

White Paper

Residential Academic Programs: Values and Futures

How does CU best meet the needs of its first-year students? How do CU's first-year student programs set us apart from other large universities? How do we best start students on the route to success at CU and in their post-graduate lives? **Residential Academic Programs (RAPs) are the answers to all these questions.** This white paper places the RAPs in the context of CU's strategic planning and sets out the story of the RAPs' successes, their role in our future as a University, and shows how further investment in the RAPs will benefit our students.

CU's original Flagship 2030 plan, approved in 2007, specifically recommended: "We intend to **build on our successful Residential Academic Programs (RAPs)** by creating a new campus-wide emphasis on "residential colleges," offering a multi-year residential academic experience for every entering student". This recommendation was the outcome of a **deep understanding of the data about student success** and how the RAPs place students in a position to do well at CU. It also recognized that in the RAPs CU has programs that are **uniquely our brand**—no other large university integrates academics with residential living like we do—that is a **major draw to applicants**. The campus has deviated from this goal, and this white paper specifically argues that we should reaffirm our commitment to the correct choice made in Flagship 2030 with this recommendation.

Research has shown that the first-year experience, from admission to Spring finals, **plays an outside role** in the academic, social, and post-graduation success of university students.¹ **Residential Academic Programs at CU have** by far the most **practical knowledge** among academic units with the full range of first-year student life, so the university's efforts to improve the first-year experience at CU should draw heavily from the expertise of RAP faculty and staff.

CU's first year students require attentive mentoring and academic skills building. Our first-year students arrive with highly variable skill sets. Some come from academic environments which have not prepared them for the challenges of coursework in a big university. Others are the first person in their family to attend a residential campus, or to be in traditional undergraduate degree program. Still others come from elite high schools, have considerable

¹ Brower, Aaron M. and Karen Kurotsuchi Inkelas (2010). Living-Learning Programs: One High-Impact Educational Practice We Now Know a Lot About. *Liberal Education*, 96 (2), retrieved from [hyperlink](#). This is just one among many articles detailing research done in recent years on this subject.

advanced placement credit, and need to be pushed to reach even higher levels of academic performance. Any given class of first-year students at CU likely has some students from each of these groups. For CU faculty, the difficulty lies in addressing the needs of all of these students. Smaller courses in the RAPs, faculty working regularly from their offices located in the dorms, and the many opportunities for making connections through co-curricular activities allow faculty to connect with each student to strive for academic success and to build strong mentoring relationships with students that sometimes go beyond first year.

The **teaching faculty of the RAPs have extensive experience** in guiding students through the transition to college-level academic expectations. Many of our faculty have dedicated appointments within the RAPs. These members of the RAP faculty have become specialists in the First Year Experience, and thus serve as potential mentors to faculty outside the RAPs who would like to explore best practices in first-year student education. The RAP faculty stand out in their ability to help guide each student with their social and emotional growth during their transition to independent living. **Institutional studies show that students who have been in a RAP gain higher grade point averages, are more likely to return to CU for a second year and more likely to graduate within four or five years.**

On a national level, CU's RAPs are leaders when it comes to blending academics with community. The CU RAP community, created by integrating the classroom experience with the residential hall living experience, plays a critical part in the recruitment and retention of students and sets us apart from our peer universities. The RAPs achieve this unique model by integrating curriculum, strong co-curricular activities, and social events attended by students, faculty and staff.

The RAPs are inclusive, and can help the University attract and retain a more diverse student body. CU needs to challenge itself to reach out to underserved communities and populations. With their intensive attention to the needs of first-year students, the RAPs are perfectly positioned to identify the unique needs of students from underserved populations and aid them in their transition to a successful life in the CU community. More RAP scholarships should be made available to ensure these students have the opportunity to benefit from the RAP experience, or better yet, the funding structure needs to change so that the separate RAP fee is eliminated, and instead the cost would be covered by regular tuition.

CU Boulder should do more to focus on investing resources that enable faculty members to serve a role like that of a life-coach in the lives of students, especially first-year students. RAP programs can lead the way in this regard.

Students who connect with an “adult” on campus in their first year —no matter if it’s faculty or staff—do better than other students and have higher retention rates. Program Coordinators are available in the residence hall 40 hours per week, far longer than any faculty member, so the likelihood of a student connecting to the Program Coordinator as their “adult” is far greater simply given the odds of being physically present. Residential Academic Program Coordinators mentor first year students by assisting them with the often challenging social and

academic transition from high school to college. Coordinators encourage student communication with campus departments, administrators, and faculty, and guide them to program and campus resources, showing how to navigate and negotiate campus systems and complex processes such as registration. The key role of RAPs in helping students academically with “adult” presences could be reinforced by **placing first-year academic advisors in the RAP buildings.**

How might the RAP model be made more ubiquitous on campus? One way to accomplish this, would be to have groups of departments sponsor RAPs. For example, to promote community engagement and interdisciplinary learning for freshmen, CU could have multiple departments (e.g. Engineering, Physics, and Math) come up with an interdisciplinary RAP that provides a theme (e.g. Technology RAP) that would encompass these fields. Since there is no RAP in the Quad, there should be one to support these students who are struggling with calculus, physics, and engineering project-based classes. At the same time, this RAP could bring in speakers from various engineering fields and field trips to Google, HP, IBM, Oracle, etc. to help students explore their career options. RAPs are among the least expensive and most cost-effective ways of delivering first-year programming. **We must explore how to improve opportunities at William’s Village and other residential halls that currently have no RAPs.**

In sum, the RAPs:

- **Offer small classes** that allow for more meaningful interaction between students and faculty. Lack of upper-division students allows more space for first-year student participation in class discussions. Plus, we can specifically design our syllabi for students who are still transitioning to university-level academic work.
- **Perform close tracking** of student progress and problems, and have specific procedures for intervening when students show signs of struggling, academically, emotionally, or socially.
- **Offer community-building** events for each class and for each RAP, including co-curricular events, class outings, social events, public displays of student projects, and so on. Students who know each other and are more comfortable interacting with each other and participating in and out of class.
- **Provide academic assistance**, including individualized writing help, tutoring, weekly review sessions, mentorship, formal and informal advising, and study skills and time management training.
- **Provide internship, career, and major guidance** from RAP faculty members who are resourceful, doing research and are engaged with the community; because of close faculty-student connection, students are comfortable to seek advice from their teachers beyond first year. This leads to retention and more student satisfaction.
- **Possess a tight sense of community** of faculty, students, hall directors, and staff. RAP students have been shown to have a lower sexual assault rate than non-RAP students.

- **Have a long tradition of focus on pedagogy and leadership** in first-year education through the RAP faculty forum (founded several years ago) or the more recent RAP FLC (Faculty Learning Community).

These are successful practices of the RAPs and we hope that they will be expanded to include all first-year students.

Let us, as a campus, take advantage of the wealth of knowledge and experience in the RAPs. The recommendation in Flagship 2030 was based on precise factual knowledge that RAP participation enhances student engagement and academic success. **Renewal of the goal of having a RAP in every dorm and elimination of the RAP fee would insure equity and support for all freshmen.**