

I'd like to start with a story. I call it The Great Cigarette Butt Controversy. One day, I noticed Anna, one of our very bright freshmen, picking up cigarette butts around the courtyard of the Living Learning Center. She's a student in Watauga College, the residential college that inhabits the Living Learning Center, the LLC. She had amassed a significant pile of butts. "Over 200," she told me. She expressed frustration that students who smoke seem to not consider their cigarette butts to be trash, a view I shared. She said, "People would never just toss other trash on the ground. Why do they toss their butts?" She asked permission to make a statement in a more visceral way. "I'd like to put 200 pieces of trash around the courtyard as a way of demonstrating smokers' carelessness about their butts, to show them how this place looks to those of us who think cigarette butts are trash." She agreed to leave the trash for 24 hours only, and then promised to pick up every piece of it.

I get these sorts of requests often. Watauga students like to make statements in rather untraditional ways. I said yes to Anna, and then went and emailed everyone on campus that would be likely to either see or hear about this and a) not understand it, b) not like it, or c, which is most often the case), both. In the emails, I referred to it, euphemistically, I admit, as "an art project." I find that calling something an art project turns anger to resignation among most administrators. Two days later, I walked through the breezeway into our courtyard and beheld a horrendous sight—our lovely green lawn full of litter. I was kind of pleased—I always am when students have big ideas (or even small ones, actually) and then follow through on them.

Of course, there was a glitch. Anna hadn't done much to inform the other residents of her vision, so when students came out into the courtyard that morning, they were incensed. Yes, that was her goal. But once they found out who had done this, they were incensed at her. "She has no right to litter our courtyard." And then Mother Nature, in that Shakespearean way she often has, offered her own contribution: a brisk wind kicked up. The trash, most of fairly light stuff like paper and Styrofoam cups began blowing all over the place, beyond the courtyard, out toward the woods. A group of students quickly began picking it all up, resentment building with each piece deposited in a trash can. After 200 pieces, art had been replaced by ire.

Anna came outside, upset that her art installation had been removed. The students who had done the 'removal' told her it was a bad idea. She was hurt, which then softened them a bit, but several of them who were smokers felt they had been unfairly judged. "I never throw my butts on the ground." That's a weird phenomenon—~~butts~~ butts escaping from trash cans—that I won't go into here. Suffice to say that a civil conversation was held, with the students who had picked up the trash apologizing to Anna for doing so, and Anna apologizing for the mess she had made in the first place. It was all kind of karmic, I think. And then, at 10 am, in the three sections of our core classes in Watauga, discussion ensued about art, trash, and accountability, as our faculty, who had seen the courtyard before it was cleaned up, offered up some space of their own ~~time~~ time in class for conversation about the meaning (or lack thereof) of it all.

Later, Anna, who seemed a bit bruised by it all, said to me, "I thought this was the kind of place where we were free to express ourselves."

"Yes," I replied, "but that doesn't mean you're not going to get an earful from people who disagree with you."

Also later, Tommy, one of the smoker/cleaners, said to me, "I don't understand why she didn't just communicate her frustration to the smokers?"

"Well," I said, "She did. Not everyone communicates everything through talking."

And in a residential learning community, that is more true than most other places.

I tell you about this because I think it illustrates some of what I want to talk about today—the learning community, specifically the residential ones, as a microcosm of a town, full of different opinions and different strategies in response to those opinions. This story is about a sense of pride in a physical place. It's about the breakdown and then repair of communications between members. And it illustrates the best that a residential learning community can be—a training ground for citizens who are learning to advocate, protest, support and respect ideas and how those ideas are manifested in action. In our classes in Watauga college, I believe we are developing "habits of mind," related to the way students learn. In the LLC, which is the physical embodiment of Watauga, I believe we are developing "habits of hand," ways that students learn to live in the world. We do this in our classrooms, in the residence hall, which we call "the House," in the Great Hall where our students and faculty eat lunch and have Common Time together, and, quite often, in the courtyard that separates the two wings of the LLC, which students seem to have made a very sacred space.

