To Intervene or Not? -
That Is The Question:
Managing Risk-Taking Behaviour
in Student Halls of Residence

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Abstract
This paper explores risk-taking situations encountered in the delivery of student services from university halls of residence. Such an exploration is important given changes to the employment contract for hall of residence staff around the legal principle of in loco parentis. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs is used to cluster different types of risk, ranging from those that require direct intervention to ensure physical safety and security of students, to situations requiring interventions that impact on the culture or atmosphere of the hall. A number of symbolic interventions are discussed to show how different types of intervention in different situations can enhance wellbeing of students and promote maturation in ways that complement academic achievement.

Introduction
A few years ago, a Today’s Extra news item appeared in the local newspaper about a "False Alarm" at "Victoria University hostel Weir House" late one Thursday night during the annual New Zealand Brass Band Competition. The report read:

"about 200 boarders were evacuated as fire alarms were set off late last night. Warden, Jane Fulcher said the 11.30 pm false alarm, which lasted 20 minutes, was a student prank. Four fire appliances attended the alarm as boarders waited in the cold outside."

In this paper, attention is drawn to what the newspaper reporter and not "the Warden Jane Fulcher" described as "a student prank". That “false alarm” is used to highlight a number of "critical incidents" in the life of a university hall of residence and explore how these might be managed to achieve positive outcomes for young people embarking on university careers. A more complete account of that “false alarm” is offered so as to highlight some of the less newsworthy events which followed. The Contract of Employment for hall of residence managers is reviewed in relation to the legal principle of "in loco parentis", showing how Management of Risk-Taking Behaviour amongst university students presents a major challenge for the new century.

A false alarm
On the night of the false alarm, Weir House was virtually full with three brass bands attending the annual New Zealand Brass Band Competition. There were also a small number of students, most of whom were from overseas and who had not gone away for the vacation period. Emerging from a deep sleep, we became suddenly aware of the fire alarm and hurried to dress, grab torches and keys, and run for the emergency assembly point. The fire wardens had already begun evacuating the hall and fire service appliances were arriving on the scene.

On thoroughly checking the hall, fire services staff confirmed it as "a false alarm" and the four fire appliances stood down. Fire alarm maintenance staff arrived quickly to repair the broken glass in the call point. Residents started returning to their rooms, some to their beds and others to activities that had been rudely interrupted. The management team began an initial review of the incident which involved consultations with the leaders from each of the three brass bands resident in the hall, and the fire wardens from each of the six living areas of the house. Apart from anything else, responding to a fire alarm at a university hall is an expensive business, whether a false one or not. In another sense, the costs could be catastrophic if students do not take a fire alarm seriously, and someone gets injured or dies in the incident. The risk of fire is one of a number of situations in a university hall of residence that requires direct intervention in the face of physical threat to life and limb. Risks of this kind cannot be ignored nor taken lightly under any circumstances.
As the excitement died down and the sequence of events leading up to and following on from the fire alarm were reviewed, certain unrelated fragments of information began to emerge. In response to the question "Who did it?", the answer was always the same: "It wisnae me!" Two of the band leaders immediately checked through the ranks of their members and broke up parties which were continuing in various parts of the house. The remaining band leader claimed that the alarm must have been set off by the other bands to prevent his band from getting enough sleep before the competition finals the next day. This leader was instructed to make it clear to one of his band members that under no circumstances was it acceptable for a resident to refuse a Fire Warden's request to leave the building during a fire alarm! A puzzling feature of this whole episode was that a burglary was reported from one ground floor room during the course of the fire alarm, with a bottle of Jim Beam and some after-shave disappearing. What sounded like a student prank seemed more likely to have come from the visiting band members, given the few students still remaining in the hall. Muttering amongst ourselves about such matters, everyone headed back to bed and disrupted sleep.

