Spring 2004

Ethnography of Dorm Life. Case Study: Fisher Hassenfeld

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ETHNOGRAPHY OF DORM LIFE
CASE STUDY: FISHER HASSENFELD

Three freshmen play Frisbee on the grass while Third Eye Blind’s “Graduate” blasts from the stereo speakers perched outside a window. A couple sets up a picnic under a familiar tree. Elsewhere, people are studying, laughing and talking. This is the Quadrangle. This is college.
College life extends far beyond the classroom. The dorm – or residence hall – experience provides a fertile community setting, with all the nuances that any culture displays. The source of my data is a series of structured 45-minute interviews with those members of a particular college house who most thoroughly embody the experience, as well as my own observations from four years of dorm life. Through the course of the next fifty pages, I will attempt to provide an ethnographic look, not at an obscure tribe like Malinowski’s Trobriand Islanders, but at the people by whom the dorm experience is created and maintained: students and staff.

Because this ethnography is based on shared and non-shared cultural knowledge, it is important to define culture. I borrow my definition of culture from Ward H. Goodenough, since he accurately captures a knowledge-based orientation: culture consists of “(i) criteria for categorizing phenomena as meaningful stimuli, (ii) criteria for deciding what can be, (iii) criteria for deciding how one feels about things (preferences and values), (iv) criteria for what do about things, (v) criteria for deciding how to go about doing things, and (vi) the skills needed to perform acceptably. (Goodenough, 1963)

Goodenough’s definition is relevant to this study because he indicates that the ways that people learn and internalize experience differs between every two people. In the case of college life, the students and the administration share a culture, though they perceive it in different ways. He compares the idea of shared cultures to language. Essentially, the differences that people have in their understanding of what a language is do not inhibit the native speakers of that language from sharing a common language. (Goodenough, 1976)
One must choose a perspective from which to view the language, even if there are multiple viewpoints. The duty of an ethnographer is to try to develop his own understanding of another community’s culture based on that community’s criterion. This is not to say that what I found is the only way that dorm life exists. But what I present is my judgment on the particular cultures that are woven into the complex fabric of college dorm life. From this case study of Fisher Hassenfeld, I seek to emulate Goodenough as I attempt to “provide a model of what one needs to know in order to speak the language acceptably.” (Goodenough, 1981)

Located in the “Upper” Quadrangle – or Upper Quad as it’s commonly referred – Fisher Hassenfeld College House is home to the University of Pennsylvania’s oldest dormitories, built in 1895-1900. More importantly it’s home to 456 residents, 10 Graduate Associates (GAs), 14 Residence Advisers (RAs), a faculty master, house dean, and two faculty fellows. The historic Quad building seems to change names with each successive donation, from Goldberg (2001) to Woodland (2002) and currently, thanks to the patronage of alumni Alan Hassenfeld and Jerome and Anne Fisher, to Fisher Hassenfeld (2003). http://www.business-services.upenn.edu/housing/chguide/fh.html [See diagram]
After thinking about different factors and topics which affect my own dorm life, and compiling a list to that effect, I began interviewing key players in residence life at Penn, focused on Fisher Hassenfeld. I first spoke with Professor Phil Nichols, J.D., Faculty Director of College Houses and Academic Services, as well as the House Master of Stouffer College House. He gave me an overview of the college housing system. The administrative vantage point was a helpful start. After Professor Nichols, I spoke with Jane Rogers, House Dean of Fisher Hassenfeld, and according to one RA, the workhorse of the whole operation. With her comments in mind I interviewed a GA and two RAs. This top-down approach helped me appreciate how each part of the system works, or is supposed to work, and some misconceptions began to arise as I headed down the chain-of-command toward the residents. Finally, I spoke with a few residents, a senior who currently lives in Fisher Hassenfeld, a senior who lived in Fisher Hassenfeld (then Goldberg) as a freshman and then moved to the high-rises and a freshman who had enjoyed his first year of dorm life, but was moving into the high-rises for his sophomore year. As much as any student could be considered the “prototypical student,” these are.

With transcribed testimony from my informants, I seek to answer the following question: Does the residence hall system function in such a way that it works well for everyone from Phil Nichols down to the stereotypical freshman who moves on to the high-rises? If it does, I want to know how it succeeds and in what way. If it fails, I wish to focus on aspects that cause the system to break down. In every case I am looking at how comparable or correct the feelings of “what goes on in the house” are between facilitators and residents. The clearest way of organizing the mountain of data was topically, based on issues of importance to anthropology at large and dorm life in
particular. The ten topics, which, as shall become clear, carry different weights include:

The Goals of the College House System

Asking an administrator to lay out the goals of the college house system is comparable to inquiring, “What are the goals of the University of Pennsylvania?” At least, that statement is true for Phil Nichols, the Faculty Director of College Houses and Academic Services. For Nichols, Residence Halls address issues revolving around bridging gaps; for example, the gap between academic pursuit of classes and free time and the gap between faculty and students: “the general idea is that Penn is much too good of a University to be a commuter school, and that the Penn experience should not be an experience [where] one comes and visits for a few hours and then goes back.” He explains, “There are any number of studies around the country that show that an academic scholarly community has a much more positive impact on people’s lives rather than being warehoused in a dorm.” (Nichols, 2004)

The Quadrangle of the University of Pennsylvania once boarded and it continues to board future leaders; housing has taken up some of the slack by helping to foster the development of “full people” who don’t merely “dabble in education.” During some of the day, students are busy in school, but most of the time is spent outside of the classroom. If during any of that free time, the resident students are able to grow as people, the housing system has succeeded. (Nichols, 2004)

As is true for the University as a whole, students have far more desire to use housing services than can be accommodated. After students are admitted and choose to go to Penn, they face the difficulty of a housing shortage. Penn does not have mandatory
housing for freshmen, yet in any given year 97-100% will live on campus. (Nichols, 2004)

Penn mails out housing packets a short time after the student accepts admission. These glossy brochures detail the advantages and features associated with each of the college houses. Administrators such as Nichols would prefer for Kite and Key – a group of volunteer undergraduates who give college house tours – to emphasize that there are more options out there, Kite and Key stresses the Quad as the place for freshman and the high-rises or off-campus/fraternity/sorority housing for upperclassmen living. Kite and Key may play a role in many people’s decisions, but it wasn’t the prime factor for the students who spoke to me. Friends from high school told each of them to pick the Quad, in general. The friends suggested the Fisher Hassenfeld building, in particular, because there were so many singles. (Nichols, 2004)

Kite and Key tries to encourage students toward multiple occupancy rooms – doubles, triples and suites – because they believe the average freshman is destined to become best friends with their roommates, then their hallmates and out from there. The underlying force behind this push may rely dually on statistics and diminished or altered expectations. The tour guides urge students – who will choose the Quad no matter what – to select the more common room type. That way, the students are probably happier with the place where they end up living. Then it’s up to a computer and algorithms to decide the building, the room and the roommate – if there is one.

After students make their living choice, 95% wind up with one of their first three choices. Nichols says, “The other 5% are people who didn’t get into the Quad, almost always.” If the stereotypical student picks Fisher Hassenfeld, Spruce and Ware, they may
not care which house they get into as long as it’s in the Quad. Not everyone chooses to live in the Quad, however, many engineers choose King’s Court-English House; those greatly interested in language choose Gregory; some high school seniors even decide they want to live in an apartment and choose the high-rises. All these options are available to the incoming freshman, but mostly everyone chooses to live in one of the three Quad buildings. (Nicho’s, 2004)

Goal #1

Administrators strive to instill a sense of community in the 1200 or so Quadrangle undergraduates, by breaking up the Quad into different college houses. In three years the number has oscillated between five and three houses. However it’s broken down, over 75% residents – are freshman, content to spend at least their first year among other first years. Meanwhile, the residents see the buildings as one big Quad. To Nichols: “It’s hard breaking down. People don’t think ‘I live in Butcher.’ They think, ‘I live in the Quad,’ because it’s so interconnected.” (Simmons, 2004, Nichols, 2004)

Reminiscing on his freshman year, RA Frank recalled each of the four Quad buildings having its own unique vibe: “Fisher Hassenfeld, then Goldberg, was known as being the nerdiest, more studious, but still has fun anyways sorta house…” The belief was that houses were increasingly social as one walked throughout the Quad. “In terms of dorkiness, it wen: geographically: it was Goldberg, Ware, Spruce and then Community – Community was the party house.” Senior Jaime Parker doesn’t necessarily agree to these distinctions, but feels it’s possible others believed it. The buildings required essays on the Housing Applications to be written in order to get into certain buildings. Once these were cut, the buildings also lost their distinctions. Currently, conceiving of the Quad as a
whole is even more accurate; there is essentially no difference between Fisher Hassenfeld and Ware. That’s not the way that the administration likes it, though, especially if outsiders can encroach upon the Quad. Last year someone crawled into bed with a Quad resident, easily took advantage of the former system of open doors.

The new system of locks and keys is one way in which those at the top try to enforce dorm separateness. Students’ building keys only open their own college house doors. Those who live in Fisher Hassenfeld cannot enter Spruce from the outside, although it’s possible to navigate through the endless miles of halls and eventually find one’s way inside that building. The bathrooms, game rooms and lounges are likewise locked. This causes a high level of aggravation to many residents. Administrators find this necessary; students find it annoying. (Rogers, 2004) Freshman Kevin Lake notes, “I think that’s ridiculous that I can’t get into a building where a friend lives, like 10 feet away… I say lock the buildings, but if I’m a student and I go here I should be able to get into a building. I’ve got a friend who lives out in the fifth floor of Spruce, so he has to go out and drop a key down every single time I want to visit.” (Lake, 2004) Many students feel exactly the same way.