My office window looks out at a wide stone staircase that rises up between the residential and academic wings of our Living Learning Center. Above it is this courtyard and the main entrances to each building, a popular gathering place for our students. So I have a lot of opportunity to watch them hang around. Sometimes they stand or sit and talk with one another. Sometimes I see them reading, or at least assuming a reading position. Sometimes they have guitars, or banjos, or mandolins, and I hear the great voices of a few of our women singing along.

I should be working at my desk, I know, but I'm always kind of drawn to the scene going on out there. I watch faculty exit our wing of the building and stop and chat with students on the steps. I see the director and staff of the House exit from the other side and do the same. During a recent reverie, I found myself transported back to Washington DC, circa 1980. I was a college student working with an organization in the Adams-Morgan neighborhood. The organization was called Jubilee Housing, and it had purchased five apartment buildings in the neighborhood, with plans to improve them and then sell them back to the residents—abrave stand against the encroaching gentrification of this soon-to-be-trendy neighborhood.

Part of my job involved going door-to-door in these apartment buildings, asking tenants about current maintenance problems. I carried a toolbox with me, and sometimes was able to fix the simple problems, like a stuck window or a door that didn't lock correctly, or a toilet that didn't flush properly. Other problems were put on a list that I then turned in to Reggie, our maintenance manager.

At the time, I was taking a class in urban history, and was reading Jane Jacobs' classic book, "The Death and Life of Great American Cities." Jacobs' work touched on the significance of architectural features that enhanced or inhibited the development of community in cities. I saw her theories come to life in these five buildings, and I want to take a minute to share what I mean. The buildings with the greatest sense of community, a feeling of safety, an awareness of each other by the tenants, were the Sorrento and

Ontario Court. Two buildings that had no apparent sense of community were the Ritz and the Marietta. Using what I had learned from Jacobs, I drew some possible conclusions as to why: (show diagrams, explain features).

The Sorrento was a successful building because it offered, maybe even expected, interaction between its residents and others in the neighborhood. It gave them a comfortable place to sit and while away the time, watch the city go by, welcome in the evening. Ontario Court was successful because it gave its residents a place to safely engage with one another, unlike the Ritz.

I fell in love with cities, with Jane Jacobs' work, with the role of physical place in the development of community, and I declared myself an urban affairs major, ready to work with the Dept of HUD and influence the re-building of America's cities.

Okay. I live in Boone, NC, in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains, two hours from the nearest urban area. Some people in our area live in hollers, and you can still get moonshine whisky if you know the right people. Life takes funny turns, right? But I've never forgotten those lessons, and they were what I found myself thinking about one day while watching my students and colleagues outside my window. If you design an academic complex with some of Jacobs' ideas in place, you are likely to enhance a sense of community. And maybe the most important idea is providing a building's occupants with places for safe and regular and informal interaction. One could call this place a "commons," a village square, or whatever metaphor works for you. When I was growing up in Caldwell, NJ, we had Bloomfield Avenue, a busy street lined with stores in the center of town, and one could walk to the Avenue on a Saturday morning, go to the bakery, Schanz's hardware store, stop at Fiegelson's for the newspaper, Hasler's Pharmacy for cough syrup and a birthday card. In between stores, you would see your neighbors, the parents of your child's schoolmates, friends from church or garden club or square dancing. You could stand, safely, on the sidewalk and chat, or in the aisle of a store or a parking lot behind it. The formal organizations we all belonged to—church, school, scouts--were the main ingredients of our community. But those informal interactions, I realize now, were the trimmings, were what made it special. My mom always came home from Bloomfield Ave with news about others' health, impending marriages, college plans.

