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## **Monarch spotlight: Bringing REP ODU to housing and residence life**

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Old Dominion University (ODU) is a thriving public research institution located in the heart of Hampton Roads in Norfolk, Virginia. The urban campus encompasses a highly diverse population enrolling nearly 24,000 students and approximately 5,000 live on campus.

Housing & Residence Life recently joined the Division of Student Engagement and Enrollment Services, a new division formed to enhance student engagement, learning, and success. ODU is focused on reconnecting the living and learning experience and has doubled its housing capacity in the past five years. Housing and Residence Life is a comprehensive auxiliary enterprise composed of 9 residence halls, and three apartment complexes.

**Keywords:** housing & residence life, student engagement, citizenship

### **Introduction**

During the fall of 2011, a group of ODU students launched the Monarch Citizen campaign in an effort to encourage our community to be more committed to a culture of Responsibility, Engagement and Pride (REP). Led by Luis Ferreira and Fred Tugas of the Student Government Association, and Greg Walsh, Student Representative of the Board of Visitors, the initiative was rolled out with great success the week of Homecoming of 2011. The group distributed t-shirts (resembling the old “RUN DMC” t-shirt lettering, but instead saying “REP ODU”) and spoke with faculty, staff and other students about the importance of making our campus the best it can be.

The t-shirts have become a popular image and prized possession on campus among the student body. Recently, an alumni version of the t-shirt has become more prevalent, which sends a message that even non-current ODU students are buying into the message – a good sign that it is resonating with the ODU community.

After informally surveying the students this fall, the Residence Education staff within the department of Housing & Residence Life decided to develop a residential curriculum that would facilitate development under the umbrella of these tenants, with the hope that implementing this model will better help prepare our students to be holistically strong for life after college. To understand and appreciate why the tenants are valuable and applicable to our work, we needed to examine what it means to be a Monarch Citizen.

Citizenship works on many levels. While we are all here at ODU, there should be a sense of obligation and opportunities available to develop citizens within our residential communities. Facilitating positive interactions within our residence halls/apartments, addressing student behavior timely and appropriately and developing and holding one another accountable for community living expectations are all interconnected in the creation of a positive living/learning environment and cultivating true Monarch Citizens. While looking at the following tenants and their planned outcomes, we expect that:

- **Responsibility** - *On-campus residents will step up as responsible members of their local and campus communities and hold others accountable for their actions.*
- **Engagement** - *Students living on-campus will forge meaningful connections with peers, faculty, and staff*
- **Pride** – *Students living on-campus will demonstrate Monarch Pride by positively representing ODU at all times.*

These three areas are essential to this plan. Students' first and utmost priority is to succeed in the classroom. But it is our belief that if students are not intentionally embracing and practicing the three tenants, they will likely not maximize their academic potential. Maintaining that responsibility, pride and engagement are interconnected and are present in all facets of campus life; it is critical these tenants are embraced in multiple ways through the interactions that students have while they are at ODU.

It helps that the catchphrase 'REP ODU' is so easy to remember. We want it to be a simple concept. But if appropriately and consistently applied, it can have widespread, positive life-long effects. Soon, you will read about how each tenant has been developed individually and how this new curriculum structure has already positively impacted some of our students.

For now, some background about who we are. The mission of the Housing & Residence Life (HRL) department at ODU is to provide safe and well-maintained communities that enhance the overall collegiate experience. We want to offer a living and learning experience that facilitates students' development as Monarchs and growth as global citizens.

### **Programmatic Aspects of the Curriculum**

Throughout the 2012 – 2013 academic year, we are diligently working to establish a sincere relationship with every single student that lives with us in the halls and help him/her understand the value of being a Monarch citizen. We have taken an active role to build these relationships through programs such as the Student Success Initiative, Community Charter, and House Calls.

#### *Student Success Initiative*

The Student Success Initiative (SSI) has been implemented as a pilot program in three out of the four freshman residence halls at ODU. The SSI is a series of three intentional conversations held at strategic points throughout the year based on the tenants

of REP ODU. During fall 2012, Resident Assistants (RAs) conducted individual interviews with each student during the first three weeks of the semester to build rapport and proactively discuss topics such as personal safety, academic success, campus involvement, and time management. For example, in a typical SSI session, an RA may ask a student, “How do you plan to take responsibility for your personal safety while attending ODU?”

Simply asking this question could be quite a reality check for some students who may have never had to consider personal safety in an urban setting. At the end of each conversation, the RA works out an action plan with the student with respect to each of the three REP ODU tenants. An added benefit of the SSI model is that it shifts the role of the RA from an authority-based figure to a revered “mentor.” By establishing these mentor relationships with students early on, RAs are in a much better position to promote the tenants of REP ODU. In spring 2013, RAs will conduct the second and third conversations in the series – a “mid-year reflection” on the successes and pitfalls of the fall semester and a “next steps plan” for the summer and sophomore year.

