across the country, and preceded the "Summer of Love" in spreading a message of tolerance, acceptance, and peace.

Today's students advocate across campuses

and the country to end American involvement in regional conflicts in North Africa and the Middle East even as they promote the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States and equal rights for the lesbian, gay, and transgender communities. They seek greater tolerance toward religious minorities, awareness of the intergenerational trauma of systemic racism, and an end to the pain of xenophobia and hatred in all of its forms.

Fifty years ago the Residential College "sought to create a liberal arts program that united the virtues of smallness with the resources of the large research university." Indicative of the social dynamic of the time, faculty, administrators, and students shared responsibility for the curriculum, which was "designed to foster freedom and flexibility within a carefully structured liberal arts framework."

"The Core Curriculum strove . . . to introduce students to the academic fields central to a contemporary university

The Residential College has long been a greenhouse for inquiry and teaching; the physical garden offers an extension of those principles through an experiential agrarian model.



PHOTO BY JOHN KNOX

The Residential College (RC) is a four-year, interdisciplinary, living-learning community of 1,000 undergraduates established through the University of Michigan's College of Literature, Science and the Arts (LSA) in 1967. The distinctive educational mission of the RC is to enable students to develop their intellectual interests and creative talents in an environment in which they can find their own voice and relate learning with doing. The RC faculty and staff challenge students to take the initiative in shaping their own education, to participate actively in classes and in extra-curricular programs, to think critically about what they are learning and reflectively about what they are doing, and to engage with the University community as well as the outside world. Learn more at: <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/rc>.

education, but also to situate these fields within an historical and philosophical context of some depth.” The college further advanced the learning environment through a personalization of the curriculum; “[a]t the end of their sophomore year, students were to take a comprehensive examination on the core, before proceeding to entirely independent and individualized concentrations in their upper-level program.”

Today, the Residential College still pursues the ideals of a liberal arts education within a living-learning community that endorses students’ academic curiosity in addition to evincing a fundamental concern for their wellbeing. Within the Residential College’s structured and systematic method of education, students experiment with diverse learning modalities, each designed with a democratic civic purpose representative of John Dewey’s vision of “hospitality of mind, generous imagination, trained capacity of discrimination, freedom from class, sectarian or partisan prejudice and passion, faith without fanaticism.”

The Residential College’s passion for cultivating humane values in our students extends beyond the classroom experiences of intellectual and artistic engagement and collaboration. Last fall, the Residential College broke ground on the East Quad Garden, two years after moving into newly renovated buildings that house our classrooms and dormitories. The Residential College has long been a greenhouse for inquiry and teaching; the physical garden offers an extension of those principles through an experiential agrarian model.

Through a collaborative, multi-year process, students, faculty, and staff from across the campus planned the garden’s design and implementation. In an attempt to address the abundant ecological issues we face, the garden provides a habitat to protect the biodiversity of native pollinators. Through both academic research and networking with area gardeners, we designed and built a pollinator box to encourage nesting sites, as well as seeding an adjacent hillside with plants native to the area. Like our students and their collaborative pursuits, the pollinator box and native plant species work in concert with one another, bringing pollinators to the garden to pollinate our crops while simultaneously offering pollen for them to take to other gardens to ensure healthy biodiversity.

The garden has grown two student forums with over forty students invested in the processes of the garden. One initiative, designed to take root next spring, is the planting of native grass species to test drought tolerance. As the planet warms, we must look for better ways to mitigate water loss. An entire area of the garden has been dedicated to this type of hands-on experiential learning. The forums also participated in last fall’s harvest, the spring planting of seedlings, and a cooking demonstration on healthy eating. The crops of



kale, spinach, and chard that were not used in the students’ demonstration were distributed to an area food pantry, thus allowing the students to cultivate their own place within the larger community.

As the Residential College has evolved over the last fifty years, so too has the discussion of a liberal education and pedagogical practices. What persists is the importance of a multicultural curriculumone that transcends Western philosophy and which encourages enquiry into non-Western culture, as well as race and gender studies: a seedling if you will, of the philosophical tradition, vigorously tended by the Residential College’s intellectual expansiveness.

The East Quad Garden, in the tradition of the Residential College, has embraced a multidisciplinary approach to what crops are planted each spring, what classes we will teach in the garden, and how garden events are communicated to the community. This summer the garden’s stock tanks hold basil, rainbow chard, tomatoes and corn. The chives from last year’s bounty greeted us again this year, as did our most resilient crop— mint. The student garden intern this spring has planted a tea garden, which will be shared in the fall during the afternoon teas held by the language instructors to facilitate fluency among students.

We’ve also collaborated with instructors in the fiber arts. Several forum students have begun to study what plants are best for fabric dyeing. The Residential College printmaking studio, too, has participated by holding a contest each of the garden’s two years in order to choose a student design for the banners that hang above the garden walkway. In this way, we promote an inclusive approach that welcomes the diverse perspectives, pedagogy, and artistic vision that identify us as the Residential College.

The Residential College "supports campus-based initiatives that demonstrate how uses of engaged forms of learning that actively involve students both within and beyond

the classroom directly contribute to their cognitive, emotional, and civic development." Our ideas and programs have recently been lauded in the Provost's report, "A New Vision for University of Michigan Academic Programs in Sustainability, Environment, and Society," which advocated for more experiential learning opportunities like those offered by the Residential College.

As I watch the students turn the earth and gently nudge the seedlings from their protective wrappings, I am reminded that the garden serves as a powerful metaphor for the work we do in the Residential College. What was once an underdeveloped courtyard has now become a productive pedagogical tool. Not only will the land produce a bounty of herbs and vegetables, it will prove (or disprove) theoretical models of drought resistance, the resilience of native species, and the paramount importance of protecting pollinators in this time of climate change.

The East Quad Garden also serves as the physical embodiment of the ideals of the experiment that is the Residential

College and the students we produce. Through a liberal education, one grounded in a core philosophical context, this experiential, student-driven plot of land consistently produces engaged, inquisitive young adults each spring: a bumper crop every time.

Each fall, students arrive from across Michigan and the rest of the country. They bring their hopes, passion, and ideas. We lay out the plot lines, measure the distance from course to course, and calculate the rate of growth. Together we bring theory to practice, offer engaged learning, and value civic purpose.

While the seeding and nurturing of minds begins in the Residential College, it is our graduates who, for fifty years, have planted roots in the communities to which they disperse, which identify them as citizens in our republic. ■

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