On our campuses are multiple, seemingly disparate groups of people. We have our students, obviously. There are the faculty, possessed by their pursuit of knowledge, of the life of the mind. There are student affairs staff, so attached to the vitality of life on a college campus that they're still there, years after graduating themselves, physical plant staff repairing, maintaining, building, landscaping Food services, the registrar, financial aid, the comptroller who pays our bills, the University attorney who offers advice, motor pool mechanics, academic advisors, librarians, tutors, the guy who takes care of the carillon bells, the woman who issues temporary parking permits, the Chancellor's assistant, fundraisers and alumni affairs, and those thousands of alumni themselves who never completely lose their sense of ownership of our campus. They're all out my window, engaged in various tasks in this, a community that exists to pursue knowledge and pass it along, a community designed to educate and enhance the lives of our students, our communities, our planet. That is my university, and yours.

A couple of years ago, I sat on a panel at this conference in Columbus, and I talked about the seemingly unspannable chasm between faculty and student affairs. I told

the audience then that I had grown tired of this metaphor of “bridging” these two areas, because I was, in my job, a “bridge,” and I had realized that a bridge is something that gets walked over. It is subject to constant environmental and structural stresses. And it implies a chasm that seems, at times, endless, which requires an equally endless series of bridges across it. I proposed, instead, that perhaps we needed to find a way to fill that chasm, one shovelful of dirt at a time, until all that exists is common ground, and the need for bridging, for bridges, is gone. I promised the audience then that this was my mission—to figure out what the dirt was, how to get it on shovels, and how to fill the chasm that keeps us from being a true community. I’m here to give you my answer: learning communities are the dirt, and those of us committed to them are the shovelers.

Okay—maybe not the rallying cry you want to take back to your campuses. In fact, I’d discourage you from using my exact language. Maybe during this conference you’ll come up with something a little more aesthetically pleasing. Please keep me posted.

I see learning communities as having the potential to be the “commons” of our university and college communities. These are safe places where the bonds of community are forged through time offered and attention paid to one another. Time offered and attention paid to one another.

For better or worse, that’s what happened during the Great Cigarette Butt Controversy.

Like the steps of the Sorrento, learning communities offer a place of repose, a place to both sit and consider the world going by, or actively engage with it. Like Ontario Court, learning communities offer a safe harbor within which our ideas are heard and respected. And like the entire community surrounding Jubilee Housing’s buildings, the diverse and bustling Adams-Morgan, learning communities can be a crossroads on campus where all sorts of people run into each other.

I think this can happen in a curriculum-based learning community, but in a residential learning community, the opportunities are rampant. Let me share some examples with you from my life in Watauga College. Watauga is Appalachian’s residential college. We have about 200 students who live together in the LLC, a complex that includes an academic wing with faculty offices. There are ten classrooms in the House, along with six kitchens, and a more-than-fair amount of formal and informal meeting spaces. In short, it was designed with living and learning in mind.

I should tell you a little about Watauga. It’s one of those holdouts from the early 1970s, awash in counterculture history and traditions. It’s an academically rigorous program that allows freshmen to fulfill their general education requirements in History and English in small, discussion-oriented interdisciplinary classes. The faculty are tenured members of the department of Interdisciplinary Studies, and a number of them have been with Watauga for two decades or more. They are also awash in counterculture history and traditions. Okay—so you’ve got the picture-tree-hugging, tie-dye-wearing, left-leaning students who are seeking something other than a traditional freshman education, and the faculty who love them.

Our students take courses both in Watauga and down the hill throughout the rest of the university, but the 24 semester hours, or the equivalent of 8 classes, they take in Watauga kind of set them up to expect that learning is a community experience.

This past year, our first in this new building, a group calling themselves the garden club formed. They wanted to plant things. Flower bulbs, a vegetable garden, whatever they could put in dirt and watch grow. That’s really not allowed on our campus.

There's a plan for such things, and it's more tightly controlled than our state budget allocations. You let students plant a few bulbs, and the next thing you know, you've got inappropriate stuff growing like kudzu, and no one taking care of it. So these students offered up a deal to the head of landscaping services: what if they offered to shovel the snow along our very hard-to-reach sidewalks and staircase? Would that prove their commitment enough to be granted the papal dispensation necessary to plant daffodils? The director relented. Bulbs got planted. Snow, I'm happy to report, got shoveled. And in the Spring, both students and the director of landscape services looked with some pride at the daffodils coming up all along the courtyard walls.