The architecture may cause inconvenience on the individual level, because of the partitions, but the breakdown of floors is irrational as well. A “floor” is neither typically composed of one level, one hallway or one section of rooms. On Fisher Hassenfeld, floors, ranging between seven and 29 students, cross sections, span multiple floors and extend beyond several hallways. Game rooms, lounges and laundry rooms also slice and dice the floors, wreaking havoc with most people’s sense of what all these terms mean.
House administrators will say that it has to be this way; student staff (RAs and GAs) and residents are baffled. (Rogers, 2004 and McCollough, 2004)

Goal #2

Another of the administration’s goals is increased faculty-student interaction. Few understand that objective better than Fisher Hassenfeld House Dean Jane Rogers, who, like Phil Nichols, lives and works in the same building as her students. (Rogers, 2004) Likewise, faculty fellows – academics drawn from throughout the University – add a scholarly element to the environment. All these things help to ensure that what happens on one side of Spruce Street – learning and scholarly pursuits – can also occur on the other side of Spruce Street. (Rogers, 2004)

Goal #2a.

Another way to experience academia on the south side of Spruce is to join a residential program. In Fisher Hassenfeld, there are three programs: 1) Law and Society, 2) Media and Communications and a 3) Healthy Living Program. All these programs require an application and an essay; from this stage the pool of students is handpicked. Rogers likes “getting to know the students ahead of time” by reading all their essays beforehand. (Rogers, 2004) Law and Society is picking up steam, thanks to the support of both the house dean and the house master, each of whom have law degrees. Students routinely select Healthy Living options as a means of circumventing Housing services – they are convinced that applying to Healthy Living will get them into the Quad, so they write an essay.

Healthy Living is a campus-wide institution aimed at promoting a healthy lifestyle. The halls are smoke-free and its programming generally focuses on healthier
living. Those in the program are one another’s support system for nutritional advice. Many pursue substance-free routines. Parts of the floor might work out together or go jogging around campus or the city. The Healthy Living floor RA may be found eating carrots and some dip with residents. With a Healthy Living Floor in many houses, this initiative serves as an example of continuity, a common thread among the houses.

Even successful programs are not guaranteed to flourish every time. GA Virginia was placed in the Media and Communications program, for no reason but to fill student staff spaces. She hadn’t signed up for the program, but was placed there anyway. Some of her residents, mainly upperclassmen, were as surprised as she was to learn that they were in this program. Meetings were held and plans were undertaken for a house-wide newsletter, poetry slams and a trip to a radio station. According to her, there was initial zeal during each meeting, but once the session closed nothing was ever accomplished. Everyone on her floor told Virginia that they had nothing against her but that they all became too busy with things that mattered more to them. The program may not have had a successful year, but that’s not uncommon. Programs’ success goes in waves, depending on interest, and that particular year, the interest – or at least the motivation – was low. Students not directly involved in the program, even if they have interest, are completely in the dark. Freshman Kevin Lake says: “I’ve done a lot of journalism so I was considering doing Communications, but I don’t really know what they actually do. I have never heard anyone ever talk about doing it.” (D’Oro, 2004)

Whatever the negatives of the Media and Communications program, the Law and Society program has really succeeded. They’ve experienced more difficulty finding a GA from Penn’s Law School. Rogers says it would be “intuitively sensible to have a law
student on the Law and Society program” but that they haven’t had luck with Law students, for some unknown reason. The pre-professional nature of Penn makes for a hotbed of interested individuals. A freshman may not have any idea what their major is or what they will study in the next few years, yet immersing them in a program like this allows them exposure to a field that they may wish to pursue. If they don’t like it, it’s not that big of a deal; they’re moving out next year anyway. (Rogers, 2004)

Goal #2b

Over the last few semesters, Fisher Hassenfeld has sponsored several Management-100 projects. This business class made such an impact on the house dean that she hopes to maintain contact with the Wharton School. If all goes well, a business-related residential program may spring up in the near future.

All these establishments, from the creation of individual college houses to residential programs, attempt to acclimate new students to living away from home. This may even be seen as a sub-goal, or perhaps even the underlying cause for all the other goals. That is not to say that the system is always successful; often students and even GAs are placed in programs against their will. They should experience a deep sense of community that is as real as their sense of family or any other social grouping. And that community atmosphere is only improved upon when caring faculty can interact well with students. No amount of architectural oddity should stop this community from forming.

The idea is that at the end of the day, a student should have a welcoming place to return to, and the closer to home that the house is, the more confident the students will be when they tackle the academic side of Penn. In terms of shared perceptions of culture, it
seems as if some of the goals of the administration may not be the personal goals of students, but that will be clearer in the next section.

I will next focus on the ways that Fisher Hassenfeld facilitates the formation of relationships within their walls.
Assimilation and Loyalty

Once students move into their residence hall, they naturally seek out friendships and form attachments with people living near them. House Dean Jane Rogers discusses the floor's role in establishing friendships: "We work as a basic bonding unit, the floor or the section and then we go from that." They also pair up two floors, which haven't likely interacted due to spatial arrangements, for activities in order to do things in slightly larger groups. Rogers says: "We've heard from our students that they want to meet more people... [if] we can provide an opportunity for them to do that within the house, we do that, and that's been successful." One could consider the desire to increase one's social network as a student goal. (Rogers, 2004)

Each floor has an RA or GA to help guide the freshman through their greenest days at the University of Pennsylvania. These upperclassmen and graduate students are handpicked by a GA/RA selection committee headed by the house dean. (Rogers, 2004) Their task is to organize floor dinners, run floor events and utilize the monthly floor money. Housing allots different amounts of money depending on floor size and some other variables. RA Frank told me that the figure is $4.50 per student, per month for floors with 15 or more residents, and $25 plus $4.50 per student per month for floors with fewer than 15 residents. One assumes certain fixed costs for buying a set of plates or knives. The reality is, there isn't very much money for the small floors and the money doesn't last that long. (McCollugh, 2004)

With some permutation of $4.50 * Y students (give or take $25), the GAs and RAs hold study breaks like watching a television program with some chips or pizza and
soda. Some of them venture to South Street or the mall at King of Prussia for shopping or head downtown for a play. Residents usually sign up via email and then flock to these very well-attended events. Transportation is often covered by the house, but occasionally it comes out of student’s pockets. All three student staff members suggested that their programs have been successful. GA Frank is the only one who has not noticed a significant drop-off between semesters. The other floors have seen a diminished response during Greek pledging. (McCollugh, D’Oro, Simmons)

Rogers is proud that Fisher Hassenfeld has grown in size — both in number of students and also as a result of changing the house boundaries. Having improved its interior, many consider the house to be one of the nicest places to live on campus. There’s a 32 unit computer lab with a split-level seminar room. Additionally, the house owns a huge library, a gym, and a soundproof music room. All these amenities help make the buildings livable, even if the heat goes off far too often and pests scurry all-too-readily about the floors.

Rogers envisions the building as a whole, or one big community, bonded from roommates to floors to all of Fisher Hassenfeld and then beyond. This may not be wholly accurate, however. It is one individual envisioning the shared cultures and seeing their little world a little differently. According to second year GA Virginia, the bonding units aren’t floor-wide: “I think they’ve bonded more within the rooms.” She says, “They chat [on the floors] while they’re at the study breaks but there’s just a stronger bond — I wouldn’t say cliquish — but it’s more natural and comfortable for them to gravitate toward each other.” (D’Oro, 2004) On the other hand, RA Lucy says her floor is “definitely cliques.” To her, “that’s always going to happen, particularly with freshman.” At the
student level, these trends are not so apparent. By February and March residents have
broadened their horizons and extended themselves beyond their dorms. (Simmons, 2004)
They have contacts hailing from throughout the whole of the University, and have made
friends and acquaintances with more than just these cliques. The GAs and RAs are only
exposed to one aspect of their residents’ friends.

Once people feel secure within their own floor, they naturally branch out.
Intramural teams composed of members drawn from throughout the entire house help
friendships develop. Others meet people through house council, Fisher Hassenfeld’s
student government. Many spend the majority of the spring semester pledging a fraternity
or sorority. (Rogers, 2004) The amount of contact experienced through house council is
debatable, however, due to the lack of meetings. That will be the focus of the next
section: government.