The next day, everything was back to "normal", or as "normal" as a hall of residence can be during university vacations when conference income is important to the economic wellbeing of the hall. At 9 o'clock in the evening, we were approached by a student from the house next door who asked us to accompany him to the downstairs toilet where we found smoke and toilet paper strewn around the floor which had obviously been burning. Fresh burn marks were clearly evident on the carpeted floor and on a towel lying near the paper. Good fortune had helped the fire to go out before the whole wood-framed house went up in flames. This time, the police were called and arrived within minutes. In the course of their investigations, it was learned that an escapee from another type of "residential institution" had just been seen in the vicinity. The toilet area was sealed off until morning when a fingerprint specialist could sweep the rooms for evidence. It was difficult to see how fire related incidents on two consecutive nights around a university hall could be viewed as a coincidence, especially after having gone for months without any such incidents at Weir.

On Saturday morning, two days after the false alarm and the morning after the fire-setting incident, there was news of a break-in at a house over the road, where a handbag with $700 in cash had disappeared. The theft was discovered not long after 9 pm when a dog walking his master through the Botanical Gardens wandered into some bushes and came out with a passport in his mouth. On further investigation, a cheque book, credit cards, the handbag and papers were all discovered but nothing could be found of the cash. It had begun to look as though the "student prank" may be something quite different in the light of further events. It seemed that an escapee from a local prison might be living in the Botanical Gardens and "doing" the local neighbourhood to survive on the run. This offered a new perspective on the theft of a bottle of Jim Beam and aftershave. All residents in the hostel were advised to step up security until further notice, with intervention of a different order required to protect residents from the emotional risks associated with theft of property or wilful destruction of personal belongings.

Many hall of residence workers will have supported students after the loss or destruction of personal property. They will also know, only too well, how the emotional trauma of such events can have at least a temporary effect on university studies. Actions of this kind during the examination period can have a devastating effect on the final results which a student obtains in their university studies. In the face of competing pressures, all of which require attention from a hall of residence manager, it is sometimes easy to minimise the impact which such events can have on students. Finally, some risk situations involve personal maturation and emotional development amongst students. These are much more difficult to assess and sometimes, it is not until some months later that one sees just how risks of this nature were managed by the particular students concerned. Like the policeman who said to us wistfully one night after attending to a different incident altogether:

"I miss my university student days. You could do all kinds of stupid things and people would just say, 'Aw, it's just thae bloody students'!"
A second look at our employment contract

There is likely to be very little difference between our contract with Victoria University as the Wardens of Weir House and that which will be found in other university halls of residence in Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere in OECD countries. We and our Council are expected "to foster the dual objectives of providing suitable accommodation for students and promoting their university education."

We are expected "to play an active part in the life of the Hall, in particular encouraging members of the Hall to take part in activities of the University, promoting an atmosphere which is conducive to successful academic study and encouraging members to take part in activities within the Hall of a cultural and intellectual nature."

We are also expected "to encourage the use of the Hall for conferences."

Phrases such as these have no doubt featured in the contracts for managers of university halls of residence for many years. They would almost certainly have appeared in the contract of employment for the American hall of residence where one of us lived as a student in the early 1960s. The same phrases would have featured in the other’s hall of residence at St. Andrew's University in Scotland at the same time. What was different then, however, was the interpretation given to these same conditions of employment. For example, in the 1960s, halls of residence had curfews. Furthermore, young men and women were not allowed in the same hostel, except for certain hours of the day and then only in the common room. It was a disciplinary offence for young men and women to be in the same bedroom together, let alone sleeping together!

In effect, the managers of a university hall of residence in those days were expected to stand in loco parentis in their relationships with students, especially first year students. Parents - then and now - send their children off to university in pursuit of a higher education and many have real concerns about what their child will be getting up to whilst outside the family circle of influence. Fears about alcohol and drug abuse, or apprehensions about a daughter "going on the pill" or getting pregnant are all sources of real concern for parents. However, if heads of halls take on these concerns in any explicit way, then moral training becomes an integral - if unofficial - part of the university curriculum. Such parental expectations normally remain until a student has successfully "made it" through the first couple of years of university life. By that time, most will have moved out of a hall of residence and are deemed to have made the status transition from adolescence and mere first-year student, to senior student and the social status of young adult.