Our students wanted a breakfast operation—juice, coffee, bagels, etc. They get lunch three days a week, but the Director of Food Services said no, no breakfast, it would not be financially feasible to staff it. What if the students ran it themselves? No, there has to be a Food Services employee there at all times, because in our experience, students are unreliable and won't show up, and the food won't get put out and sold. Could you make an exception for this exceptional community? I mean, the students live right there. If a faculty member can't get his coffee in the morning, he can go knock on the kid's door, right? So the Director agreed, and watched with skepticism, and then pleasure, as the students went an entire semester without a missed shift.

I could list a dozen of these—University police, judicial affairs, all of these offices who were invited to the commons for a conversation, and came away with a new view of students and their potential to share in the responsibility of community. But I'd like to focus on the two groups that most often struggle, and how we've tried to bring these together.

First, I should say that I'm a tried-and-true student affairs professional. I sprung, fully-formed, from the University of Maryland's doctoral program in College Student Personnel Administration, and I live and breathe student development theory. I know icebreakers. I've been thrown over a wall by students on purpose. And I have to admit that I've spent sleepless nights wondering how I ended up directing an academic program, trying to "direct" faculty. That's a long story that requires several bottles of cold, imported beer, so I'll skip it. Suffice to say that the cultural differences between these two groups, which I thought I knew well enough to teach graduate students about, to talk about at conferences. I didn't know what I didn't know. Three years of being supervised by a department chair who was called to the faculty life the way a priest is called to serve God has sometimes made me feel like I work in the former Yugoslavia. History, traditions, beliefs—we're talking deeply ingrained differences.

One conversation the chair, whose name is Richard, and I had was about the origins of student affairs. "The thing is," I said, with all the confidence my Maryland pedigree gives me, "our whole profession exists because of the faculty's ongoing abrogation of duties it formerly owned, like counseling and advising, housing, discipline, spiritual guidance."

He glared. "Perhaps it's not the way you've been told. Perhaps the faculty were continually pushed out of these roles by the increasing expectations university administrations had regarding publications, scholarship, and other services. What if we didn't want to give up the work you've since claimed, but had no choice?"

You know, it never occurred to me that the history of our profession as I was taught it might have been somewhat tainted by the biases of those who were teaching it. History is written by the winners, right?

Another conversation: I was frustrated with a particular long-time faculty member whose classroom performance had significantly declined in the previous couple of years, and whose current classroom behavior was less-than-educational. Poor preparation, not returning papers promptly, etc. The students for whom I was responsible as director were not receiving a very good education in this class. I talked with Richard about it. He shared my concern. He said, "Well, I'm expecting that he will announce his retirement in a year or so, and do it through phased retirement, so he'll be gone in four to five years."

"Four to five years! That's a whole generation of students. My students get one freshman year in their whole lives. Why should they sacrifice part of it in one of our core classes with a professor who obviously doesn't want to be there?"

We stared at each other like gunslingers, in this way that's become kind of familiar. It's a mutual look that says, "this is one of those student affairs/faculty differences, huh?" Yes. We have completely different views of time. How cosmic is that? But it's a crucial difference. When a faculty member gets tenure, that's a lifetime contract, "more permanent than marriage," says Richard. So in the grand scheme of a lifetime, three, four, five years is a blip on the screen. But in the life of a student, or of a transient student affairs professional, it's a big chunk of very important time. Whose view is correct? Both. Neither. I don't know.

I could list a bunch of these realizations, but the point I want to make is that it's only been in the context of a learning community, where we, student affairs staff and faculty, share the responsibility for the experience, that I've really begun to understand the depth of this rift, the nuances that in the past I might have walked right by without noticing, and just grumbled something about my faculty colleagues. While they grumbled something about me, no doubt.