Everyone seems to enjoy making friends and working one’s way through the
complex social architecture that is college life. People do not tend to stay in Fisher
Hassenfeld, or the Quad in general, past their freshman year. If they do, it’s usually
because they have found something appealing about the community itself, not the
individuals within the community. Those who stay past their freshman year also seek out
upgrades in accommodations. In looking for nicer rooms, many upperclassmen seek out
Fisher Hassenfeld for its large number of suites. (Rogers, 2004) The majority of residents
move into the high-rises, following the pre-ordained rite. (Multiple confirmations)

Freshman Kevin Lake discusses his feelings on living in the Quad: “I’ve enjoyed
it for what it is. I’ve made some good friends and I almost always have someone who I
can hang out with. It’s been a good time.” Next year, Lake will be living with three of his
hallmates in a suite in the high-rises. He hasn’t lived in the high-rises yet, but still intends to move into the house of the fraternity that he is currently pledging. For him, it’s just the way things have to be. (Lake, 2004)

His story is similar to that of senior Jamie Parker, who spent freshman year in Goldberg and the last three years in High-rise East. She “didn’t want to be a sophomore in the Quad unless [she] had a huge amount of friends.” Some of her friends needed her to fill in a spot in the high-rises so she took the opportunity to leave. To her, living in the Quad is “something where you do it once and then you move on.” (Parker, 2004)

After their first year, students display a lack of dorm loyalty, almost as a rule. It’s almost built into the system. Freshmen need to move out so that the new class of students can move in the following year. Plus, these students have had enough of the parties, loud music and fun; it’s time to buckle-down and study. The cyclical nature of one’s living situation is pre-destined; students like Lake have it down before they even step inside the Quad. The sequence is Quad, then high-rises. As upperclassmen, it’s either off-campus or into one’s fraternity or sorority house. Except for Jane Rogers who lives and breathes the Quad house currently called Fisher Hassenfeld, everyone else makes their friends as freshmen and then moves into an apartment with them. She realizes that the students’ goals of making friends, and expanding beyond the Quad may go against the general goals of the administration to form community in the houses, but is realistic in her expectations. The “key situation” will only aggravate residents; the administration is not convincing these students that they live in one of multiple Quad buildings. Every freshman, even someone like Lake who is involved in house council, made close friends
on the floor and generally assimilated well while living in 'the Quad.' Community thrives for a year and then evacuates.
Administration and Student Government

In Fisher Hassenfeld, there is a drastic difference between the established hierarchy and the established responsibilities. According to the GAs and RAs, House Master Skip Rosoff is very busy and well-meaning, yet at the periphery of the house that he supposedly runs. The house deans are the workhorses who keep the house running. Regarding this disparity, RA Frank is particularly adamant: “You’ve got two people; you assign one of them all the work and the other a supervisor role. I think that’s a bunch of shit.” (McCollugut)

In explaining her role in Fisher Hassenfeld’s day-to-day upkeep, Rogers talks at length:

“I’m the house dean which is sort of the chief administrative officer of the house. I do a little bit of everything – literally. I don’t have a wrench and a hammer but I’m very involved in instances involving the facility – especially any large problem. We’ve had the heat go out a couple of times for example, and while I can’t fix the heat, my job in that situation is to get people who can as fast as I can and my duties range from something as kinda basic as that to another as basic as a student who’s had disaster. It could be academic. It could be personal. Lost a member of the family. They could be sick themselves. That runs the gamut from trying to help get them emergency services, trying to get them over the immediate hump and then help them deal with the long-term effects of whatever that may be. And then depending on, I guess, the source of the disaster, I may be
part of the follow-up solution. If the student has done something that's
seriously against the rules or put other people in danger [I am called in].”
(Rogers, 2004)

The GAs and RAs confirm that Rogers does everything for the house, and know
that she regards its residents as family members. She is smart and friendly, and her office
door stays open whenever she isn’t busy handling issues. Her job is to keep the building’s
heart pumping by fixing problems that range from personal crises to facilities issues. She
is busyness personified: In the course of our interview, a few residents stopped by her
office to ask for forms, a Philadelphia playhouse called to try to sell her tickets, and a GA
came in to drop off some papers. All this happened when her door was closed and she
was ostensibly out. By all accounts, she keeps everything operating smoothly.

At the student level, unless there’s a problem or if a student is assigned as her
advisee, it’s very possible to never interact with Jane Rogers. Both senior Jamie Parker
and freshman Kevin Lake reported that they knew her by name, but neither knew exactly
what she did nor had ever remembered interacting with her in any way. At first glance,
this seems like a discrepancy between the levels of interaction that Rogers thinks she has
with her students and how much they interact with her. I don’t think that is the case,
however. Signs of an efficiently operating house may be because the administration
works seamlessly in the background, without many knowing exactly what the house dean
does. Rogers weighs in, saying: “I feel I spend the majority of my time dealing with a
small number of students who need me for some reason. I like dealing with the other 80%
of the students who don’t have a particular use for me at the moment, but who are just
interesting people that I like to meet and talk with.”
Below Skip and Jane, but on a different hierarchical level than the GAs and RAs, are Faculty Fellows Rita Barnard and Andrea Grottoli. These professors are very intelligent and interesting people and great resources for anyone who takes the time to learn about them. Barnard’s expertise lies in African Studies and Grottoli’s in science. RA Frank says, “For me they are just academics, and they are really nice to have around. I don’t know what their roles are in other houses though.” Occasionally, these scholars will have cookies or small get-togethers at their apartments. (McCollugh)

GA Virginia’s impression of the faculty fellows differs from RA Franks’ in that she has made an effort to spend time with them. Virginia recently attended a concert with Rita. Last year, she spent many hours at Grottoli’s apartment. Virginia sees herself connected to the faculty fellows in that they are both filling house roles – theirs is more academic, hers is social. The GA suggests: “I don’t feel a huge disconnect. I don’t know if it’s the same for the RAs or what.” That a GA spends more time with the Faculty Fellows than the two RAs is either a personality issue or an age issue. Virginia admits there “is a difference in terms of age and status,” but is comfortable both in visiting the fellows on her own time and in taking a group of interested students into their apartments for cookies. (D’Oro, 2004)

Many students neither know Barnard or Grottoli personally, nor what they do. For uninterested residents, they know off-hand only that they exist. Usually, residents seek them out if they share an interest in African Studies or science. RAs and GAs point their floor members to the fellows in that case, but otherwise students don’t necessarily spend any time with them. (Lake, 2004 and McCollugh, 2004)
The student staff line up directly beneath Rogers. They would probably show up below and to the side of the Faculty Fellows, because the Faculty Fellows are more prestigious for Fisher Hassenfeld, but are not in charge of the RAs and GAs. None of the three people at this position felt that there was any distinction in relative power between the two. The only differences are their ages and their relative amounts of accessibility – based primarily on how much work they have. They hang out with each other, plan ski trips together, and are a fairly friendly crew.

Housing is more than just a job for Phil Nichols; it also envelopes his personal life. Nichols and his wife, three kids and two dogs call Stouffer College House their home. With so much on the line, in terms of role modeling, his first priority is to make sure that the GAs and RAs, of all houses, not just Stouffer or the Quad, promote positive things. Nichols lays out the way he envisions the role of the GA and RA in residence life: “They try to do what they do [in Stouffer]: build community into smaller units and engage people in thoughtful things. I wouldn’t say academic, but, thoughtful things that they might be interested in.” (Nichols, 2004)

Nichols wants the GAs and RAs to help facilitate students when they need things, but recognizes that it’s difficult to run programs “because freshman don’t know what they’re interested in yet all the time, nor should they.” For him, the principle of supporting academic programs for a small number of people makes Penn special. It is the basis for backing PHD programs with only one doctoral candidate. Therefore, running a program where one person shows up does not constitute failure if that person got something out of it. (Nichols, 2004)
Rogers tries to find GAs who have RA experience as undergraduates. For RAs she has a “considerably richer pool” of talented and interesting undergrads. RAs and GAs are specially selected, based on their personalities and academic pursuits, and the resulting squad hails from “literally every department that [Jane Rogers] can think of, from medicine, dentistry, vet med, education and social work to the variety of arts and sciences; [they] have had an art historian, a demographer and someone in the folklore department.” Some graduate students don’t want to live in a dorm again, and share a bathroom with 18-year-olds. Many graduate students are extremely busy, but Rogers’ goal is to find the best mix of students that the University can offer. The kindhearted way she speaks of her GAs and RAs – aforementioned problems with law students aside – one might think she was describing relatives. If she considers the college house as her family, the GAs and RAs are among the closest members. (Rogers, 2004)

The student staff of graduate associate and resident advisers is given free housing and a limited meal plan. For what amounts to thousands of dollars in alayed costs, it would seem that the staff should approach their positions like jobs and take them seriously. Most cover the bare minimum of expectations, but do not let the position run their lives. Some do and are dubbed “über-RAs” by the less dutiful bunch. Frank is not alone in the way he views being an RA: “You have a social life and you do a lot of things outside the RA life.” (McCollugh, 2004) Rogers describes them all as professional, but from some of the testimony it’s not clear that they do much more than the bare minimum – if that. (Rogers, 2004)

The 24 RAs and GAs monitor a group of anywhere between seven and 29 students, with varying degrees of assimilation. Upperclassmen seldom interact with their
RA or GA as much as the typical freshman, but some are active in dorm life. Primarily, the staff comprises the facilitators who promote the first social interactions of the freshmen’s Penn experience. They watch to ensure that the students are adjusting to life away from friends and parents and take care to provide an outlet for discussions of homesickness and other potential problems. Most first year RAs won’t “necessarily baby them,” as Frank notes, “but I saw them as needing me as a catalyst for their social development.” Frank no longer sees himself as being solely responsible for the students’ interactions: “I just let them be… I don’t see myself as helping them to become friends. I don’t feel I do much to foster development; rather I’m just here in case of problems.” His case was backed up by GA Virginia who says she serves as “a way of getting resources” who provides her students with “a space to socialize.” Just being available in good times is not all, though. (McCullough, 2004)

Like Frank mentions, the RAs and GAs are the first line of defense against potential problems, and fortunately, this remains a virtual constant. Most situations are settled with little strife. Maybe someone needs the number for facilities because their heat is off. Maybe a student confides his depression in an RA who refers him to CAPS (Counseling and Psychological Services). Or maybe the student just needs someone with whom to shoot the breeze. These are all areas where GAs and RAs should be involved. The reality is that sometimes they aren’t all that accessible, because they lead busy lives as well, and no one expects them to devote all their time to being a student staff member. (D’Oro, 2004)

Open doors promote community and allow for a friendly, free environment in which people stroll in and out, stop by to chat and keep up-to-date with each other. A
GA's or RA's door should always be open. This is not a mandatory, so much as a highly recommended suggestion. For Housing, this issue seems comparable to the "required" reading lists, which many individuals religiously accept and many individuals forgo. GA Virginia's door isn't necessarily open, but she is often available. RA Frank's motto follows the model set by his freshman year RA: "When you're in your room you have your door open, and frequently you are not in your room." RA Lucy is more lax in her responsibility, rarely leaving her door open. As a result, her floor's doors are seldom open. In no case was the GA or RA fully accessible, but likewise, none reported complaints from the residents. The rule appears to be that once the GA or RA has set the floor's tone, most students accept the way things are.