### *Community Charter*

The community charter goes a step beyond the SSI and attempts to cultivate the tenants of REP ODU on a hall/floor level in each residence hall across campus. Grounded in the work of Terry Piper (1997), the community charter is a tool that enables the residents of each floor to create a set of community standards for behavior with the RA acting as a facilitator of the process. By allowing residents to create specific floor norms with respect to topics such as guest behavior, visitation, floor leadership, academics, and safety/security, they are empowered to take greater responsibility for the success and well-being of their community. This process also gives students an early opportunity during the first floor meeting to practice civil discourse, learn from the diverse views of other students on the floor, and express their own personal views. For many students, this may be the first time they have had to articulate their preferences on a community issue such as acceptable noise levels. The RA is present to assist the student if he/she struggles and to maintain civility in the room should the conversation become too heated. At the end of the process, each student signs the community charter to symbolize the group effort and commitment to Monarch Citizenship. To convey the importance of these community charters and increase visibility, Housing & Residence Life has placed them in large frames on each floor for students and guests to see.

### *House Calls*

The “House Calls” program was another way we facilitated the development of positive relationships this fall. This door-to-door welcoming campaign consisted of faculty, staff, and university police going around to all of the residential rooms and apartments on campus, which consists of 4,600 students, to give out ODU REP magnets and swag, introducing themselves and telling residents, face-to-face, that we are glad you are here with us. We handed out magnets for their fridges that asked the following important questions:

- Is what I am doing right or wrong?

- How will this action affect my future?
- If someone was watching, would I make a different decision?
- How will my parents/family/friends feel?
- How do my actions represent the ODU Community?

We want for students to think about their actions, find themselves considering these questions and asking others these questions when they see or contemplate questionable behavior.

### *Floor Wars*

RAs and RHA are encouraged to connect their events to Responsibility, Engagement, and/or Pride. In the following example, an RA submitted an activity planning proposal (Three Floor Wars Programs) that supported all three tenants.

Three Floor Wars Programs:

- *The Robot Build-Off event epitomizes the tenant Responsibility. This event emphasizes the importance of recycling. Residents will create a robot for their floor using recyclable materials. Recycling is an easy way to take responsibility of our environment, and this event can help residents learn to recycle and reuse everyday materials in ways that are different from their intended purposes. The “recycle robot” will be judged by the HRL Office Staff, and points will be awarded based on the cumulative scores.*
- *The Food Donation Drive supports the Engagement tenant, which will run all week long. It is important that students are engaged in the Norfolk community, not just the ODU community. This event will encourage students to think about families that live in the area. Residents will be urged to donate non-perishable food items to bins located on their residential floors. All of the donations will go to the Norfolk Food Bank. Points will be awarded to floors based on the weight of their overall donation.*
- *A challenge representing the Pride tenant is the Floor Decorating Competition. It is important for students to feel like the residence halls are a place to call home and to be proud of where they live. The Floor Decorating Competition will give residents a chance to express pride in the floor they live on while connecting with other floor mates. The final products of each floor will be judged by the HRL Office Staff.”*

### *Haunted Halls (HRL Annual Event)*

This model is more than just welcoming students, though. In order to continue to promote the tenants, it is important that we continue to thread them into our curricular efforts throughout the year. HRL at ODU has taken great pride in showcasing a university-wide event for the past five years. This *Haunted Halls* event involves the hard work of nearly half of the RA staff, and the careful and attentive leadership of several paraprofessionals and professionals to ensure a successful production. Annually, as anticipated, many students stand in line for hours to participate in the event, which is held over two nights around Halloween, to get scared and be entertained. Equipping the actors with skills and costumes, converting a large lounge into a haunted environment, and advertising the event takes a great deal of work. Every time the residence education team

puts on a program, it has to connect to one of the three tenants.

This year, the coordinators made sure to take the extra steps to educate our students and other participants about some of the lesser known, but arguably most meaningful, aspects of the program. First, the donated goods (admission was waived in lieu of at least one donated canned or non-perishable food item) collected at the event would be given to the Southeastern Virginia Food Bank. To provide a reflective moment of *responsibility* to the on-campus residents, our staff took time to create bulletin boards throughout all of our residential communities that promoted *Haunted Halls*, but also informed people about the realities faced by the Southeastern Virginia Food Bank. Some of those facts included - that 40,034 individuals live at or below poverty in Norfolk; that 157,378 individuals are served by the Food Bank of Southeastern Virginia; and that 4,324,813 meals are provided through this organization annually in the city of Norfolk.

As we continue to find ways to integrate Monarch Citizenship into the daily life of our ODU students, we must also face the unfortunate scholastic challenges that our students face. Recent research has shown us that many students are scoring low on writing tests when they enter college. And that they often continue to struggle with their writing throughout their first and second years of college (Arum & Roska, 2011). Recognizing this need, coupled with our attempts to engage students to become Monarch Citizens, we created a goal that will inform both efforts to a desired end - to get the students to express themselves through writing and tell their story as it pertains to Monarch Citizenship (Hayne et al, 2009).