How have we worked to fill in this chasm? We meet a lot (too often, some might say), because meetings tend to be a place where our different perspectives are put on the table and examined. We meet weekly to discuss our freshmen, trying to identify troubling patterns in behavior and intervening before these become disastrous. Some faculty think we "hand-hold." Some of us in student affairs think faculty prefer avoiding awkward confrontations. Each of us are sometimes right and sometimes wrong. But the important thing is that we make transparent our opinions on the matter and don't simply work on presumptions about one another. Recently, I suggested in a meeting that the irregular scheduling of our Common Time might be the cause of students' poor attendance. I talked about Chickering's notion of "developing competence." "These are freshmen," I said, "four months past having their mothers and fathers remind them of their obligations—soccer practice on Saturday, renting a tuxedo for the prom, a dentist appointment. They are just not capable of remembering to check every Monday, Wednesday and Friday to see if you all have scheduled something for them to do at 1 o'clock." The faculty were skeptical, till I reminded them that when we changed the day of this weekly meeting, several of them missed meetings because they forgot it was on Friday, not Wednesday. They found that persuasive, and agreed to a regular common time schedule for the rest of the semester. And a week later, I listened in rapt attention

when one of my faculty colleagues offered an eloquent exegesis of Perry's Position Three (without naming Perry of course), and how she had brought a student to a very different place cognitively. It was lovely, and inspiring.

What else do we do to fill this chasm between student affairs and faculty? We eat lunch together, with our students. Food is love. Eating together is an important part of any community. To that end, I've seen faculty plan additional meals with their students, and I can say without a doubt that there is a direct correlation between the frequency of meals and the satisfaction and involvement of these students in Watauga. They have a chance to interact with their professor, share their gripes, their gossip, their worries, their victories—connections made over pasta and three-bean salad. And I am filled with admiration for these faculty members who understand and value these connections.

One of our faculty members co-advises (along with our building director), the Community Expectations Circle, our in-house judicial process that deals with violations of community standards, like noise, kitchen messes, general disrespect. His perspective is invaluable, born of 30 years in the program and an innate sense of justice and fairness in a community. He is more student development-aware than many of us who claim that moniker, and I often seek his wisdom on Watauga matters, which, I hope, makes him feel like I respect his judgment about students. I don't think we do that often enough.

I've seen a number of my faculty colleagues don canvas gloves and work side-by-side with students on a maintenance project on the Appalachian Trail. For months, these faculty will refer to a student as "the guy I passed gravel buckets to for three hours," or "the freshman I sat next to while we ate lunch on the trail." My faculty colleagues have put on costumes for a Halloween party, flipped burgers at a cookout, carted boxes up steps during move-in, played miniature golf with them on a course the students created in the residence hall (not one of our best ideas). One of them tends the large potted plants in the lobby of the House, chatting with students who walk by while she's pruning and watering.

Working within the structure of a learning community has given me a powerful sense of respect for my faculty colleagues. Yes, there are other faculty who are equally committed out there, teaching regular classes. But I just think there is something about a learning community that ups the ante on commitment, that makes us want to be better at this work, and I am determined to spread that word, to brag about these colleagues, and ask you to start bragging about yours.

Learning communities are a unique structure in higher education. They abandon the traditional notions of how we teach and support our students. The conventional hierarchy of education is dismissed in favor of a more democratic, more egalitarian approach to learning that is, at its best, a community. Like the steps in front of the Sorrento, everyone gets to participate in the conversation. Everyone's voice matters. But there's more to it than that. On most campuses, those who are not directly involved in the classroom experience usually just walk past those classrooms without a second thought, just like people on a bustling city street walk by the blank facades of apartment buildings without a glance. But not the Sorrento. I sat on those steps myself and watched as the Sorrento residents called out to passersby, engaging them in some serious or silly conversation, and I realized that those who frequented that stretch of 18th St. had come to see the Sorrento and its residents as a kind of village square, a place of exchange of information, of affirmation of one's identity: I am known. I belong here.