The limited meal plan is set aside in order that the staff eats with their residents. GA Virginia recalls Nichols saying that if you, meaning the student staff, don't eat with your residents, you shouldn't eat. As far as anyone knows, this rarely works for any amount of time it works at all. She reported this fairly black-and-white mandate only seconds after admitting her own omission of responsibility: Virginia never eats with her floor. As a graduate student, responsibilities keep her schedule drastically different than her floor members' schedules. RA Frank never tried to eat with his floor. And, RA Lucy tried having her students get together once a week for dinner, but slowly cut it out once she noticed dwindling support. If the students don't show up, one could say that it's the staff's fault, but if the students are content, this part of the system is working. That students don't need their hands held when it comes to dinner should suggest to the administration that the job of RA or GA should not come with a partial meal plan. That's
assuming that the administrators know that the student staff shirks its dining responsibility. They should be aware, but it is not necessarily the case.

The GAs and RAs arrange events called programming. Here is another example of different expectations: Although Rogers expects programs to be weekly, GAs and RAs think that if they hold them more than once a month that it is sufficient. The purpose is to “have a time for the floor to come together to get to know one another.” These study breaks, both for reasons of convenience and popular success, typically revolve around the food item served. Some of the staff members run academically-oriented programs, but it is not as common. RA Lucy likes watching reality television with her residents, and has hosted study breaks with cookies where they all watch *The Apprentice, Survivor, American Idol* or any other of the standard reality TV escapes. As mentioned before, the Healthy Living Floor does health-oriented programs. They include events like having smoothies or group meditation. The general rule is: set up food in front of your room’s television and the residents will hurry over. During these study breaks upperclassmen and freshman will hang out more than they usually do and even Lucy’s cliquey floor opens up a little. Those pledging fraternities or sororities impact the floor to varying degrees: in some cases they spend a lot of the study breaks talking about what pledge events they do, in other cases they are completely absent and are too busy with other aspects of their social lives. (Simmons, 2004)

The most important part of the RA or GA’s job is to handle problems. GA Virginia says, “The primary duty is to be ‘on duty’ once every 20-25 days, which involves picking up a pager and the master keys, and if you’re phoned on duty – it could be anything from a lockout to alcohol poisoning to a party” then he or she handles the
situation. Over heavy times like Spring Fling and graduation, they are “stacked” on duty. Over holidays and Spring Break there is “warm body duty” where five or six staff must stay in the Quad. The section on justice will cover some of the problems encountered while on duty and how they are typically handled. (D’Oro, 2004)

Although each of the three students I interviewed had a slightly different outlook on their RA or GA, all were all complimentary regarding their student staff member. This leads me to believe that the student staff is successful in what it does. Nichols certainly doesn’t think it is right that they should have a meal plan, if they don’t eat with their students. In the end, it may not really matter as long as the students do not expect or notice a difference. One must hope this is the case, at least. Problem-solving and regular programming is pretty much all the students need. One must not forget that the RAs and GAs are still people, with personalities. Some are hands-on, some are lax. The students seem to survive problems and attend programs: does their staff member’s door need to be open?

One area where students are able to interact with the administration is in Fisher Hassenfeld’s version of student government, called house council. Students representing every section of the building – plus a few staff members – sponsor social events with the house, meet with facilities to voice concerns about facilities issues. Currently, a group is having a dialogue with dining to make meal plan changes. The GAs and RAs know the student that’s on house council, but little more about this group. The same can be said for nearly all the students who are not representatives themselves. Unlike some other houses, where the house doles out to the house council a fixed amount, Fisher Hassenfeld’s leaders come up with ideas and they are never turned down. Rogers says: “We basically
let them think of something they’d like to do and work with them to make it work, and they’ve never asked for anything that we haven’t been able to support financially for them." (Rogers, 2004)

Though Rogers lauds house council as another great place to meet people, it doesn’t seem possible given how infrequently they meet. Freshman Kevin Lake, a house council member, initially said that they had “meetings every week where we’d just discuss things... just planning events.” Then immediately his story changes, every week becomes: “I think I went to maybe two or three meetings and that’s pretty much all we had.” This contradiction – if it is indeed one – means either a few highly constructive meetings or it means that house council doesn’t really do anything. It’s possible that this student missed meetings, but he did not give the impression of being an unmotivated representative. This semester there haven’t been any meetings, and the reason is unbeknownst to Lake. “A junior or senior RA who runs it’” said that he’d contact Lake soon for a meeting, but has yet to call. One thing is clear: even if house council is extremely successful in its financial goals, it isn’t a big part of the life of even the council’s head. The council does not appear to form ad hoc, short-term issue specific committees, either. It’s a fine example of the administration putting a lot of emphasis on a facet of the organization that has little to no direct impact on the students’ experience. (Lake, 2004)

This section goes into the perceived chain-of-command, or at least the chain of responsibility from highest to lowest. Once again it becomes clear that there are institutions, like the house council which are not as concrete of assemblages as the administrators would like. Doors are not always open for students to check in with their
RA or GA. Likewise, the GA/RA duties of eating with their students seem to be at the heart of the idea of community, but occur irregularly in practice. Instead, the student staff members see their positions as problem solvers, often too busy to actually foster community. More than once a month, that is.
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Health

In the first few weeks of college, especially, new students test their limits regarding alcohol—often with unfortunate and disastrous consequences. It is no secret that there are fraternity parties during NSO (New Student Orientation) which serve free alcohol to minors. Having seldom or never drank before college many freshman get sick. The worst ones are sent to the hospital. The issue of serious underage binge drinking and the co-morbidity of alcohol poisoning haunts administrators and student staff members. In every case the students find themselves in poor shape because of activities that happen outside the Quad. Generally, friends or roommates of the sick or poisoned student will notify RAs and GAs. The house dean is notified when it is serious or requires hospitalization. Though the students would be left to their own plight outside of the Quad, once inside Fisher Hassenfeld it becomes a housing matter.

Part of the problem with the Quad, not just Fisher Hassenfeld in particular, but endemic in the Quad, is that when so many freshman are gathered together, they become targets for upperclassmen with intentions that are “not that swell.” (Nichols, 2004) Nichols recognizes this problem and discusses it openly: “You get a lot of misdirection from older students going on there. And it’s a problem; it’s really hard to combat those particular currents. You know you don’t want to be a Nazi or jackbooted about the whole thing. But, it’s hard, it can get unhealthy over there, and that can be difficult. And [the student staff] do a great job working with that.” (Nichols, 2004)

Nichols’ thoughts on upperclassmen serves as an interesting foil to a study that Jane Rogers recalls: “We have lots of data that shows that the volume and the instances
of drinking fall off after the freshman year.” That would imply that the upperclassmen who remain in the Quad do not necessarily follow norms in terms of development. Rogers feels they are successful role models, because they provide an example of how to navigate Penn. To her, the upperclassmen are “like baking powder in a cake batter.” She says, “They keep it from rising too high and they provide a kind of calming influence with their presence.” (Rogers, 2004)

Even if what currently occurs is unhealthy, and is reinforced by upperclassmen without the noblest intentions, it could be a lot worse. Rogers has been involved in the Penn Residence system since 1990, and through that time she has seen many trends come and go. There was dedicated first-year housing and an emphasis was placed on all things freshmen. And, while upperclassmen were not discouraged from remaining, fewer stayed. Rogers recalls, “Things were different, it wasn’t just drinking, it was generalized unsettled behavior.”

Rogers provides a memorable account of how bad it was. During the same span of freshman-emphasized activity, there was still a freshman football team. It just so happened that 68 of the 80 football players wound up in her part of the Quad – Fisher Hassenfeld or whatever name it once had. She vividly recalls some “generalized unsettled behavior”:

“I can remember it as if it were yesterday, sitting in my apartment, and these white things were flying by my apartment window. I was on the second floor and I sort of looked out and just as I did another white thing went flying by my ear crashing onto the tree below me and landing in the area between where the big black fence is and the Quad building proper.
Someone was tearing a bathroom apart up above my apartment and was throwing the sinks and the toilets out that window. Then he later turned and started throwing the stalls down the stairwells, which obviously could hurt someone.”