Over the past two decades, university halls of residence - as with other types of residential institution (Ainsworth and Fulcher, 1981) - have had to reassess the extent to which social control over the daily behaviour of residents can be exercised. Whereas one might have been immediately evicted from our 1960s halls of residence for being together in a bedroom, such behaviour is now much more common place in most university halls. For the most part, single-sex halls of residence have now become co-ed facilities. Some behaviours that would not be considered a normal part of family life, such as keg days, champagne breakfasts or dunkings in the fountain, are rather more common place in a hall of residence. If the National Lampoon film Animal House offers any basis in reality, then it can be said that many university halls, houses or residences abandoned the principle of in loco parentis years ago. And with it, the challenge has intensified about how to manage risk-taking behaviour amongst students in university halls of residence.

Different types of risk

The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines "risk" as a "hazard, chance of bad consequences or loss, and exposure to mischance or danger." While some risks are essential to the normal growth process in adolescence, the question facing us in this paper concerns those risks that may be particularly hazardous or dangerous, and that may require intervention on the part of hall of residence staff. Most would agree that a wide range of potential risk situations might be faced during the course of any week or month in a busy university hall of residence. Four different types of risk are identified, using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as a conceptual framework around which to cluster several different types of "risky situation" commonly found in university halls.
It will be seen that a firm definition of risk has been rejected in favour of a rather more pragmatic approach that some might say smacked of moral relativism. No apology is made for this stance. It means that we are concerned with, and interested in the moment by moment decisions that might need to be faced in a lively university hall of residence over the course of any week or year. Such a grounded approach offers a different way of looking at the question "Should we intervene? Or, should we hold back and “go with the flow” around this incident while monitoring what happens next?"

Survival Needs associated with Physical Safety and Security

Maslow’s first level of need, beyond basic food, water, warmth and shelter, is concerned with survival and is frequently associated with basic safety and security issues. There are a number of risks associated with physical safety and security that require direct intervention in university halls of residence. Here we are thinking of any situation where a student's physical wellbeing is placed at risk. Students need to be well fed, kept warm and feel safe.

More than a decade ago, Weir House was faced with a case of potential food poisoning which developed out of inadequate supervision of its resident kitchen staff. Students were well into their Sunday evening meal of pizza when the cooks emerged from the kitchen to retrieve the main course from each student's plate. It seemed that a fine layer of green mould had developed on the bottom of the pizza dough which no one had discovered. That incident led to the discharge of resident catering staff - many of whom had a history of alcohol abuse - and the negotiation of a catering contract with a well established firm of institutional caterers. The risk of food poisoning was reduced dramatically as a consequence. However, there have been situations where a small group of fundamentalist Muslim students found that traces of animal fat were present in virtually all food prepared by the Weir House kitchen. While this illustrates a different form of potential "food poisoning", it does highlight how one must be attentive to widely different interpretations of risk in the management of university halls of residence. The need for continual monitoring of meals by both the catering staff and the administrative staff is crucial. In our case, our family eats most of its evening meals with residents and Jane eats lunch on a regular basis in the hall dining room. Close cooperation with catering staff ensures that balanced, healthy and interesting menus are provided. Health and safety training for catering staff are legal requirements, such that incidents similar to those noted above are extremely rare events.

All bedrooms have locks on the doors and all exterior doors are secured at night by the Deputy Wardens. Only Wardens and Deputy Wardens have access to individual bedrooms. Each student receives clear instructions about how to contact emergency services. At least one member of the hall administration is on call virtually 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
The incident of the fire alarm draws attention to some of the risks associated with physical safety and security. Other examples might include situations where female students have been physically abused by a male intruder, or the victim of a knife attack. Students should not have to fear for their physical safety whilst living in a hall of residence. Such incidents, fortunately outside our own hall of residence, have resulted in the installation of security measures in many halls and illustrate the type of situation which requires direct intervention, preferably before a student's physical safety is put at risk.

