

St. Francis Xavier University

Residence Renewal



Executive Summary

Background

Students and alumni often describe StFX as a strong socially engaged community where many find a sense of belonging and share common values and interests. Leveraging this strength, our vision is a residence culture that values inclusion, academic success, wellbeing, safety, and healthy social engagement. Experiencing a sense of belonging is a key factor contributing to a student's progression (retention) through to graduation. Residence culture is a key contributor to the overall experience of campus life. Moreover, residence is the pathway for more than 80% of our first-year students, which positions the residence experience as a critical part of the first-year experience and new student transition to university life and academic rigor.

Acknowledging the impact the residence experience has on retention, the structure, supports, and programs geared to residence and the residence experience, particularly for first year students, is a strategic priority for the institution.

In 2017 a full Residence Review was conducted by an external team that was aimed at understanding and advancing the residence culture, residence retention, and academic focus in residence. The 2017 review looked at residence staffing model, house councils, residence staff and house council relationships, discipline procedures in residence, damage, and the application and assignment process. The process involved a review of policies, practices, institutional data on retention and satisfaction, and broad stakeholder engagement sessions.

Observations noted in the 2017 report acknowledged the high level of student engagement in university life, and that it was "often directed toward inappropriate behaviour such as hazing and repetitive and deliberate damage" (2017 Residence Review Report, p. 3). The reviewers also noted that students were open about the role alcohol plays on campus – "alcohol is the common denominator in the many negative events on campus" (p.3). The 2017 review made 58 recommendations. These recommendations became a driving force for changes over the next four years, tracking the updates and changes in the Residence Review Action Plan (available at <https://www.mystfx.ca/student-services/equity/student-services/student-experience-and-opportunity-plan>).

In 2020, while in the process of developing an incoming student transition strategy (Recommendation 2.2, 2017 Residence Review Report), the need for further consultation became evident. A second external review, initiated in 2021-22, was focused on two specific recommendations from the 2017 review related to welcome and transition of new students in residence and the formal and informal responsibilities of the student leadership in residence, namely the Residence Assistants (Residence Life Staff), House Presidents and House Vice Presidents (Students' Union leaders). These sessions were narrow in scope and specific to gaining input from stakeholders about the next steps toward the vision of a residence that provides student leadership opportunities and balances social and academic success with

health, equity, safety, and inclusion. Current residence leaders, the Students’ Union, and other members of the campus community participated, recognizing that the Covid-19 pandemic with its impact on the diverse young adults coming to our campus has only amplified the urgent need for change. The external consultants concluded their work in January of 2022 by providing a report summarizing stakeholder feedback and providing four main recommendations:

2022 Residence renewal Project – Consultation Report

1	Create a Director, Residence role. This addresses the need to have one person accountable for all residence policies (currently divided between Housing and Residence Life)
2	Develop Residence community Living Standards and adopt additional formalized assessment measures within residence to monitor performance. Shifting community management to residence and less on the Code of Conduct, which is a shift that has begun after the 2017 review.
3	Address remaining role clarity issues that influence positive culture development through targeted enhancements of key staff positions and by shifting House Council governance to Residence Life
4	Transition the Residence Life Coordinator (RLC) position to live-in only roles, with an associated plan to grow infrastructure and improve policies to support the role. Such as, reviewing compensation model including salary, taxable benefits, and length of contract.

The full report is available upon request to StFX community members by emailing StudentLife@stfx.ca.

The consultant’s report discussed each of these in relation to the work that has been done since the 2017 review, the context of today’s students and the increase demand for direct mental health supports and services, and in comparison, to standard practices in residence in Canadian institutions.

The report highlighted that “some of the challenges noted in 2017 pertaining to the Xaverian residence culture persist, i.e., repetitive and/or deliberate damage, and unhealthy social activities. The clear negative impacts of inappropriate or undesired behaviour in residence is driving StFX’ s commitment to build positive culture change” (Residence Renewal Project – Consultation Report, p. 5). They provided a discussion of the themes that were repeated in both reviews, in particular the issues with role clarity in the residence leadership, communication

flow, the programming model and expectations, and the process for addressing misconduct. The consultants noted a sense of urgency to address these challenges and act on the recommendations from the 2017 review that had not yet been implemented, given the rapid and sharp increase in student needs.

