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The Price You Pay to Live on Campus

By Tyler Kingkade

Photos by Anne Walsh
he paint on the walls is chipped, the heater is noisy and there’s no easy way to turn it off. The furniture is mismatched and beaten up, the intense water pressure of some of the showers peels off your skin, and your neighbors could care less if you don’t want to hear Lil’ Wayne blasting from the bass of their speakers. Although annoying, this is a common experience for Iowa State University dorm residents.

The average cost of living in a two-person dorm breaks down to approximately $450 a month. Since purchasing a meal plan is required of students living in dorms, that adjusted price ranges between $750 to $850 a month (depending on the plan select). People might expect to pay $800 a month for rent in an apartment in Ventura, Calif., but not in Ames. Considering the poor conditions of buildings like Friley, Helser, Willow and Oak-Elm, many students wonder where all that money goes.

Pete Englin, the director of the Department of Residence, says the DOR does not take in a profit.

"The hardest part is self supporting [the residence halls]," Englin says. "We receive nothing from the general fund. There’s no tax appropriations—everything over [our budget] is looked at how we can put it back. We stopped borrowing against ourselves [for renovations]."

Englin says rates are actually determined and then approved by the Inter-Residence Hall Association, Frederickson Council and SUV Council before being taken to the Board of Regents.

"We’re just stewards of [the residence hall dweller’s] money," Englin says.

According to Englin, it’s an ongoing dialogue with the students to give direct feedback to the administration. It’s not Community Advisors who give feedback, Englin explains, but student-elected leaders, such as hall leaders and house presidents, who vote on and approve any changes made to on-campus housing.

"We price point annually against 15 properties in Ames," Englin says, which is similar to how property managers operate. "We thoroughly inspect and clean every room between residents."

However, some of the residency rates have increased in recent years, giving the DOR less time to clean between residents.

"We’re a victim of our success," Englin says, citing that Fredrickson Court was already 90 to 95 percent full for the 2009-2010 school year by spring break.

"Ten or 11 percent of seniors live on campus. That’s twice what other Big 12 schools have.”

From day one

The main difference Englin points out between on- and off-campus housing is the greater “sense of community” on campus, with CA’s, Hall Directors and a large staff “with a vested interest in seeing the students succeed.”

The Department of Residence works “from day one,” Englin says, toward making students feel comfortable with a welcoming experience they call “U Pack, We Haul.” Englin, President Gregory Geoffrey and his wife, men’s basketball coach Greg McDermott and other university staff walk around the residence halls welcoming new students and their families.

Emily Bohach, a junior in interior design, says she was scared by the interior of her room in Willow when she moved in as a freshman.

“There was no space... I didn’t like how the bedroom, kitchen, living room were all in one in a dorm,” Bohach says.

“And it took me two weeks to get used to the whole sharing of the bathroom. I feel like you lose every part of your privacy [when living on campus].

“My roommate and I were getting legitimately sick from mold growing on the windows and it took forever to get it cleaned up,” Bohach says.

Bohach says her experience as a freshman in Willow was fun because she was close to friends all the time, though she says her roommates weren’t ideal.

“By the end of the year, you’re ready to get out. I loved the idea of having my own room and my own kitchen.” Today, Bohach lives in an apartment on Welch Avenue that she’s lived in for two years.

Chelsey Lass, junior in mathematics, lives in the neighboring building on Welch. Lass lived in a two-person suite in Martin Hall her freshman year, and a one-person suite in Buchanan as a sophomore. Her scholarship covered the cost of her on-campus housing, but she had to pay a difference to elect to live in a suite rather than a regular dorm.

“You couldn’t pay me to live [in a regular dorm],” Lass says. Lass’ experience with on-campus housing included a difficult relationship with her roommate, which she Lass she tried to make work. She says she got used to getting “sexiled” on a weekly basis from her dorm room. “[Living on campus] probably made me a worse student; I needed an outlet and couldn’t get one.”
High density living has advantages and disadvantages," Englin says. "We've got a lot of students living on campus to get a different living experience."

Not all students gave the dorms a chance freshman year. Chuck Summers, freshman in business, rebuts the notion that dorms help students meet and make friends. He says the only incentives for on-campus living are that you're close to class and meet new people, but he doesn't believe it justifies the price students pay.

"Believe me, you will meet a lot of people whether you live on campus or not," Summers says. He decided not to live on campus because he knew he "wouldn't get anything done. Another big reason was that it is way cheaper to live off campus."

"Although those places are not all that bad to go and hang out at, I could never see myself living in a place that is in the condition that those places are in. I mean, if you stand in the courtyard area of Helser just to the east of the building it seems almost as if you are standing in the projects."

Opting to live in an apartment with his older brother in West Ames, Summers' four-bedroom apartment costs $300 a month, and he and his brother both use meal plans that cost them about $350 for each semester.

"It is much more economical to live off campus," Hunziker property manager Julie Lenz says. Roughly 75 percent of Hunziker's occupants are students.

Buchanan C.A. Ian O'Connor, a senior in finance, will graduate this semester having lived in a dorm all four years. Having lived in Larch, Friley and Buchanan, O'Connor believes the prices for on-campus housing reflect the university's costs.

"There are a lot of on-campus job opportunities to help students, but costs are up for the university, too," O'Connor says. "It might cost more [to live on campus], but the convenience is what you pay for; having all the resources available, the events that go on and being super close to campus."

"If costs go up, rents will too," Lenz says. "We try to get the most for their dollar." Lenz says heat, cable, utilities and internet have become the biggest concerns from apartment complex customers, and many pay a flat fee each month.

It's getting hot in here

Currently, there's only a $50 difference between a dorm in Union Drive with or air conditioning and without air conditioning.

"We're a chilled water, steam heat university," Englin says. "We've looked into adding air conditioning to some of the older buildings but couldn't support it."

Englin says additional A/C in some buildings would overload the electrical supply and cost millions that the DOR couldn't afford right now. When some dorms began to have their own thermostat in each room, energy use skyrocketed.

Englin strongly advises students to take advantage of work orders if they have issues with their heating systems or anything else. DOR's Palm Pilot program relays issues to service employees within seconds. The care from the staff around the clock is one of the perks from the DOR, according to Englin.

Hunziker Properties also provides a 24-hour maintenance staff.

"We maintain the property. It's their home and we provide quality in apartment living our high standards is definitely a huge factor in our success," Lenz says. Hunziker's high standards include replacing carpet and painting between tenants.

"If it needs it, we'll do it," Lenz says. "Putting money in will make the tenant want to take care of their apartment."

Some students admit this sentiment holds true.

"If [dorms] were nicer, kids would keep them nicer," Bohach says. "It was so shitty, I didn't care."

It's what you do as a freshman

Most upperclassmen students can come to the same conclusion looking back at their time living in different locations on and off campus.

Lenz says she wouldn't want her own son (who is about to enter college) to live off-campus his first year.

"Everyone should live on campus the first year for sure, you'd miss out on a lot if you go off campus. I still keep in touch with a lot of my college friends," Lenz says.

"When I came to Iowa State I knew zero people," O'Connor says. "The dorms are where I met all my friends. He considers it a good transition to living on your own. "It's pretty lenient, like if you get caught drinking when you're 18, you don't have to deal with the cops. You get a lot of second chances."

"It works for freshman year, because that's where you meet friends and get adjusted, but I couldn't go back," says Bohach.

"I'm amazed at how many life skills you really develop living in apartments," Lass says. She likens the thought of staying on-campus to living a sheltered life for four years.

Englin admits, "We're not perfect, but students vote with their feet [and the DOR continues to see students opting to live in residence halls]."