While this event was extraordinary for her because it was happening so close to her head, it was not uncommon. Nearly every weekend someone would get angry or drunk, or both, and would tear a bathroom to pieces. (Rogers, 2004)

Underage students may be caught drinking beers while watching a basketball game on a weeknight, if their GA or RA happens to walk in. This is certainly not condoned, but it is relatively safer than alternatives. For example, students once held a party on top of a false balcony, which was really a bay window. Rogers recalls a large party congregated on one of these false balconies where some inebriates thought it would be a good idea to take some of the stone masonry and hurl it into the courtyard below. Fortunately, no one was hurt. Nevertheless, it could have easily become a safety issue, and then a punitive one for the offenders. (Rogers, 2004)

One of the reasons that Jane Rogers became involved with the housing system was that “it represented a real attempt to change some of the student culture at the institution.” Since then, Penn no longer has a freshman football team, but even if it did Rogers wouldn’t allow so many of them to dorm together. It may be harder for the coaches to keep track of their players, but from an administrative standpoint, it’s hard to maintain facilities when bathrooms are being torn out every weekend. (Rogers, 2004)

Students still get sick and require hospitalization. The RAs and GA have experienced differing health-related issues on duty. GA Virginia did not know any cases
personally, but knew that people drank to the point of hospitalization, in general. She saw it as occurring in waves: the beginning of the year, Spring Fling had a high frequency of hospitalization and then other periodic times throughout the year. Another GA informed Virginia that one of her residents was so intoxicated that he attempted to swipe his cell phone through the PennCard holder. In her experience, intense binge drinking happens, but it is not the norm. (D'Oro) RA Lucy also hasn’t personally come across people in her hallway or while on duty. She also knows it happens in general. And the three students I spoke to do not know anyone from all of Fisher Hassenfeld being hospitalized, let alone someone from their floor. They knew that people got sick sometimes, but it wasn’t a friend or an acquaintance.

RA Frank, on the other hand, has taken someone from his own floor to the hospital. While on duty he’s brought four or five. Every case was alcohol-related, but one, which was a health issue. None of these cases involved residents partying in the Quad to such a scary point. In all the cases the helpless student was found passed out somewhere, and Frank was called in to help.

The culture has seemed to change from the seemingly extraordinary, yet once commonplace, bathroom destruction incidents. Upperclassmen may still be setting a poor example in the way they carry themselves, and freshman seem to always engage in unhealthy behavior. The perceived level of serious binge drinking appears to be without much cause. The amount of on-duty time that RAs and GAs have is the same across the board. It’s strange that RA Frank would have seen so many more instances of hospitalization than the other two student staff members. There is no clear reason why this is the case.
Other than alcohol-related or similar self-induced health problems, there are problems related to stress, deaths in the family and relationship breakups. Most of the student staff, as well as Jane Rogers, know how to help someone make it past a family problem, at least at the basic level of compassion and concern. Relationship breakups on the male side tend to produce aggressive and violent behavior and the GAs and RAs need to be sensitive and aware to such altered mood states. Being attuned to the factors that cause trauma can only help the student staff be better facilitators. Students who put a lot of pressure on themselves to excel in the rigorous academic environment can show signs of wear and tear when they receive a poor exam or paper grade. The GAs and RAs refer these students to the WHEEL: Academic Services if the problem is academic. Students, as any group of people, can become depressed and anxious, and suffer from any of the psychologically-related ailments. The student staff will usually talk to the depressed student and will refer these students to CAPS (Counseling and Psychological Services) for treatment. The students themselves may become aware of alcohol abuse problems related to depression, and they might go for help on their own. RA Frank was called in for a potential stalking situation. It may have been a misunderstanding, but whatever the cause, he settled the problem.

An extremely atypical situation is that of acquaintance rape. Rogers emphasizes how infrequently it occurs. It certainly happens in general and Rogers remembers that in “some of the halls that I’ve worked with on campus, [there were] situations where improper things were done, but those are so rare. They happen less than once a year.” She references the incident in the high-rises, which received heavily coverage in the Daily Pennsylvanian, wherein a student walked into an unlocked room and made advances
toward a sleeping girl. She says that they’ve been lucky that nothing like that has taken place this year.

Health issues are a very important area in which the staff should be hyper-aware of what occurs. They shouldn’t be annoying or intrusive, but should look out for potential problems and should keep their eyes and ears open. The student staff has to facilitate the students through both good times and bad, especially if they lose a loved one, their relationships break up or in the extremely rare case that they are sexually assaulted. Watching out for the residents’ safety while allowing for a degree of laissez faire is not always easy; students have their own lives and might be dealing with their own issues. This is a difficult line to toe, but in terms of ensuring safety it seems like things have been a lot worse, and it’s only getting better. Everyone wants to maintain the community and help protect the members. As Rogers noted, the culture of the Quad has been changing for the positive. There seems to be general agreement among GAs, RAs and students.
Justice

“They don’t want to be police over there but I’m sure it becomes like, ‘just nip it in the bud.’ No parties, no drinking, nothing. If I smell a funny smoke coming out of the door I’m going in. So you get this kind of siege mentality going on.” Nichols’ “siege mentality” has a negative connotation; he would clearly prefer that the policeman aspects of the role were deemphasized compared to their role as community builders. But sometimes the administration and student staff must step in to prevent destruction to property, personal injury and lawsuits against the University. (Nichols, 2004)

Rogers admits, “We certainly haven’t cracked down.” The penalties have not become harsher. The ratio of student staff to students has not changed either. She feels, “In some ways we are more enlightened about underage drinking.” Some students come to college with preexisting problems. She continues by saying that, “We have to treat a lot of what happens as medical problems first.” Rogers has noticed that the “background noise has gotten toned down a little bit” which is an obvious positive. In her opinion it is difficult for students who are in such a high-pressure environment to keep up their level of rigor, if they can’t use the bathroom because someone has torn it out the weekend before. To a degree that is at least favorable on the administrative end, problems appear to have diminished as Penn’s academic side is stressed more than the social aspects. (Rogers, 2004)

Bathrooms may not constantly lay in ruin, but residents still do damage to both public and private property. When parents first come to school and see a homeless person by WaWa, they assume that the biggest concern should be related to external factors.
Rogers says, "One of the hardest things we have to do is try to make students aware of other students. The person who will steal your CDs is probably not the homeless man in front of WaWa but someone from another floor who sees your door standing open and might walk in and take something." Occasionally a homeless person will find his way inside the Quad, but that is remarkably uncommon. And, once a community has formed wherein people really know each other and it becomes like a family, problems are less likely to occur. Rogers hopes that GAs will impact the students in such a manner that "they’re not like mother or big brother, but they’re sort of someone that no one wants to disappoint, by doing something that might hurt someone on the floor or be against the rules or might put the RA or GA in a position to enforce the rules." (Rogers, 2004)

That is not to say that students will not cause problems on other floors; it’s much more common that someone would vandalize another hall. People will try to keep their hall like they would their home. When Rogers finds out that a student who was never a problem in Fisher Hassenfeld destroys property in King’s Court English House or somewhere else, she gets a similar response. According to Rogers, "They’ll say, ‘I didn’t want to do anything on the floor.’ That sometimes can happen. ‘I’d have to look someone in the face.’ Or, ‘There’s no way I would want to disappoint my RA or GA.’ You hear that sometimes too." (Rogers, 2004)

Back when there were 68 freshmen football players in Rogers’ House, the house dean wanted to make sure that there was more than disappointment in the face of potential offenders. Rogers used to routinely make it a point to get a "number of big guys" on the student staff. They were there not necessarily to physically put their bodies
in there, but just to alleviate some residents’ concerns. She felt that it set a good tone to have a 6’2” All-American lacrosse player down the hall from potential issues.

Even if they mention something like, “not that I’m a policeman,” part of the role of the student staff is to be a watchdog, at least while they are on duty. Different approaches follow from student staff members with different personalities. The most common approach is a modified version of *laissez faire*, which interrupts students’ activities only for safety reasons.

The students, for the most part, try to adhere to Rogers’ mentality: they do not want to disappoint their RA or GA. Inevitably, it will happen, however. Examples range from something as irking as hinges being taken off bathroom doors, furniture being stolen and friends of residents urinating in people’s shower baskets to something as major as “the motor oil incident.” The students who took part in the infamous November 2002 attack on Princeton students occurred in Fisher Hassenfeld, and, even though the offending parties were not residents, it still hurt the house. (Rogers, 2004)

On duty, anything can happen. When a GA friend was on duty, GA Virginia recalls being called in for backup on a particularly nasty incident. There was a female student who was very intoxicated and very loud. The GAs went over and knocked on her door to no avail – the student continued to make a scene on the floor. Eventually she opened the door and was extremely belligerent, eventually slamming the door in their faces. Then she didn’t return to the door for 15-20 minutes. Because she was “really under the influence of something,” Virginia and her colleague warned her that they’d call the Penn Police, and eventually did. The resident opened the door for the police, if only so they could hear her yell “F*** off!” The student needed counseling and this was the
“firecracker type of explosion that ended up getting her the help and services she needed.” (D’Oro, 2004)

This is a more intense example than the standard. Parties are broken up when they become loud enough that the student staff member or students in the area become annoyed and report it. In almost every case, loud noise signals a dead giveaway of a party. Everyone knows that people “pre-party” or “pre-game” – drink before going out to fraternity parties, but as long as this happens without much noise they can basically get away with it. There’s almost no way that the student staff could know about it. GA Virginia remembers breaking up parties that are loud and started too early – violations of the quiet hours give her reason to come in. The quiet hours are midnight to 9 a.m. on weekends and 10 p.m. to 9 a.m. on weekdays. Otherwise, how would anyone know? (D’Oro, 2004)