Strategic Direction

The residence renewal is happening within the larger context of *Being Xaverian*, an integrated value-based community development approach that engages students to live the values of:

- Belonging
- Resilience
- Courage
- Respect
- Learning
- Flourishing
- Community

The *Being Xaverian* community development approach is in alignment with, the StFX Student Experience and Opportunity Plan due for implementation in 2022. The Student Experience and Opportunity Plan is focused on how best to achieve a strong vision for campus and student life, and how to make these areas of focus the most effective. The draft plan includes initiatives and programs that ultimately contribute to the goal to cultivate a flourishing campus in which the emotional, psychological, and social well-being of all students is foundational to developing and delivering a holistic programming framework. A flourishing campus framework involves:

1. Addressing mental health as a continuum
2. Recognizing and responding to social determinants of health
3. Promoting agency through wholistic student engagement
4. Harnessing a developmental and proactive approach to transition, i.e., new student arrival and the first year (StFX Student Experience and Opportunity Plan [draft], April 2022)

The StFX Student Experience and Opportunity Plan provides theoretical and practical evidence to demonstrate the strengths of flourishing campus philosophy and echoes the contextual challenges of today's students. The plan includes initiatives to respond to the documented need for enhanced student mental health services and supports, concerns about social and academic readiness exacerbated by the Pandemic and the prevalence of harms associated with a high rate of alcohol and substance use.

Considerations and Direction on Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Create a Director, Residence role reporting to the VP Students.

The reviewers referenced this same recommendation made in the 2017 review. This recommendation is a solution suggested to move the accountability for residence life and “as many of the associated housing operations and functions as possible” (p. 10). The report raised the issue of the Apartments (Somers and Power Hall) that fall under Housing, meaning there is no formal Residence Life involvement. There are two challenges this creates: 1) the students living in apartments are not technically “residents” with the developmental supports from Residence Life, which leads to 2) the Apartments become a hot spot for activity that students from other residences participate in.

The consultants in both the 2017 and 2022 review argue that a director for all residence life and student housing operations would “ensure a common strategic plan of support and service delivery while ensuring all resources are in place and align with the institutional goals” (Residence Renewal Project – Consultation Report, p. 11).

The implications of this recommendation reach beyond the Student Services department into Ancillary Services directly and Facilities Management indirectly. Since the implementation of the VP Students Role, the reporting lines for Residence Life and Housing are separated up to the VP level, which has brought to light the potential for conflicting goals.

A collaborative and thoughtful exploration of this recommendation and the institutional goals for the residence experience is needed to determine how a role would support the strategic direction. Since the 2017 review, when this recommendation was first made, practices and procedures have been developed and implemented to improve the collaboration and communication between Housing and Residence Life. For example:

- residence life has input into some assignment practices
- room move requests are now processed through Residence Life first before going to Housing
- Co-location of the Manager in each department has been prioritized, recognizing the importance of effective and regular communication and information sharing between these roles.

Recommendation 2: Develop Residence Community Living Standards and adopt additional formalized assessment measures within residence to monitor performance.

The StFX Student Code of Conduct is the policy that describes the rights and responsibilities of all students and the process for adjudicating student misconduct. The current version of the Code includes violations that describe behavioural issues that are specific to residence living

(i.e. references to guests, disruptive noise, smoking, unauthorized pets). After the 2017 review, a Residence Community Standards document was developed that was a resource for students about residence living services and supports, that included behavioural expectations.

In response to the 2017 review, we have evolved our approach to addressing behavioural challenges in residences to shift the focus away from the rules and more towards student learning and development. The StFX Relational Model provides the philosophical guidance that is now the foundation for how Residence Life approaches community building and management. Guiding Principles articulate a commitment to students' learning and development through all our interactions with students.

