RESPECT: A Proactive and Data Based Approach to Community Values

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Abstract

Deakin's RESPECT values guide community expectations and standards amongst the on-campus residential student cohort. First introduced in 2016, these values provide a unique opportunity to measure community sentiment, and extend beyond rules and regulations to outline core ideals embraced by the 2,700 students across multiple campuses who call Deakin home. By integrating these community values into all aspects of campus life, including resident induction, rules and regulations, disciplinary processes, student leadership, and event management they have become part of the fabric of the residential community. The recent introduction of a RESPECT values index, calculated using aggregated data from targeted questions in an annual survey, provides a quantitative benchmark, the ability to examine the effectiveness of each individual value, and an opportunity to celebrate examples of positive culture. This paper highlights the rationale behind the introduction of these values, outlines the collaborative design, development and implementation processes used to meaningfully establish and embed them within the community, and details the methodology employed to effectively measure and assess their impact.

Introduction

Deakin's RESPECT values guide community expectations and standards amongst the on-campus residential student cohort. First introduced in 2016, these values provide a unique opportunity to measure community sentiment, and extend beyond rules and regulations to outline core ideals embraced by the 2,700 students across multiple campuses who call Deakin home. The ways in which these values are incorporated within the DRS induction program has been the topic of a previous paper (Burge, 2018). This paper highlights the rationale behind the introduction of these values, outlines the collaborative design, development and implementation process used to meaningfully establish and embed them within the community, and details the methodology employed to effectively measure and assess their impact.

Deakin Residential Services context

Deakin Residential Services (DRS) was established in late 2013 and assumed ownership and responsibility for the operation and development of all new and existing student residential facilities at Deakin University. The residential community has expanded significantly since 2011, approximately tripling in capacity over a 7 year period, with the team currently managing over 2,700 student beds across four campuses: Waurin Ponds and Waterfront, Geelong (approximately 100km from Melbourne), Warrnambool (250km south west of Melbourne), and Burwood (located 15km from the city centre). Whilst each campus has a diversity of student cohorts and geographical communities, all operate under one set of operating policies, procedures, values, and student experience frameworks.

DRS has a critical role to play in enhancing the student experience of the students living on campus during their time studying at Deakin, and upholds the belief that residents, student residential leaders, and staff all share the responsibility of building and maintaining healthy and happy communities. In joining the on-campus community, all residents commit and agree to reading the DRS' Resident Handbook, and completing the Residential Agreement, which clearly outlines

community values, and the standards and expectations of behaviour whilst living on campus (Burge, 2018).

The importance of shared values

Research demonstrates that shared values play an important role in increasing connectedness, inclusion and belonging within communities (Cooper, 2009; Foubert, Tepper & Morrison, 1998; Strike, 1999). Such values further provide community members with a sense of ownership of their own learning and any issues which may arise, help create expectations or norms for appropriate behaviour, and reinforce the belief that every individual has something of value to contribute (Bowles, Dobson & Fisher, 2011; Cooper, 2009; Foubert et al., 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Posner et al., 1985; Strike, 1999; Tinto, 2003; Weaver & Trevino 1999). As Cooper (2009) notes,

in order to persist in their education, all students need to feel they are in a campus community that supports and values them, where learning opportunities are developmental, and where they feel a strong sense of identity and affinity. (p.1)

Authors, Posner, Kouzes and Schmidt (1985) in particular argue that a commitment to shared values can result in three key benefits. Firstly, the personal growth of members who are more likely to take calculated risks necessary to grow and learn, enhance their resilience, and take on leadership roles, additional projects or responsibilities. Secondly, a decrease in behavioural issues within the community as a result of exposure to lessons on positive values, increased respect, responsibility and accountability, and the fostering of positive peer relationships. Finally, a lasting legacy with the ongoing development of the community and the individuals themselves, who can take the lessons learned with them into their future ‘communities’.