Another type of risk associated with physical safety and security is illustrated through reference to the unprecedented number of suicide attempts that occurred one year. Each of these attempts, involving both young men and women, had to be taken seriously and some involved acute psychiatric treatment for emotional problems which surfaced during the course of the year. While halls of residence are not psychiatric institutions, the reality is that emotional problems are very much a part of the late adolescent/young adulthood transition (Maier, 1978). Our Deputy Wardens receive basic first aid instruction to enable them to deal with potentially life threatening situations and know where to seek immediate back-up support in dealing with such risks. A close working relationship with the Student Counselling Service has proved to be enormously helpful in such instances and a partnership with such external support networks is highly recommended. Together, the Student Counselling Service and halls of residence can point to instances where students have successfully managed risk-taking behaviour to the extent that important career decisions could be made about whether to withdraw from university or to complete alternative courses of study.

A more common form of physical risk-taking behaviour involves alcohol and drug abuse. Experimentation with substance abuse is not uncommon amongst university students. Indeed, some students argue it is their right to engage in such activities! As relative newcomers to New Zealand, we offer the observation that a cultural preoccupation with "getting pissed" is a worrying feature amongst young Kiwi students. Australian students who have stayed at Weir House have normally done their part to reinforce the same cultural stereotype. Few seem to have any real idea of the dangers associated with alcohol poisoning. Nor have they been introduced to the idea of controlled drinking at an early age. For many young Kiwi and Australian students, the aim is to drink as much as possible in the shortest possible time. In other cultures, alcohol intake is a feature of social interaction where conversation and debate takes a higher priority than getting drunk. If the longitudinal research on alcoholism gives us anything to go by, then it is clear that alcohol intake increases between the ages of 18 and the early to mid-20s before tapering off for most adults. Those young people who sustain the same level of alcohol intake from late adolescence on into adult life show a much greater likelihood of developing alcohol dependency and addiction (Sobell and Sobell, 1978). These risks to longer term physical safety and security should not be ignored.

There are many other risks associated with alcohol abuse which feature prominently in the life of a university hall of residence. Anyone involved in university student life will be able to recount tales of risk-taking behaviour presented by students under the influence of alcohol. Walking on the roof or the ledge of a high-rise building, games of daring in the lift well, or rough housing on the fire escape are all potential risks. It is less easy to monitor the student who passes out under the influence of alcohol and is at risk of asphyxiating by choking on their own vomit. For all of these reasons, it is important to be available to intervene if the need arises during episodes of residence drinking. Residents’ Association events are no longer permitted to use Association funds for the purchase of alcohol and students are encouraged to limit the volume of alcohol available to a reasonable level of individual intake.

Our interventions in this regard are not to dictate what is allowed (an approach we think has limited value), but to encourage students to learn how to use alcohol responsibly. Fines are also levied in cases of disruptive behaviour. With regard to other forms of drug abuse, we also take a firm line. Smoking, for example, is not allowed inside the building. This is in keeping not only with university and national legislation but also as a response to the wishes of the vast majority of students who are concerned about the specific health hazards associated with passive smoking.
Smoking of other substances anywhere in the residence are grounds for involvement of the police and eviction.

One last area of physical risk involves sexually transmitted diseases. One day Jane was amused to receive a telephone call from the local newspaper to see whether Weir House had appointed a "condom controller" as had allegedly been done at some other New Zealand halls. As with other types of physical risk, we have taken the view that students who decide to become sexually active should also be encouraged to be sexually responsible. Both men and women share this responsibility and neither can be exempted from ensuring that physical safety and security is maintained. Rather than handing the control of condoms over to an individual, a condom machine has been installed in the one unisex toilet in the house. We also endeavour to make sexuality a topic that is open for discussion in a responsible and sensitive manner. The sexist behaviour prevalent in many areas of New Zealand and Australian society is often found to be alive and well in university halls of residence, and we think it needs confronting whenever and wherever it occurs.

