

Thursday, September 26, 2019

While I was quick to notice physical space at Cornell University this past summer, I was much slower to acknowledge its impact on students and myself. With just over 15,000 undergraduates, its enrollment is not dissimilar to Minnesota State University, Mankato, my undergraduate institution. However, US News & World Report (2019) lists Cornell's total campus acreage as over twice that of Minnesota State (745 and 303, respectively). While some consideration is given to Cornell's larger graduate enrollment, the difference still does not level the student to space ratio of the campuses. I also acknowledge that I was on campus during the summer, which at Cornell like many campuses, is a time of year with fewer students on campus. Despite these things I still believe Cornell was a "big" campus. In fact, campus was so large it was colloquially divided into multiple contiguous sub-campuses, with my internship being primarily located on north campus.

On June 28, 2019 I moved into Ecology House, an environmentally themed, 99-bed residence hall, and the furthest north building on north campus. Historically, Ecology House was a hotel, but structurally it seemed closer to an above-ground bomb shelter with concrete walls so thick that wi-fi did not reach into the rooms. I was set to live in "Eco" for about two weeks, before moving into Clara Dickson Residence Hall, the hall I was co-directing for the summer. Unlike "Eco," Dickson is the largest residence hall in the Ivy League, built in 1947 with 512 beds across 5 floors, split into two "sides." Dickson is so large as a building that it also houses the offices for Student Life (Student Affairs) marketing, Cornell Dining, and Residential Programs. On June 11<sup>th</sup> when I finally moved into Dickson, I discovered that most Dickson rooms are single rooms with no overhead lights, and none of them have air conditioning. It was as a benefit of employment that my room was outfitted with an air conditioning unit. It was also one of the few rooms in the hall that had a private bathroom, a wall-mounted light fixture, and was only a few lengths of hallway from the room that had been converted into my office.

Cornell had so many interesting spaces that brought so many new experiences. Whether it was McGraw Tower (locally known as the bingly-dingly), Robert Purcell Community Center (RPCC), Beebe Lake, or Cascadilla Gorge, Cornell was not short on spaces. In my end of internship report, submitted to Residential Programs, I wrote humorously about the ability to wait and spot policy violations at the Dickson loading dock or the near-clock-like predictability of campus door prop alarms. I excluded from the report, anything about my bi-weekly (every other week) frustration with walking to west campus for professional development sessions, perhaps in recognition of the value of the sessions and the want to not disparage them.

What I will, in reflection, speak ill of however, is the process of night-check. At 10:45pm on school-nights and 11:45pm on non-school-nights, all of the program participants line up in lounges in their respective residence halls, show their student ID to a student staff member, and are checked-in for the night. I have no inherent problem with night-check. It is a logical safety measure for minors, many of whom were in a foreign country. My problem was with the lounges and the hallways and the volume of students needing to be checked. I directed the male-identifying side of Dickson hall (Dickson 6-side), with about 250 students. Night-check for Dickson 6-side took place in two lounges, separated by a wide-point in middle of the ground-floor hallway. Each lounge served half of the students, sorted alphabetically by last name. During the first week, residents walked into the lounges, checked-in and then walked back.

After a week of observation, I realized the doors into each lounge served as a choke-point and caused significant congestion. Further, despite the lounges being in the middle of the hallway, the lines into both lounges queued in the same direction. By week two, I pulled the check-lists to the lounge doorways and queued the lines in opposing directions to reduce hallway congestion. By the beginning of week three, residents had largely caught on. Unfortunately, about 95% of Dickson 6-side students were participating in 3-week programs and moved out, just as they learned the system. I had to re-teach the process to just over 200 new residents, who moved in on July 14, 2019.

In a deeper reflection, I think we look past the impact of space too often. This overlooking is embedded in our language; The common phrase that talks about forests and trees fails to even mention the land, the hills, and the rivers below the forest. In a University, we have to see beyond the students, we have to begin seeing the buildings and the sidewalks. We have to acknowledge that university spaces have an undeniable impact on the student (and student affairs professional) experience.