Importantly, the development and promotion of strong shared values recognises, honours and celebrates difference, whilst simultaneously uniting students in a larger purpose (Cooper, 2009).

Supporting students can be done in part by recognising the multiple cultures present on any college or university campus, and purposefully identifying core values that both transcend and unify these diverse cultures. (Cooper, 2009, p. 7)

The result – members of such communities have stronger feelings of attachment and mutual respect, a sense of obligation to each other and to the community, and a shared faith and sense of satisfaction that their needs will be met and respected thorough this collective commitment (Cooper 2009; McMillan & Chavis, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Strike, 1999; Tinto, 2003).

Designing and introducing community values

With this research in mind, DRS’ RESPECT values were introduced as a means of publically articulating the expectations and ambitions for the residential community, adopting a proactive approach to encouraging appropriate and positive behaviours, and further developing and enhancing the existing sense of belonging and shared ownership amongst the residential cohort (Burge, 2018). Officially launched in 2016, the values – an acronym forming the word ‘respect’ - Responsiveness, Encouragement, Safety, Proactivity, Enjoyment, Connectedness and Tolerance - guide community expectations amongst residents. They further emphasise the importance of the role of every individual in fostering a harmonious and healthy community, ultimately creating an engaging and enriching on-campus student experience for all. These values provide the opportunity to measure community sentiment, and go beyond rules and regulations to outline core ideals which residents embrace, complementing the Universities Australia sector-wide campaign, “Respect. Now. Always.”

First crafted over a period of months in 2015, the values evolved following initial discussions amongst the staff leadership team, followed by workshops with the broader staffing group, focus groups with student leaders and residents, and finally consultation with relevant university departments. Residents, in particular, played a key role in the design phase, working closely with the staffing team in brainstorming each of the initial values, ensuring that each value selected was clear, relevant and meaningful to the student cohort.

The creation of the RESPECT acronym has proven to be particularly appropriate for a number of key reasons. In particular, the acronym has been an important means of ensuring a clear and memorable values statement for all members of the residential community. Whilst every element of the acronym articulates a specific value, the word as a whole is also representative of the holistic approach to respect. Additionally, the word 'respect' and such values have also emerged as particularly relevant in light of recent global trends concerning sexual assault, harassment, hazing and other problematic behaviour within higher education, and within residential colleges, also providing a clear message of support and alignment across this space (Australia Human Rights Commission, 2017).

The RESPECT values guide every aspect of the student experience within DRS, and this has been demonstrated via a number of means. Firstly, this has taken place via a core communication campaign involving posters, phone wallets, and branding as part of residential merchandise. Secondly, via a creative and engaging resident driven video campaign. Thirdly, through engagement and education of volunteer student leaders, incorporating values into their recruitment, selection, training and ongoing monitoring in the role. Fourth, through clear and consistent articulation of values in all rules, policies and documents, in particular within our Residential Handbook, and the requirement that all residents sign a tenancy agreement which states our values as part of the acceptance process. Additionally via the embedding of our values as part of our disciplinary process and the ability to issue breaches in the event that a resident engages in contravening behaviour. Finally, through the requirement that all programs and events held on residence must leverage at least one aspect of the RESPECT values.

Embedding our community values

A number of initiatives have been introduced in the past twelve months to embed these values within the residential community. The first major initiative was the launch of a tailored and interactive online Residential Induction Program (Burge, 2018). Designed using Future Learn, a digital education platform, the induction has further enhanced resident awareness of rules, values and community living expectations prior to their arrival, whilst also offering students a forum through which to connect, communicate and share their experiences. All residents are required to complete the induction before arriving on site and collecting their keys to check-in. The induction, taking around 20 minutes for students to complete, involves five interactive sections covering rules applying to behaviour, consent, drugs, alcohol, safety and security, and RESPECT values, whilst also introducing students to the on-campus living environment and key members of the residential staffing team. Best-practice, digital learning design principles have been used, including scaffolded learning, constructive-alignment and authentic assessments. These are supported by the inclusion of short and engaging videos to cover content with the aim of sustaining student interest. Participants are further encouraged to respond to, and engage with, others based on topic-related learning activities via an interactive discussion board within each section, with moderation of any commentary by a DRS staff member. The program concludes with a final seven-question test assessing comprehension and requiring a mark of 70% or above to meet each resident's compliance obligations.