In an attempt to reduce some of the problems associated with sexual activities, arrangements are made each year for Health Service staff to give talks on contraception. Leaflets on contraception and sexually transmitted diseases are available in the Common Room. Access to the Student Health Service is also widely publicised. A video - made by students on sexual responsibility is also shown. Students are encouraged to consider the risks associated with sexual promiscuity and to take responsible action to ensure that such risks are minimised. We hold to the view that risks associated with physical safety and security need to be managed very closely, if at times circumspectly in university halls of residence. Non-interventionist policies are far too risky.

Physical Safety Needs associated with Emotional Safety and Security

Under this heading can be listed a number of other risks associated with hall of residence living, ranging from loneliness to psycho-social crises of one sort or another. In the case of this type of risk, the question of whether to intervene or not is rather more conditional. Depending on the relationship which emerges between residents and the people responsible for managing the hall of residence, students may approach staff to discuss these concerns, or may seek help elsewhere. Frequently, however, the best support is still likely to come from their peers. Each year, therefore, we attempt to establish a "culture" of openness (Fulcher and Ainsworth, 1985) which encourages residents to approach one another as well as those of us in the administration if the need arises.

Interventions found to be the most effective in this regard have been associated with helping first year students get to know each other as quickly as possible. When taking over responsibility for Weir House in 1987, a "tradition" was inherited that had become known as "The Weir Howl" (as in Weir Wolves howling at the moon!) which took place on the night before the start of first term. Our students paraded around the other student halls shouting obscenities about how wonderful Weir House was and - not too surprisingly - retaliation from the other halls was swift. Attempts to modify the event met with little success so the matter was referred to the Weir House Council with a recommendation that this tradition end and be replaced with a tradition which helped students get to know one another in a way that caused no offence to students living in the neighbouring halls. Such action was vigorously resisted by the President of the Residents' Association on the grounds that "war unites people". But as one of our more astute Council members pointed out, Hitler and Mussolini were not role models which Weir House sought to perpetuate. The challenge was to develop an activity which brought people together in a positive manner within the residence instead of reinforcing a negative identity, based on unity in the face of external threat from neighbours.

The tradition which replaced the Howl was really quite simple and students have been enthusiastic in claiming it a success. We reasoned that on arriving at a hall of residence from all over New Zealand and other parts of the world, one of the central questions on each student's mind was "Who are all these people and which ones might become my friends over the next few weeks and months?" Thus, at the end of the traditional first night information session, each new student was given three attractively printed sheets of paper with spaces for each room in the residence, for the
name of each student, the degree they were studying and the geographic area from which they had come. Everyone was given the next hour and a half to find particular people and places in the hall that would be of use to them in the coming year (eg Study Room, Computer Room, TV Lounges) and to begin filling in their Weir House Resident List before re-convening for ice creams in the dining room. Our aim was to encourage young people to introduce themselves to one another at the very start of the year and to be able to put faces, names and room numbers together so as to begin feeling a part of the place. To encourage participation in the exercise, two free tickets to the Weir House Ball were offered to the male and female students compiling the longest list of residents within a week of moving in.

The social interaction which follows on from this exercise is virtually instantaneous. Each year since it was introduced, the House has buzzed with conversations in every corridor on the night before the start of first term. Our intervention was to give everyone permission to introduce themselves and provide a means through which everyone could start getting to know something about their neighbours living in different parts of the House for the next year. It is easy to take such a basic principle for granted and to assume that everyone is a social extrovert who makes friends easily. Interaction between young Kiwi students and the older international students has been an especially pleasing feature of this new tradition. What continues on from this first night's event has been even more exciting in that, as people began to get to know each other, the ice is broken and there has been a reduction in the other forms of risk-taking behaviour so prominent in earlier years.