RA Lucy never has parties in her hall, and her philosophy extends to students. For better or worse, she encourages students to go out and drink outside the Quad so she isn’t forced to deal with it. She says, regarding her role as policeman, that from the beginning you decide “how to play it”:

“A lot of people, especially GAs use this a lot, that they’d be disappointed.
For me, I’m like, ‘Go out, have fun, but the Quad is not the place to do it.
First of all you have to buy things. Go to free [alcohol events], outside the Quad. [Laughs] And then especially the way my floor is laid out, it’s this hall and the one below me that, if I hear you and you are being annoying, you are obviously being stupid, in the sense that there’s a time and a place.
And there’s a way that you’re gonna get in trouble and a way that you’re
not gonna get in trouble. My first information is if you’re gonna do it, do it somewhere else. Second, is if you get in trouble, it’s because you’re stupid.” (Simmons, 2004)

Her resident, freshman Kevin Lake confirms that there are no parties on the hall and although very social himself, he doesn’t understand why there would be parties in the dorm. The rooms are small, and even his double can fit only 10 people very tightly. If he goes out to a frat, it’s a big party. Plus, Lake notes, “There is free alcohol if you go to parties.” (Lake, 2004) That sounds an awful lot like the “go to free, go outside the Quad” motto that Simmons shared with me. I suppose it has been effective for her and her residents. At least, no one has complained about the situation. If people are drinking very quietly in their rooms, Simmons wouldn’t know because she is not the one to pop in all the time: “It’s not something that you’d suggest or condone, but how are you gonna know about it?” Some people might go handle themselves like police trying to sniff out rule violations, but Simmons isn’t that person. Mostly she just doesn’t have to deal with as many annoying things. (Simmons, 2004)

RA Lucy’s only two instances of being called in to break up parties were both while on duty. One consisted of students smoking cigars in a hallway, in the other case; students who were only drinking Pepsi were being loud. Not too crazy in either case. (Simmons, 2004) Senior Jamie Parker doesn’t remember there being parties back in the Goldberg days, freshman year: “Maybe during Fling there were parties. In the Quad there aren’t as many big rooms as in the high-rises.” Parker also doesn’t remember her RA busting anyone for being intoxicated. In fact, once, she and her RA both got drunk at the same party and afterwards her RA gave her pretzels. (Parker, 2004)
RA Frank doesn’t bust up parties directly and hasn’t written anyone up for alcohol violations. His strategies for dealing with problems make it clear why:

“Last year, my room looked out into the Quad, and a bottle dropped from upstairs and bounced. I saw another thing fall out the window and bounce. This is sketchy, right? I went outside, got the bottles and walked upstairs and knocked on the door right above me. The door opened and there was six or eight gigantic football players, and I’m totally intimidated and I’m like, ‘Are these yours, I think you dropped these.’ They’re like, ‘Noooo!’ I’m like, ‘Well, that’s funny because I’m pretty sure they dropped from this window.’ I lied, ‘I was outside and I saw you do it, so are you guys sure that these aren’t yours?’ ‘Oh, those, yeah, I’m pretty sure we did drop those out the window.’ I’m like, ‘Yeah, you probably don’t want to do that because if you do that again then I have to write you up and if I have to write you up then I need to take a surveillance of the room and if I take a surveillance of the room then’ — I always do that — ‘I have to smell the cups and if I smell the cups then I need to write you up for beer.’ So, what I always do is just do the trail [of consequences] if you don’t deal with me now, so they were really apologetic. So I was like, ‘I’m gonna be on rounds.’ This was a lie. ‘And if there’s any noise or you guys are still here in five minutes you’re getting written up.’ I walked by like 10 minutes later and they were gone.” (McCollugh, 2004)

In his case, he used deception and inference to keep from dealing with an obvious alcohol violation. While students may not have been throwing toilets out the window, they were
only dropping plastic bottles, it could have been worse. He used a similar approach of tracing consequences (from him going back in and smelling cups) to break up a party at the end of his hall. (McCollugh, 2004)

Even if he did write someone up, the RA never has to deal directly with administering punishment. The system of “writing someone up” is as follows: take everyone’s PennCard and take all their names down, get a quick sense of the situation, then leave. Once back in one’s dorm room, the RA or GA goes onto a dedicated website where they fill out basic information like who was there, what times, what their room numbers were, if there were guests and what happened. This information is emailed to the house dean and she handles it. For Frank, “All I have to do is, if there are rules; enforce them; that’s all.” (McCollugh, 2004)

From both RAs cases, it’s obvious that they know that their students are drinking underage and they rarely do anything constructive to stop it. GA Lucy wants her residents to keep their partying outside the Quad but generally does not mind. RA Frank would also prefer that the students drank away from Fisher Hassenfeld, if only so he isn’t responsible for write-ups and breaking up parties. (McCollugh, 2004 and Simmons, 2004)

Other than noise violations, which are often connected to alcohol violations, students engage in all the pranks of college. They may not necessarily involve the destruction of property, but if Jane Rogers knew about them, anyone can bet the offending party would be in trouble. Senior Jason Sanders was very active in his freshman hall. In fact, he loved his experience so much that he still lives in Fisher Hassenfeld. He never broke any hall rules, but recalls doing things that were “if not
mean-spirited, things I shouldn’t have been doing.” It’s a learning process after all, and freshmen do freshman things. Sanders shares some of the things that “one of the better kids” engage in as freshman:

“As a student I did a lot of things that if I was caught I would have probably been thrown out of housing. During Spring Fling I was throwing water balloons out the window. When I was really sick once, I was farting like crazy. My pants smelled like ass, so I burned them. Under the arches of the quad I had a little fire. I just lit them on fire. One time, you know the statue up there; my friends and I put shaving cream on it and shaved it. We did a lot of stuff. I never got caught… Also we would sit on ledges and flick stuff off at people when they went by.”

These types of narratives come as no surprise to the RAs. It is very likely that some of the RAs and GAs engaged in this juvenile behavior. They didn’t all necessarily do the same things as Sanders, but they have their own stories of immature freshman mischief. They may regret it now, but it can also be considered necessary to development. Fortunately, none of Sanders’ activities – except maybe “flicking stuff” off ledges at people – hurt anyone. It easily could have been dangerous to set fire to any part of the Quad, even if, Sanders contends, “I would like to say for the record, they were flannel pants, it was well-contained, I was sure it wasn’t nearby any gas lines, and it was snowing so I did it with a pit of snow and put the snow on top of it.” If not, whoops. Explosion! Poof! “It was an accident” doesn’t cut it.

From the sections on health and justice, especially when they relate to alcohol, it is becoming increasingly clear that the student staff knows exactly what goes on and that
they try to keep it from happening in their sections. They all recognize that students will do things that aren’t smart that they may come to regret. After all, they were all once freshman. Most would rather that residents leave the Quad if they plan on engaging in questionable or illegal activities, and it seems as though students have internalized that mentality when it has been presented to them by a responsible upperclassmen – an RA. The same applies to GAs

Jane Rogers probably would prefer that the GAs and RAs enforce the rules, and might even assume that they would write students up more often. If she assumes they do, then they are failing her and jeopardizing the health of her “family members.” If she assumes they don’t enforce the rules, but is happy with their job otherwise, then perhaps she should encourage the GAs and RAs to take a stance backed by a stronger warning than “I’d be disappointed.” Whatever the case, everyone knows that students engage in immature freshman mischief and the pranks of college. They may come to regret these acts, but it’s part of the process of growing up, as is moving into the high-rises. Because nearly every student drinks underage, it must be taken as a given and the student staff should address the issue. They should make an effort to keep safety issues in mind, warning about binge drinking and telling the students they are available in times of crisis. If GAs and RAs suggest that the proper place for student social life is outside the Quad, where free alcohol and frat parties are numerous, that stands in opposition to their role as community facilitator. I suppose as long as the bathrooms aren’t torn out every weekend, most will considerate the situation a positive.
### Personality

Through the last few sections, it has become clearer that the dorms are not merely warehouses, but aim at a middle ground between a parents' house and complete anarchy. In any living situation, personality conflicts will arise. Many students formerly lived by themselves in rooms twice the size of a room that currently holds two people. They see college dorm life as an opportunity for them to learn how to live peacefully with another person. Kite and Key promotes the roommate bond as a particularly strong one, and a good take-off point for all future friendships. This is sometimes the case, but roommate conflicts are one of the most common problems for people living in multiple occupancy rooms like doubles, triples, and multi-person suites.

Part of Jane Rogers' job is to mediate roommate trouble. She says that it doesn't matter if roommates knew one another before arriving at college; many will still have issues with their roommates. The Quad is constantly full, with a long waiting list of people trying to get in. This well-known fact contributes to many roommates solving their problems, because they know that if they leave they will not be able to get back into the Quad. That someone is so unhappy that they would even consider leaving the Quad signals to Jane that there is really something serious. They would first try to relocate the unhappy students, and do so if there is room, but most times there isn't. (Rogers, 2004)

Rogers thinks the biggest cause of problems lies in adjustment issues: "Maybe [learning to share a room] is not the best sort of thing to be taking on as you're adjusting to college and doing everything else." In her experience roommate relationships often dissolve over trivial things. To her, having a roommate is about recognizing differences,
sharing space, being responsible toward the other’s possessions and not allowing friend’s encroach on the roommates’ physical space. And these are “difficult lessons to learn in the best of circumstances.” (Rogers, 2004)

RA Frank experienced a roommate dilemma once in each of his two years. In one situation the roommates experienced no interpersonal problems but rather they were simply dissatisfied with their room. This year, however, a situation arose between one roommate whose boyfriend visited often and her sexually conservative roommate. The more conservative girl felt awkward and would leave. Frank says, “Sometimes she didn’t feel comfortable in her own room. We dealt with that… I just had them talk. In that case it was just facilitating talking.” This dispute was never brought to the house dean’s attention, and, in fact Frank confides “I’ve actually never brought anything to Jane.”