PRINCIPLES OF THE RELATIONAL MODEL

The StFX Relational model is characterized by several principles:

1. Relationships are an integral part to the social and emotional development of each community member.
2. Student leaders play a critical role in establishing trust and ensuring every student feels connected to the community.
3. Residence leaders build trust through establishing personal connections with each student and by developing a shared set of values within their community early each academic year.
4. Residence is a place for Xaverian values of honesty, respect, and contribution to the community to develop and flourish.
5. The residence community provides a context for students to take responsibility for mistakes, and learn from and support each other, while maintaining their place in the community, rather than isolating individuals in a strictly punitive response.
6. Relational practices put an emphasize on the quality of relationships created and thus creates a community of care.

Student Life continues to develop restorative practices to resolve conflict and repair community. The residence community is an ideal environment for restorative practices, with our defined relational principles as a guide to proactive and responsive intervention.

The recommendation to enhance the Residence Community Standards will involve further development of processes for the Residence Life team to have greater responsibility and accountability for conduct within their community. Behavioural concerns in the community can be addressed within the context of a developmental mentorship approach (see the Student Experience and Opportunities Plan) that benefits both the individual causing harm and the whole community.

The premise of this recommendation from both the 2017 and 2022 reviews is to shift the accountability and control of the residence experience to the Residence Life management, with the conduct office, senior leadership and Senate (with respect to the ownership of the Code of

Conduct) as supportive roles to the residence leadership, primarily regarding escalated or complex behavioral issues.

It is important to note that this recommendation not only aligns management and accountability for residences under one leadership team, but also supports the residence curriculum and learning goals that reflect our Xaverian values. The restorative process emphasizes learning and development. Restorative practices are also embedded in a proactive developmental mentorship model, which is a feature of the Student Experience and Opportunities Draft plan.

A sub-committee of the Residence Renewal Project in 2021 contributed to enhancing restorative practices in the overall conduct process, with particular emphasis on the role of the Residence Life Coordinators (RLCs) in low level resolutions. Further development of the residence process is underway, led by the Manager, Residences and the current RLCs.

Recommendation 3: Address remaining role clarity issues that influence positive culture development through targeted enhancements of key staff positions and by shifting House Council governance.

The recommended model in the 2022 consultant's report shows how the current House Council which is governed by the Students' Union will move under the governance of Residence Life. "Supporting positive cultural development in residence is perhaps the most critical aspect of the Residence Renewal Project. It stands to reason then that the key roles in residence life staffing directly impact how culture is developed; CAs, House Councils and RLCs, require a strong operational foundation because this will ground the student experience" (p. 14).

An extensive literature review (will soon be available at <https://www.mystfx.ca/student-services/equity/student-services/student-experience-and-opportunity-plan>) conducted as part of the Residence Renewal Project echoes the important role of residence student leaders (CAs) have in developing and maintaining the residence community as part of the campus experience. CAs have two roles: 1) community builder, and 2) community enforcer. The demand of living, learning, and working amongst peers 24/7 requires constant interaction both personally and professionally, making it difficult for student leaders to compartmentalize the dual role of peer and enforcer. The impact of the Students' Union led House Councils has created a dynamic where the CAs are unable to undertake their role as community builders because that is the role of the Student Union Community Leaders (SUCLs). The responsibility for community building and social programming allocated to the SUCL role encroaches on the CA's ability to "own" the community builder aspect of the role and further reinforces their role as "enforcer."

This culture affects how residents and CAs interact, often relegating the CA role primarily to response to complaints or behavioural issues. Moreover, it creates confusion for students when they are seeking supports for personal issues about who they can or should go to for help. If they only know the CA as enforcers, they may go to an SUCL who is not trained to know how to handle issues that require referral to other resources, such as mental health concerns, sexual violence, or interpersonal conflict. Well-meaning SUCLs are not equipped to appropriately respond to sensitive issues and more importantly are

not accountable for their response in the way an employee of the university is. A first-year student in crisis who goes to a sanctioned peer leader may not know the reporting structures and that there are two separate governing bodies in their residence (the Students' Union and Residence Life); all they know is that they "made the university aware" of their issue. This presents a major risk for both the Students' Union and StFX if the issue is not handled appropriately, and more harm is caused.

