COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY

In this regard, Berry is akin to the nation’s top liberal arts institutions. These institutions are deliberately residential because they understand that the most powerful forms of undergraduate learning occur when students are immersed in an experience: Such opportunity is most likely to occur if a student can spend a semester or more working on a tutorial with a professor in a laboratory, a leadership experience with a campus organization, or working and living with a family in an unfamiliar culture. In-depth learning has little to do with sitting in a lecture hall but has to do with investing fully in a project and making it one’s own.

Among the nation’s top 50 liberal arts institutions, there is little or no formal agreement with Amherst College and Davidson College: more than 80 percent use the term college to signify their commitment to excellence in undergraduate education. In the case of those using the university label, several have professional programs that complement their undergraduate emphasis: for example, Washington and Lee University (law) and Sewanse – the University of the South (theology). Interestingly, several nationally ranked doctoral-granting institutions have retained the name college, presumably to convey the changing importance of undergraduate education at those institutions, including the College of William and Mary, Dartmouth College, and Boston College (which was chartered as a university). Berry chooses to be called a college, thereby affirming our core identity and committing ourselves to excellence in undergraduate education. The idea of a learning community is critical to Berry’s identity (the classroom, living laboratory) for a first-hand education. Campus life is integral to, not separate from, the educational experience. The living-learning community provides lessons not only for the head, but also equally for the hands and heart.

Consider three ways in which this living-learning community is intentional, integrative, and service. First, when students enter the college community together, they form close bonds as they learn from and with one another. As they live in close proximity – sharing rooms and bathrooms and meals – students adapt and bend and understand. For a good number of our students, it is the first time they have had to share a bedroom. Given a choice, many of them would probably prefer not to share, but the lived lessons learned and friendships that emerge would not be the same without this close proximity. Living together tests their capacity to be civil and courteous, to work through differences and disagreements, and to act on behalf of someone else’s needs.

Second, students come to lead the community over time, helping shape and define it. New students benefit from and enjoy the warmth and generosity of a community that is created for them. As seniors, these same students are responsible to and for this community – they have the privilege and opportunity to create anew a warm and welcoming environment for entering students. Seniors sometimes yearn to be independent, they appropriately want to take on more of their own affairs. Yet, this desire for increased independence can also be fundamentally self-centered and disengaging. An important lesson of the heart is to recognize our responsibility to sustain and improve the community in which we live. Engaging in one’s community as a leader, whether informally or formally, is a great lesson for any student. It can be learned practically in the senior year.

Finally, Berry’s residential community provides the context for its extraordinary Work Experience Program. In its early years, Berry operated as a small, independent college community as much as possible. Although the world has changed in the intervening century, there remains something attractive and ambitious about this model. Thus, Berry gets as close as it can to act as an independent college community. In its senior year, students adapt and bend and understand.

The president’s cabinet recently visited three other highly regarded colleges to review their residential master plans. Given the fact that in enrollment patterns, we will need to decide in the coming years whether to add additional residential facilities, especially for our senior-year students. We are actively studying options relating to the types and distribution of these residential units.

Financial colleges offer the pinnacle of undergraduate education in the nation. Berry represents this tradition in the state of Georgia, and it is the legacies of the country who seek a national-caliber education. Berry’s residential nature is part of what we enter into. We expect students to be active participants in the life of the college, to live and learn in a residential community that facilitates that expectation. Make no mistake, we are proud to be called Berry College.