RA Lucy also had a few roommate flare-ups in the beginning of the first semester. In one case someone switched upstairs to accommodate a problem on another floor. Since their rooms were changed, all of those people are content with their living arrangements. Another case involved two students who were so overwhelmingly different that it was obvious to RA Lucy that they weren’t going to be friends. One of them was Kevin Lake. On him, Simmons says, “He’s a pretty sensitive individual and he came to school thinking that, ‘I’m gonna be friends with my roommate; it’s gonna be great.’” (Simmons, 2004) That was not the case and he needed to adjust to that. And he has. Currently, Lake, as has been mentioned earlier, is living in a quad with three other members of the hall and he also joined a fraternity. It was all a matter of developing other avenues. If he was able to move a few floors up, he might have jumped at the opportunity. Lake knew that he would have to leave the Quad if he wanted a switch and had made too many friends in the
hallway to leave. For now, he is happy and his roommate situation doesn’t tax him. They aren’t friends, but they can talk sports and live peacefully. (Lake, 2004)

A roommate is not a guaranteed best friend. The basic bonding unit is supposed to be the floor, but when it comes down to it, students do a lot more than just dorm life. Jane Rogers view of the world once again differs with the students. Roommates and floors do not consider themselves a family, or if they do it’s not a very tight-knit family and there is a lot of room for movement. If dorm life were the main basis of solidarity then the numerous extracurricular activities around Penn’s campus needn’t exist. Personality is a very important indicator as to whether roommates will get along. Like family members, who are compelled by blood to live together despite personality differences, most are able to settle their disputes and live in relative harmony. Community can be restored through the facilitation of discussion, and otherwise people will go about their business. The next section will explore what students do outside of the residence halls, as well as how these activities affect dorm life.
Expanding One's Horizons

Residence hall life is only one facet of college life, and even the most pro-dorm advocate will encourage students to spread out. Rogers explains: "It's sort of a normal developmental thing to find other interests outside of the house." Staff are concerned when students do not spread out: "We actually worry," says Rogers, "about someone who gets to March and April and they're still kinda following their RA or GA around. We're worried that they're not developing in the way that we like." This expansion could be joining a club sports team, joining a fraternity or sorority, becoming involved with the Daily Pennsylvanian, UTV (University Television), or any of a wide range of civic-minded programs. It is from many of these activities that students acquire the most rewarding of their college experience. (Rogers, 2004) And, in every case it seems that the student staff knows who's in what activity. They are very aware of that, even if they aren't attune to some of the other aspects of their residents' personalities.

Overwhelmingly, the biggest set of organizations that the students are joining lay in Greek Life. The pledge process dominates the second semester of the freshman year, from rushing in January to the close of pledge in April, just before Spring Fling. Sometimes the activities of the fraternities are at odds with the activities of the residence system, as in the case of the pseudo-Greek organization The Owls, who were responsible for "the motor oil incident." Another case occurred when a frat paid, literally, for irresponsible behavior. According to Rogers, a "fraternity pledge class last year decided that it would be fun to copy their naked backsides on our copier and learned the lesson that you don't have to be a very big or a very heavy person to break a copier by doing
that.” The fraternity was forced to pay the $2000 replacement cost. She says: “So sometimes we run smack up against something that a frat is doing that we don’t like.”

The official standpoint on fraternities and sororities is neutral. The University is happy that joining a Greek organization allows students to expand their network of friends and acquaintances. The do not condone the “groupthink” attitude that leads to heavy drinking and destruction of property. Also many RAs and GAs, and the house dean herself pledged a sorority, so it would be difficult and hypocritical to condemn something in which so many undergraduates blissfully participate. It’s pretty apparent to those involved in the selection process who is “Tri-Delt material” or “SAE material.” In time, through attending many fraternity parties – as freshman do – it becomes more obvious to the individuals.

The pledge process is ultra-time-consuming, especially at fraternities like The Castle which require their pledges to be on-call basically all the time. This is somewhat destructive to dorm life because programs and house dinners – if they occurred first semester – are even more sparsely attended. Fewer people going to events makes everyone less engaged in the whole experience. Interest wanes and everyone finds better things to do while The Apprentice is on in RA Lucy’s room.

The process of reaching past the dorm to make friends is part of the natural development of college students. Their sense of community surpasses the walls of the Quadrangle, and the administration realizes it must. If the goals of fraternities and dorms go up against each other than the effects are less than desirable. Students will always seek to expand their horizons and make friends with people outside of their little corner of the Quad, and staff supports this effort. There is more to life than where one lives. Some
people appreciate the Quad experience and the community that exists there to the point that they remain for four years, becoming RAs in their final years. Others find more fulfillment, whether temporary or longer-lasting, in their organizations and activities. It’s all cultural, and nothing can stop it.
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Race and Religion

Race and religion are two of the most important human factors differentiating people. Every culture has at least one religion and everyone self-identifies with a race. There is no difference with the residents of Fisher Hassenfeld. Race is a topic wherein people have their own unvoiced opinions which may be racist, but they do not want to get into disputes because of those prejudices. Similarly, religion may be something that college students do not want to fight over. They act in such a way as to avoid controversy.

To anthropologists, race is used only as a way to socially distinguish groups based on salient visible characteristics. It has nothing to do with underlying biological similarities. The informants I spoke to, in many cases, were not operating under an anthropologist’s notion of race. To most, or perhaps all, of them, race has only to do with the differences of black and white and potential prejudice associated with these associations based on skin color.

Phil Nichols suggests one reason that race may not be an issue in Fisher Hassenfeld, “There is a sense that the Quadrangle is less heterogeneous than some of the other houses.” People see the houses in the Quad as being whiter even if the distribution is fairly even throughout all the houses, except Dubois, which is primarily African-American. (Nichols, 2004) The houses have many white students and many Asian students, both Asian and Asian-American, and it appears that there is no tension.

The GA and RAs were hard-pressed to come up with an example of racial tension. They all recall their students being majority white, with the non-white students
typically being Asian. If anything, students with proud ethnic backgrounds are likely to share their experiences with their floormates at activities like study breaks. GA Virginia shares her example of this phenomenon: “one of my students is Korean and she was telling us about Korean barbecue for like half an hour two nights ago.” (D’Oro, 2004) RA Frank said that race “hasn’t been a problem whatsoever.” His halls were predominantly white, as he surmises is the case throughout the Quad, but there was never an issue. (McCollugh, 2004)

With 1200 people, there’s bound to be differences in religious opinion. On religion, Nichols is the only person who mentioned problems. Most people keep their religion personal. The fundamentalist Christians seem to bring the most fervor to the table and with it the potential for strife. Nichols says that in the past few weeks some evangelical Christians have caused problems: “I understand, it’s part of their religion that they have to proselytize, but do it someplace else basically. This is our home. Get out of our home.” (Nichols, 2004)

GA Virginia knew of a staff member who was an evangelical Christian. They had a training activity in which they each had a religion taped to their forehead, but no one could see theirs. Then, the other staff members would say things like, to the person with the Muslim card, “Why isn’t your head covered?” so that they could figure out what religion they were. The evangelical Christian was very offended at the perception of evangelicals, claiming, “I don’t try to convert other people.” Since, she knows only of a student who is a born-again Christian involved in Athletes in Action. For this student, “It’s part of her week, it’s very part of her life and she talks about it.” She has invited the hall to go see a movie with the group, will post flyers of events, but Virginia hasn’t “felt
that it’s been pushy, condescending or judging.” It hasn’t caused any problems because the student puts things out there in same way that someone on student council or an athlete might fish for interest.

The University of Pennsylvania is not the place to fight over issues of race – in the way my informants define it, at least – and religion, at least not in the dorm setting. People are all entitled to their views. One part of living in a diverse community of thought is accepting that not everyone shares the same belief system and not everyone is the same race. It seems that in most cases, people have faith or do not, but are not likely to make their religious beliefs something to fight about. They are more likely to join a group like Athletes in Action, pray, hang out with friends from that group and move into a community living situation in the high-rises if they feel uncomfortable. No one seems to have any trouble with race or religion, at least in the context of residence hall life.
Gender

Gender is another important variable to which anthropologists give attention. Does the dorm setting have a special way of dealing with differences in gender, external or self-identified? The setting is mixed gender, where women share halls with men – as opposed to the past concept of dorms where women and men were separate. The most concrete example of how gender affects social interaction is with regard to bathrooms. According to Phil Nichols, there are “non-gendered bathrooms in the Quadrangle and Hill and King’s Court English House.” While non-gendered may be the most appropriate word to describe the bathroom situations, no one else seems to use it. From House Dean Jane Rogers down to Kevin Lake, everyone refers to the bathrooms as being either single-sex or co-ed.