Other ice breakers have been used to build on this event. Guardian Angels, where everyone is given the name of someone else in the House, and asked to send an anonymous, inexpensive gift or card as a welcome gift, was at first greeted with scepticism but has worked extremely well for many new residents. The Revelation Supper which follows a few weeks later offers a social opportunity over ice creams to those who participated.

Sometimes it will be the Deputy Wardens who are approached to discuss an emotional issue because they are of a different age and have a different role and authority in the House from us. We have sought to appoint Deputy Wardens who have different backgrounds and experiences, who have already demonstrated good communication skills, and who are pursuing a range of studies, in an attempt to provide a variety of people responsive to the needs of as many students as possible. During the first term, Deputy Wardens provide hot drinks in the dining room in the evenings as a further means of pro-actively addressing problems associated with loneliness and relationships. This, too, has helped to reduce social isolation. Residents quickly learn their way around Weir House and work out within hours where potential friends are living. We encourage our Deputy Wardens to make contact with different students at meal times and to build up a personal relationship with new students, just as we ourselves seek to foster such relationships.

Tables in the Dining Room are now normally set out in long rows. Although at first glance this may appear institutional, it nevertheless prevents residents from settling into small cliques at specific tables dotted around the room (Maier, 1987). Four rows of tables reduces the number of choices new residents have to make and simply results in new arrivals sitting down beside the first empty chair (Moos, 1976). Inevitably, this means that they may meet a different group at every meal in the first week or so.

Active attempts are made to break down some of the emotional barriers between "the administration" and the residents, often with very positive results. Everyone is known by their first name. Jane is available from 8 am to 6.30 pm every weekday and her office door literally remains open all the time she is there, apart from when she is involved in specific meetings. The main office is staffed from 8 am to 8 pm, so that somebody is virtually always visible and available to assist with problems. Wardens and Deputy Wardens eat meals in the Dining Room, attend student functions and host countless social events.

It can be said of these experiments in social engineering that intervention can take many different forms in a university hall of residence (Fulcher and Ainsworth, 1981). The most effective forms of
intervention are also those which appear to be the least obtrusive (Casson and George, 1994; 1995). Our conclusions after several years have been that intervention to address risks associated with emotional safety and security are very worthwhile. Such an interventionist policy has gone a long way towards explaining why fewer fines are issued since placing more emphasis on personal and community relationships at Weir House, loneliness has been much less of a problem and the atmosphere in the house has been far more positive than in previous years. Successful outcomes for students means that both they and their families are satisfied customers, and places at Weir House are highly sought after, by New Zealand students and from prospective students elsewhere in the Pacific region seeking to study at Victoria.

Love and Affection Needs associated with Relationships and Self Esteem

Risks associated with interpersonal relationships are closely linked with emotional safety and security but take on many additional features. Questions associated with whether to intervene in situations of this sort are far more complex. A memorable example at Weir House was linked to the assassination of Kanak leaders in New Caledonia where Jane found herself supporting international students grieving at the loss of important people who carried the hopes and aspirations of many people for a peaceful future in New Caledonia. The Fijian coups in 1987 presented us with similar issues as Melanesian and Indian Fijians in the hall were forced to consider the impact of political developments at home whilst living out the personal and interpersonal consequences of those developments as residents of the Weir House community. Our interventions were critical in dealing with the anger and tensions that flowed over between the two groups.

All students, in one form or another, experience risks associated with attachments, separation and loss during the course of their time living in a university hall of residence (Maier, 1979). All students entering a university hall of residence have to deal with leaving family and friends - many for the first time. Many experience difficulties arising out of intimate relationships between residents in the hall or friendships with people living outside the hall. Several residents over the years have lost parents or loved ones through death or departure overseas. Other young people have grieved over the divorce or separation of parents whose marriage stayed together until they themselves had departed the home scene. Still other students have needed to talk about friends in the residence who were contemplating suicide or who have made serious or successful attempts. In some cases we have spent more time supporting friends through crises such as these, than the individual whose life was actually under threat.