Like the Sorrento, the well-designed learning community, especially one that is residential, has a permeable membrane that invites others to engage. Those others might be staff working elsewhere on campus in areas like community service or service-learning, recreation and outdoor education, advising, the library, even physical plant and food services, as I've seen with Watauga College. Picture the members of a learning community sitting on some sort of metaphorical steps, calling out to others as they pass on the streets of your campus, and you begin to see the power of this kind of structure.

Consider, too, the way that information is shared in a traditional educational setting: it's a one-way communication. The sage on the stage passes along knowledge to students who passively receive it and then return it in hopefully some similar fashion at the end of the semester in a final paper or exam. This is kind of like the way a local newspaper tells community members what they should know. Readers peruse the paper, absorbing what an editor has deemed worthy of reporting to them, and with the occasional exception of a letter to the editor, these readers passively receive the news. But learning the news in the village square or commons—this is a different dynamic altogether. It is at least a two-way communication (and recalling my mother in the midst of an impromptu gathering of neighbors in the parking lot of Hy's Supermarket, it's often much more than two-way), and again, it affirms the identity and sense of belonging among the participants. "I'm here. I'm heard." Learning communities, at their best, model exactly this. There are multiple connections made: between ideas and disciplines (since many LCs are interdisciplinary), encouraging students to develop the habit of connecting across different ideas throughout their education, between students (since many LCs emphasize group projects and exercises). There are connections between students and faculty, who come to know one another in the context of this community in ways that are often impossible in traditional classroom settings. There are connections between faculty (since many LCs are team-taught). Connections between the learning community and the wider campus, as I've suggested earlier, and, when service-learning is an expectation, between the learning community and the broader town or city in which it exists.

Learning communities themselves are just the structure, like neighborhoods and civic organizations. But their power comes from the opportunities they constantly present for democratic, multi-directional connections and communications that bring people face-to-face with one another. You know, the concept of "building community" can sometimes seem intimidating, especially when you're trying to do it in two weeks in a residence hall, or over a weekend on a retreat. But here's the simple truth about community: it begins with a series of "micro-connections," one person connecting with one person connecting with one person. Those are the threads that weave themselves into a fabric of community, and without those, you have nothing. Learning communities, at their best, do that: one student connecting with one faculty member connecting with one food service employee connecting with one residence director connecting with one Humane Society volunteer connecting with one student.

One shovelful of dirt at a time. Here we are, in Bloomington, Indiana, being issued our shovels, gloves and a bottle of Advil. Our work for these few days is to learn what we can about this critical task of building community as both the context for learning and the end result of learning. Community as the context for learning, and the end result of learning. When we know that we learn and live best in the context of community, then we begin to seek it. And if we can't find it, we are emboldened to begin

building it. It starts from the commons, from the village square. It is a place of connection between likely and unlikely allies. And it grows outward to include others who can enrich our lives. That's what I hope you'll take away from this conference—an unshakeable belief in our work in learning communities. Every time a complication arises, every time a request is denied, every time you want to hit a student or a colleague over the head with your new shovel, remind yourself that you are engaged in work that is nothing less than world-changing. We who work in learning communities—we know we're on to something. We need to keep shoveling till others see it as well.

Habits of mind—the ways we think. Habits of Hand—the way we live, both of these are shaped in community with others.

When I watch from my window as my students and my colleagues stop on the stairs to say hello, or check on an assignment, or offer an excuse for a missed class, or just listen as Alan accompanies Laura's amazing blues voice on his guitar, I can't help but think of a late afternoon in Adams-Morgan, watching the residents of the Sorrento joke with one another and greet passersby before heading inside for dinner, secure in their membership in a community that offered some protection from the harsher world, offered them connection to other human beings.

I think that in the end, that's what I most want for my students—a safe place full of people they know and care about, who know and care about them, a place and an experience, that propel them forward as learners and citizens and neighbors and when they eventually find themselves beyond the walls of our learning community and our campus, they know enough to seek out the village square, the commons, and make themselves at home.