For many floors, the bathroom setup vexes the residents. It really depends on the architecture of the buildings as to whether the bathrooms are a problem or not. For example, there are sections with a group of females on a hallway, but with a majority of males on the floor. In such cases, the GA or RA might assign the bathroom as Male to accommodate the majority. The female residents would likely have to trek up and down the stairs in order to go to the Female bathroom. The fourth floor apparently has too few bathrooms for the 29 residents, and accommodations have been made. For particularly heavy-traffic times, anywhere between nine and eleven a.m., Jane Rogers gave a select group of the busiest female residents the keys to Speakman in Ware. This type of situation is avoided when possible, but sometimes it makes sense to set the bathrooms up that way. (Simmons, 2004)
Imposing a particular bathroom type on a section is usually the worst way to handle the issue. Students tend to feel happier with the arrangement when it is brought to a vote of some sort. The RAs and GAs get a lot of flack for choosing the bathroom types for them. Everyone is respectful of the bathroom arrangement and very few problems have arisen once the decision has been made by the residents. (D’Oro, 2004)

When given the option, some floors choose the co-ed arrangement. They have bathrooms that can be used by anyone, but they are all still locked. A male and a female need not necessarily co-occupy a bathroom, although it’s possible. It’s likely that if anyone had a major problem with the arrangement that the floor’s student staff member would attend to the issue by designating at least one bathroom as single sex. (Simmons, 2004)

Even when the choice of single-sex is made, it is not necessarily a completely dead issue. When RA Lucy is in a hurry, she sometimes scurries into the Male-designated room. She would agree that some of her female residents do this as well. The only protection she has is a Post-It Note. No one seems to mind or care about these infrequent happenings.

Because using the bathroom is such a vital part of life, it is inherently important to those who have limited access to it. Rogers is willing to accede to certain individuals with special needs, in the case of the Ware house keys, but mostly students just deal with it. The GAs and RAs must wait in line for the showers just like the 18-year-olds in their midst. Everyone is equal in a towel.
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Incest Taboo

Every society, even the community of Fisher Hassenfeld, has rules about which members are and which members are not appropriate sexual partners. Dormcest, floorcest and hallcest are just some of the words coined to describe sexual encounters between house members. Jane Rogers would prefer that Fisher Hassenfeld’s members see each other as a family, but knows that it happens. It goes along with her mindset, picked up from observing her two cats, wherein, “they don’t soil the place where they want to be comfortable.”

Rogers says that floor members tend to hook up with each other early in the year before they know each other really well. Sometimes they’ll regret it: “You’ll get stories in March and April that so and so and so and so hooked up in the fall and they broke up before fall break and there’s been tension ever since.” They attempt to discourage people from getting sexually involved in the beginning of the year and try to keep people “busy enough” to “focus on getting to know each other as family in ways that will discourage that, because those things usually don’t turn out well.” (Rogers, 2004)

None of the student staff knew of any members of their own floor that had hooked up with each other but knew it happened. Further, they admitted that across the whole of Fisher Hassenfeld there were probably a lot of amorous encounters. In the GA’s case, at least, she considers herself an outsider to the whole concept, knowing only what she is told about. A student should know best: Kevin Lake was also unaware of any of his friends or floormates engaging in dormcest, but did know about the fourth floor.
Anyone that mentioned anything about floorcest commented on the fourth floor of Class of '28. The fourth floor displays such a blatant disregard for the potential for a familial structure that the floor is almost legendary. RA Lucy is friends with the RA up there and describes the twisted aberration from "normal":

"Fourth floor – they definitely have a hookup chart during the first few weeks of orientation... Stephanie has 29 freshmen all in a row. It's known as the crazy hall. They would definitely have nights where someone else was in your room, you didn't have to hookup, or nights you spent the night in someone else's room would be like home and away. There would be points and you would tally it up. That obviously got taken away eventually or taken down. Not by Stephanie, but by someone. I know there were four couples in the first week. And she's just like AHHH."

Although it stands out compared to any of the other floors on the building because it is such a strong example, dormcest is not all that rare. Many people engage in floorcest or dormcest in secret. (Simmons, 2004) One thing is clear: if this floor could go so far as to construct a hookup chart, it must be more common than those who participate know.

Relationships between student staff members take place from time to time, to Rogers’ knowledge, but she discourages it strongly. She says, “I basically tell them, I don’t want you hooking up with each other. Do not do it.” (Rogers, 2004) RA Frank knows of at least two relationships that have happened in the time that he’s been RA, and he is fairly sure that Rogers doesn’t know either happened. He would not explain further, but just said that it was obvious that she didn’t know about it. (McCollugh, 2004)
Relationships between GAs/RAs and students are strictly forbidden. Rogers says, “I also tell them if they do it with their students that I’ll fire them. That is unacceptable.” She sees too many negatives that can occur in those situations. She feels that she is too old, as is Skip, and as are the faculty fellows, for the students to pose any sexual lure for them. Age is not the real issue, however, it is power and the potential for abuses of power. She holds the student staff to being professionals and feels that they are oftentimes professional without even knowing it. Rogers feels like she is insulting her staff by stating it outright, but she likes to address the possibility early: “I tell them, if you find yourself being attracted to one of your residents, you’re going to have to be the adult and repress it – at least for the time being – because it’s not an appropriate relationship.” Inappropriate since it’s between people of different power in the dorm setting, which is neutralized once one moves out. That all being said, RA Frank does not know of any relationships between student staff and students and neither did the female staff members.

The incest taboo, which creates names like dormcest, floorcest and hallecest is particularly amusing given that – barring twins or cousins – no one in these buildings is related. The idea of not engaging in sexual activities with one’s relatives makes sense, however, and if Jane Rogers can instill that into the students’ minds so much better for her. Her sense of community involves students who only engage in friendships with those who live around them; it doesn’t cross into the sexual realm. Looking at this community as a tribe of unrelated individuals, it does not make sense why the students should not form attachments with each other which surpass friendship. Some students went to high schools that are smaller than their current dorms and many of them had girlfriends and
boyfriends in these situations. What is it about living with someone that puts these prohibitions on sexual activity? The only case where it truly is inappropriate has nothing to do with location or family and everything to do with abuses of power. Just as professors should not get physically intimate with their students, the staff and student staff should not take advantage of their roles. All in all, the incest taboo is interesting, but the way it plays out in a dorm setting often confuses biology, community and authority.
**Conclusion**

Coming back to the original question: Does the residence hall system function in such a way that it works well for everyone from Phil Nichols down to the stereotypical freshman who moves on to the high-rises?

From the beginning, the student staff tries to get the students to see that they are in a community and that they should consider it a home. Rules are set out in order to protect the students and the preexisting culture: do not destroy property, do not host loud parties in your rooms and do not engage in sexual activities with your neighbors. People accept the rules or they are punished. The administrators would also like to promote a sense of dorm loyalty, and attempt to do so by separating the large Quadrangle into separate buildings, the college houses. They also set up activities where the students can interact more with the faculty, especially through residential programs, like Healthy Living, Law and Society and Media and Communications.

The student staff is the first line of defense against homesickness and maladjustment to college life. They program monthly (or better) events that encourage their residents to come out of their rooms and meet other people. Students see meeting new people as among the most important goals of their college experience and the dorm is often where this first happens. It is, in Rogers’ ideal, the leaping off point of all future Penn friendships and a comfort zone from which to gain more acquaintances and friends. The staff may not keep their doors open all the time, but the students don’t suffer that much for it. They also may not eat with their students, like Nichols requires. Likewise, students seem unaffected by this.
Problems can arise in a number of ways and the staff has implemented different ways to deal with them. Roommate disputes over personality issues are quite common. Usually both people need to adjust to living with another person while they are tackling all the other challenges of college life at the same time. If their issues are insoluble, one of the residents is often forced to leave the Quad. Room scarcity is a driving force in the motivation for many of the students to remain in their rooms, even if they have problems with their roommates.

Students may drink irresponsibly and cause harm to themselves and others. These are treated first as medical problems – especially if they require hospitalization – and then the students may be written up and punished. There may not be a freshman football team anymore, but students still destroy property. Students steal from other students. Everybody acts mischievously when they are freshmen. Some of these offenses are found out and overlooked; some are found out and punished; and some are never found out at all.

Everyone is bound to expand their friendships beyond the dorms. Many join fraternities and sororities, but there are countless other activities that students devote time to. The administration generally takes a neutral stance on Greek life, but promotes expanding one's horizons. Typically, Greek life is fine with administrators as long as their ideals to come directly into confrontation with the ideals of their community.

Several staples of anthropological study bore out different levels of relevance. Race and religion may be important factors for anthropologists to look at, but in terms of the college experience no one seems to want to fight about these differences. Gender issues are only towel-deep; most of the problems that arise between men and women co-
Through this overview of dorm life, some trends in shared culture have arisen. In most situations, the administration knows what goes on, in general. They know students drink underage; they are familiar with dormcest and hookups between floormembers; they are aware of property destruction and general freshmen stupidity; they are conscious of happenings that are universal to college-age students. They know the particular cases that are life-threatening or punitively important. Otherwise, the student staff members know what is going on, often without the administrators’ knowledge. Being students themselves, and having engaged in many of the same activities as underclassmen, the student staff has an excellent handle on what’s really going on. They know with even more certainty, and with more examples, the situations that develop in the Quad environment. The students, of course, live the resident experience. They are less familiar with overarching trends and more concentrated on specifics. The only trend most freshmen know is that they will be moving into the high-rises and then off-campus in the coming years.
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