Since its launch in February 2018, all incoming residents have completed the induction, with many

highlighting the benefits of the program, noting that the coverage of rules, community values, fire safety and consent, have been of value in guiding their expectations of residential life and aiding their transition to the on-campus living learning community. The section focused on RESPECT in particular, requires participants to comment and engage with others regarding the specific ‘value’ they perceive to be of most importance or relevance to their personal circumstances. Whilst perspectives have varied, they provide a valuable insight into students’ level of understanding and individual interpretation of the values, and have proven meaningful as they articulate the values in students’ own words. As one resident commented:

All of the RESPECT values are important and they sound like they create a very positive, safe, encouraging and accepting community. Watching the RESPECT video made me very excited and I can't wait to get involved with life at Deakin!

The second major initiative has been the introduction of DRS-wide Student Experience and RESPECT Awards. For this first time in September 2017, a number of awards were presented to academic high achievers and those who had made significant contributions to the residential community across the multiple campuses. One category specifically related to the RESPECT values, with the recipient of this particular award selected by the panel for having role-modelled, inspired and motivated others to act in the interests of the residential community, exemplifying these values. In 2018, these awards were further strengthened with the requirement for each individual campus to seek nominations from the community for this category on a monthly basis.

Effectively measuring community values

DRS recognises that, as with many aspects relating to ‘student experience,’ it can be challenging to effectively assess or measure the value or impact of a specific subjective project or initiative, and this could certainly be the case in regards to something as potentially intangible as community values. It can also be easy to lay claim to having outlined and articulated such values without truly having them adopted by the residential student community. In the past two years, DRS has sought to identify definitive and tangible ways of measuring the level to which these values have been adopted by residents.

Firstly, awareness and understanding of these values is assessed via an initial DRS Orientation and Transition Survey. In 2017, 36%, and in 2018, 51%, of the residential population completed this survey. On both occasions, 97% of residents indicated their agreement that they felt safe and comfortable in their new home, whilst 99% understood key rules and values, and wished to play an active role in contributing to a positive residential culture.

Secondly, residents are also asked to provide further feedback as part of a DRS Annual Survey, conducted in August each year. In 2017, 44% (N = 841) of the in-room residential cohort completed the survey, with 97% of residents indicating their awareness of the values, whilst 89% and 90% respectively noted that they felt their community as a whole and the Residential Leader, upheld these values. One year on, in 2018, 47% of the cohort responded to the same survey, with 99% of residents indicating their awareness of the values (+2%), whilst 90% noting that they felt their community as a whole, and their Residential Leader upheld the values (+1%).

Finally and of most significance, in 2017, DRS created a RESPECT values index, which calculates aggregated data via responses from targeted questions in the Annual Survey relating both generally and specifically to the values (see RESPECT Index table below). A score for each RESPECT element is calculated, in addition to an overall Index Score, providing a comparative total. Overall, the higher the score, the more likely it is that respondents report having a positive experience or understanding of that value.

Table 1: DRS RESPECT value index scores

Value	Max. Score	2017 Score	2017 % Index	2018 Score	2018 % Index
General	16	12.2	76%	12.6	79%
Responsive	12	8.7	72%	9.1	76%
Encouraging	12	10.4	87%	10.6	88%
Safe & Secure	12	9.6	80%	9.8	81%
Proactive	12	8.2	69%	8.2	69%
Enjoyable	12	10.1	84%	10.3	86%
Connected	12	9.2	76%	9.2	76%
Tolerant	12	9.5	79%	10.2	85%
OVERALL	100	77.9	78%	80.0	80%