In situations like these, the emotional risks are significant in terms of a young person’s inability to study through crippling anxiety or psychosomatic illness. How to intervene in such cases is not easily defined. The challenge is to remain open to a student's need for support. Good office staff can contribute greatly in this regard. Such people can play an important part in the lives of many students as they are not really authority figures and can respond in quite different ways. Wardens and Deputy Wardens alike try to "keep an eye open" for students who look unhappy for one reason or another, or who present other patterns of risk-taking behaviour (Guttman, 1991). Regular alcohol abuse or non-attendance at classes are often clues that intervention in the relationship area may be required. Active listening in the office, in the Dining Room or on campus is essential for all involved in the “emotional tending” care of residents.

Esteem Needs associated with Self-Actualisation

Under this heading, it is possible to identify risks associated with educational attainment, career planning, study and exam preparation and overall maturation. Interventions which might be required are more often associated with the overall atmosphere maintained in the hall as compared with specific interventions that respond to particular incidents. Intervention to reduce the risk of low educational attainment has taken several forms. Seminars have been provided on themes such as essay preparation and sitting exams. Deputy Wardens have made themselves available to assist new students in preparing for specific assignments. A list of senior students’ names, room numbers and papers around which advice might be sought is posted early in the first term. Students are
invited to meet academic staff on a personal basis at a series of Faculty Dinners hosted during first term. The annual International Night festivities help strengthen students’ cross-cultural awareness and encourage greater cultural sensitivity and understanding of diverse cultural traditions.

High expectations concerning behaviour and maturity are set even before students step across the threshold. The Information Booklet pulls no punches about the standard of behaviour expected of residents, the fact that academic success is our primary goal and we insist on consideration for one another in support of that primary goal. All residents are treated as young adults unless and until they prove otherwise. House meetings are held once a month where problems, plans and policies are fully discussed. No rules are brought in that have not been previously discussed with residents in this regular forum. The Catering Manager attends and listens responsively to suggestions concerning meals. The Residents’ Association Executive Committee attends and listens to requests for activities. Surveys are carried out at the mid-year and end of year, with the results from such evaluations being posted for all to see. Where possible, suggestions are seen to be carried out; and where impossible, reasons are given. Activities such as these encourage young people to feel that they and their views are taken seriously, and that they are indeed mature individuals. The outcomes have been gratifying, as seen in the reduction of generalised vandalism and irresponsible behaviour.

Whereas previously, the power of the Residents’ Association Executive was once hijacked by senior student men on one floor, Constitution reform brought in amendments that now ensure that membership on the Executive reflects the overall population of the House and two representatives are elected from each floor. Real representation is now a feature of the Executive and the framework exists for all residents’ voices to be heard. Two members of the Executive serve on the board of management and their input is eagerly sought and attended to.

To summarise, it can be seen that different types of risk require different forms of intervention. Risks involving the physical safety and security of students require immediate intervention. Risks associated with emotional wellbeing require more subtle forms of intervention aimed at supporting students to build relationships with their fellow students that can sustain them in the longer term. Risks associated with interpersonal relationships are central to the developmental tasks of late adolescence and young adulthood (Maier, 1978). Our interventions may at times involve social engineering (Fulcher and Ainsworth, 1981), while at other times give direct support in helping students to build relationships where these are non-existent or potentially dysfunctional. Finally, risks associated with self-actualisation and maturation require interventions which affect the overall atmosphere of the university hall of residence, a strategically important feature of professional practice in the student services field.

It is only when former residents return for a chat and talk about what they have gained from their experiences in a university hall of residence that one learns just how important the experience has been in relation to each student’s personal journey towards wellbeing and maturation (Arieli and Kashti, 1991). Experiences with each type of risk have taught us some important lessons about the variety of interventions required in the running of a university residence. We conclude with a consideration of what might be defined as "symbolic interventions" that are important in managing risk-taking behaviour with students.