## **Learning Opportunities for Staff**

### *Guiding Philosophy*

At its best, REP ODU should not only be for the students that we work with, but also guiding principles for what we - staff and faculty - do on a daily basis. It is important that students see us doing what it is that we expect of them. So when we respond to crises promptly, we are able to show our students that we are RESPONSIBLE. When we take the time to invite students to dine with us and have a conversation, it sends a message that we are sincerely ENGAGING with them. When we take the time to wear an ODU polo shirt on Fridays or at a conference, our professional peers know that we take PRIDE in our institution. When students see us engaging the tenants, it reinforces their value and meaning.

### *The Case for Night Desk Receptionists*

As we approached the 2012-13 academic year, it became increasingly apparent that we needed to develop a program that would create a presence in our residential communities during the late night and early morning hours. Assessing our program during the summer months, we discovered a highly active, and often negative, late-night social environment was likely to occur on any given night. As a result, we created a Night Desk Receptionist (NDR) position, whose responsibilities include: performing community rounds, working at the residence hall front desk, assisting with administrative tasks, and providing additional services and a measure of security in the residence halls. There are 3 NDRs in each building, meaning that approximately 36 NDRs work nightly on ODU's campus. The NDRs are primarily on-campus students. They are integral members of the Housing & Residence Life

(HRL) team, serving as essential front line representatives of the department during the hours of 12 am to 5 am. This new position infuses the tenants of *responsibility* and *engagement*, adds depth to our support systems and reinforces the community of care that we seek to establish through our work every day.

After having completed only two months in their new positions, NDRs were asked to express themselves in writing about how they feel their work relates to REP ODU. The following are excerpts from their comments, which were abundant and, remarkably, all positive:

*“REP ODU is engaging in many ways. As a Night Desk Receptionist, I am concerned if students are safe inside and outside of the residence halls. My responsibilities require me to observe and respond to disruptive behavior. As for our department, it is great to be appreciated for being responsible students. It is a great way to take pride in Old Dominion University.”*

*"Being an NDR has allowed me to become a major player in enhancing the large campus/small community environment that ODU has come to be known for over the years. Having direct relations with the students allow me to develop meaningful, open relationships with them. As an NDR, along with the police department and other housing staff, I have also become responsible for ensuring the safety & well-being of each student in the living community. As an ODU student, I have Monarch Pride, which means it is my duty to represent my campus in a positive way, when I'm on duty and when I'm not."*

*“My position as an NDR has helped me become more responsible because of the demands of the job. Since this is a night-shift job, you have to do more planning than typical workers if you want to keep up on your sleep, and school work. This job has also made me feel more concerned and responsible for our school’s safety even outside of work. I've become more engaged through meeting and chatting with my fellow students while I work, and through meeting my fellow NDRs, and the RAs. Finally, my pride in ODU has shot up considerably since I started working as an NDR, because I've realized how ODU handles certain situations, and they handle them quickly, efficiently and with the utmost care. It's an honor to be part of a school that truly cares for its students.”*

Oftentimes we see our methods of pedagogy as the best ways to facilitate learning among our students. During the course of the year, however, there will be times where we can - and should - ask the students to take on a leadership role to create an environment that will encourage our students to grow as Monarch citizens (Tagg, 2003). The Monarch Citizenship model places a lot of emphasis on getting our unengaged student engaged. The programs that we create, the academic priorities that we support and the ways in which we encourage student engagement such as the NDR position, are all pathways to success through REP ODU. The aforementioned comments alone tell us that we are on

the right track.

Another important part of being engaged is asking questions. Intentional interactions could present a whole new world to these students, which could have tremendous implications on their futures. Just a short conversation and the right questions could encourage a student to reflect on their values in a meaningful way or alter their career aspirations. In short, we want to inspire our students to be curious about the world they live in, actively inquire about it, and consider their place within it as they grow up. As we get older, we have the tendency to not be as curious (Kashdan, 2009). Curiosity among college students can play an essential role in lifelong happiness. Many students enter college with long term career goals in mind, which have been influenced by outside factors (i.e., parents and peers) (Haynes et al, 2009).

A recent report, *Colleges Confront a Gender Gap in Student Engagement*, demonstrated that women and men engage with their campus community in entirely different ways. “Women tend to study abroad, volunteer in the community, and spend longer hours preparing for class, some experts noted. Men spend more time playing video games, relaxing, and watching television, but men have more substantive engagements with their professors, are more likely to do undergraduate research, and tend to major in fields that steer them into better-paying jobs. Although women do many of the things that researchers have identified as positive influences on a college experience, they also report higher levels of stress and lower levels of confidence than men.”

### **Looking Ahead**

Despite these challenges and others, it is imperative that students care about their experience when they are in college, know how their behavior can affect their peers and value the positive opportunities they have during this time in their lives. Therefore, the Residence Education team is charged with connecting all that we do during the 2012 – 2013 academic year to the tenants of REP ODU and the Monarch Citizenship campaign. As a staff, we have a responsibility to intentionally expand this campaign into our program, recognizing the importance of engaging our students with one another and the ODU community in a positive manner.

We are all proud to be Monarchs – this should be evident on a daily basis! We look forward to greater success as our efforts continue to take root and provide meaningful experiences for our residential students.

### **Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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