As noted in the table above, in 2017 and 2018, the DRS RESPECT value index score was calculated as 77.9 and 80.0 respectively out of 100. These annual successive scores provide value in two key ways; firstly, the overall annual score, and score for each value, provide a numerical benchmark for improvement year on year, and secondly, each individual value score can be examined to see if additional programming or service improvements can be made to enhance future scores. Indeed, following the release of the 2017 Index Score, a range of additional programming was introduced, including the development of a Resident Induction program and the implementation of new compulsory community meetings (hosted by student Residential Leaders within their units/apartments, which resulted in improvements in general awareness (76 – 79%) and demonstrable increase in the 2018 index score.

On the basis of such forms of assessment, in particular the survey data, the RESPECT values index, student feedback via the Resident Induction, and the approach to making improvements using available data, DRS believes that the large majority of the residential student body have wholeheartedly embraced these values. DRS will continue to explore ways to continue to enhance engagement and awareness of the values, and in particular looks forward to exploring opportunities for improvement on the basis of results from subsequent annual RESPECT values index scores.

Guiding principles

Throughout the creation, implementation, measurement, and ongoing review of the RESPECT values, DRS staff have been guided by three principles – engage, enrich and embed - as constant considerations and indicators of success. A continual focus on these touchstones has ensured that these community values remain relevant and meaningful to students, staff and other stakeholders.

Firstly, at each and every stage of development, a wide range of stakeholders were engaged and involved, including DRS staff, student Residential Leaders, and other key members from the wider university. Key emphasis in particular was placed on students as critical partners and competent community members in the initial, and evolving, conception and design process, and ongoing implementation (Tinto, 2003). Importantly, each consultation was authentic in nature, providing a number of opportunities for feedback and guidance which had direct impact on the final product. This approach ensured wider buy-in and adoption of the values amongst the community from day one.

Secondly, the team responsible for design and development of these values, were conscious throughout to ensure that the values were of true value to the residential community – enriching their stay on campus, supporting student development of social and cultural capital, and directly

influencing their present and future behaviours, attitudes, and values (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Whilst the RESPECT acronym may on the surface appear to be somewhat simplistic, it was very deliberate to create an acronym that was catchy, clever, memorable and meaningful. Ultimately, even if residents were only to remember that such community values are based on the overarching principle of respect and fail to recall each individual value, DRS firmly believes this has achieved a level of successful integration.

Finally, the team were clear from the concept design phase to note that a values statement for the sake of words or a slogan on a page can frequently mean very little in practice, and to this end DRS took great care to embed our RESPECT values into every aspect of life on campus (Tinto, 2003). Posters and signage can be found at each of the operating locations at any time of the year, student Residential Leader uniforms are emblazoned with the values, and as previously mentioned, each activity, campaign, or event held on campus is specifically aligned to at least one of the values. Ensuring measurable impact of the values in a tangible and demonstrable form was also critical, and significant import has been placed on the aforementioned measurement tools, designed to give true indications of the effectiveness of the values overall, and indeed of each individual value, providing improvement opportunities as well as good news stories to tell.

Conclusion

DRS believes the clear articulation of the RESPECT values has been of benefit to the residential community, and continues to play a central role in enriching the living and learning experience for residents during their time on-campus at Deakin. In the past two years, the broader University has adopted aspects of these values as part of wider communications in the ‘respect’ space, publicising the values and recognising the work that has been undertaken in raising awareness of shared community values. Particular acknowledgment has been made of the RESPECT Index as a means of formally measuring community sentiment, and the importance and value of the Resident Induction Program, an initiative which the university is also now looking to potentially expand and build upon as a requirement for all students attending the University. DRS is pleased to note that it appears a number of other accommodation providers are in the process of adopting their own set of similar values to guide community living expectations – a reflection of the impact these values have had in the broader student accommodation industry. In future years DRS intends to further develop and enhance resident awareness and understanding of these values, educating the new cohort of residents year on year, and building upon the positive culture in existence within the residential community at Deakin.

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