Further, the residence leadership team and the Student Life conduct office regularly discipline Student Union Community Leaders who actively undermine the staff in the building and fail to uphold and model the community standards we are seeking to instill. Such positions can no longer be supported by the University as sanctioned peer leaders and role models within the residences. Going forward, sanctioned student leaders are accountable to the formal management structure of the buildings.

With the recommendation of both the 2017 Review and the 2022 review, a review of the literature, and assessment of how the structure has created barriers to achieving the strategic vision for the StFX residence experience, the university is moving on this change and will have a new house council governance model under Residence Life for the Fall of 2022. Residence Life has already begun the work of developing the House Council structure with input from the Students' Union on aspects of the model. We acknowledge that this change has knock on effect for the Students' Union in terms of their By-Laws the VP Residence Affairs role and sub-executive roles (SUCLs). Maintaining a connection between residents and the Students' Union is a priority; the new House Council will continue to have a representative for the residence to the Students' Union. This representative will represent their House to Student Council and liaise with Council concerning residence participation in Student Union sponsored events. For example, the Campus Affairs Committee under the Students' Union is an existing committee chaired by the SU VP Residence Affairs and brings together the representatives from each of the residences and off campus regularly. What will be different is that those representatives will no longer lead the House Councils in their respective residences.

Residence engagement in Welcome Week activities will become a primary responsibility for Residence Life, namely the new Community Educator role, and fully supported by the Community Advisors who will be accountable for leading engagement of their assigned students in key activities of Welcome Week. This change will reposition the Community Advisor as a peer mentor and support, reinforce their role as a Community Builder and provide the required strong foundation for the relational approach.

Shifting the current structure will allow both the SU and Student Life to develop and grow into true collaborative partners. The SU will maintain essential connections with residence, while freeing up time and energy to effectively scale their programming initiatives to all residence communities. Likewise, the Office of Student Life supported by other units in the Students' and Academic Divisions (such as Health and Counselling, Human Rights and Equity, Academic Success Services and Athletics and Recreation Services) will work to its capacity with the staffing, services, and administrative structure it already has in place to meet required, well documented student needs.

The model in the 2022 report includes a change from the current Hall Director role to a Senior Community Advisor with added responsibilities emphasizing the community building and culture setting leadership they will and must be for their residence. The SCA will be an advisor and mentor for the House Council members. We expect to have positions on House Councils that will provide leadership opportunities for first year students and some upper year students in the building. House Councils will

continue to be peer led with organizational support provided by the SCA and general oversight by the Residence Life Coordinator.

There are details with respect to the development of the terms for the House Council, the roles and portfolios on the House Councils, operational processes, etc. under development. Specifically, the House Representative role selection and role description will be developed in collaboration with the Students' Union VP Residence Affairs.

Recommendation 4: Transition the Residence Life Coordinator (RLC) position to live-in only roles, with an associated plan to grow infrastructure and improve policies to support the role. Such as, reviewing compensation model including salary, taxable benefits, and length of contract.

The role of the Residence Life Coordinator was highlighted in both reviews as an integral part of the residence community operations and culture. The recommendation recognizes the increase in student needs and complexity of those needs, especially for first year students transitioning into university life. Residence Life has already taken steps towards implementation of this recommendation with budget support. The number of RLCs will allow for a dedicated RLC for each of the buildings with first-year students. Additionally, the role of the RLC will be redefined, incorporating the recommended live-in only component and taxable benefits, transparency regarding the expectation for very high engagement in their building particularly in the first 8 weeks and traditionally active nights, and clear expression of their role with respect to accountability for the implementation of residence supports, standards and ultimately the residence culture in their building.

Over the next several weeks Residence Life will:

- Finalize the job description, post and hire a full RLC team
- Develop a full on-boarding process to build capacity in the team to be effective in the new role
- Develop a plan with Housing to ensure all RLCs live on campus and where possible in their assigned building. Where that is not possible, a longer-term plan to create appropriate living quarters in some buildings will be developed

Once the RLC team is selected and start (anticipated in June 2022), Residence Life, Safety and Security Services, Facilities Management will participate in some engagement work to develop good communication and collaboration between these departments who are managing the campus overall as a collective team.