**Hall symbolic interventions in the life of a university**

As the Joint Wardens of Weir House, we have frequently commented about how different students deal with us in quite radically different ways as we interact with them on matters of daily living. One example is the student who had been spoken to on three occasions about his smoking in a no-smoking zone. It seemed to come as a surprise to this student that both Wardens interpreted the no-smoking rule in the same way. When later confirming with this student that we had each discussed the matter with him on separate occasions and were clear in our interpretation of the events, the response to the male Warden came from a surly, abrasive adolescent with a decidedly anti-authoritarian manner. In his dealings with the female Warden, however, everything was sweetness and light. It was clear who was the "bad" Daddy and who was the "good" Mummy. With a student
who accused us of running a “Chinese Communist regime”, Jane was the "wimp" Mother-figure and Leon was the "authority" Father-figure. When this student was overheard talking to his parents on the office phone one evening by a Deputy Warden, it was found that he spoke to his mother and father in the same way that he had been speaking with the Wardens.

Experiences like these help to illustrate the symbolic roles into which residents almost unconsciously place those who run a university hall of residence. Such examples offer a useful starting point for beginning to reflect on how symbolic intervention actually operates (Fook, 1996). By paying closer attention to interpersonal dynamics or transactions with students, it is possible to see how different types of role model might be used effectively in different situations when intervening in the lives of university students, sometimes with quite dramatic effects. A few examples are offered to illustrate how symbolic interventions operate in university halls of residence.

How about *Starsky and Hutch*? the American TV cop show, or change the gender roles to *Cagney and Lacey*? On the occasion of a large party elsewhere in the neighbourhood which was getting out of hand, the Warden from one of the other halls sought Leon’s help in breaking up the disturbance. With more than a hundred drunk students both inside and outside the student apartment and with music blaring at intolerable levels at midnight in a neighbourhood with several elderly residents, it was decided that the party should be shut down. One Warden went for the mains connection to the sound system, the other went for the lights. Within 15 minutes, the party was disbanded and those living in the flat were instructed to meet with their Warden the next morning. *Starsky* turned into *The Hanging Judge* the following day when he offered the option of a $600 fine and no further parties for the remainder of the year or immediate eviction for the offence. In this instance, our interventions were unequivocal and unashamedly authoritarian. Seeking support from a colleague was vital to the successful resolution of the incident, minimising the risk not only to administrative staff but also to students.

How about the role models found in that other American TV series *M.A.S.H.*? One year, following another drinking episode, the visiting husband of a Pacific Island student managed to smash his arm through a panel of reinforced glass cutting an artery in the process. In his drunken state, the student struggled determinedly to pull his arm back through the glass panel in an attempt to free himself. With each attempt to pull his arm back through the glass, further damage was being inflicted on his arm. Two Deputy Wardens sought assistance from other senior students to hold the Pacific Islander and to apply a tourniquet in an effort to stem the flow of arterial bleeding until an ambulance arrived. This needless accident resulted in major surgery to repair torn nerve tissue and ligaments in the student's arm. Without prompt intervention, the student might have bled to death or been left with permanent damage to his arm. Focus on the physical safety needs of the resident was infinitely more important than reviewing the incident as a disciplinary matter.

Then there is the role model of *The Three Monkeys* who see no evil, hear no evil and speak no evil. One afternoon, and it might have been any afternoon, Jane was knocking on doors and entering the rooms on one floor in search of missing vacuum cleaners. When a response was heard from inside the rooms, she asked if they had the vacuum cleaner and moved on. When no one answered, she quickly checked the room and moved on to the next room. On receiving no answer at one particular room, Jane used her master key to enter the room only to find the resident and his girlfriend in bed together. Jane asked if the resident had the missing vacuum cleaner and he pointed under his bed. She retrieved the missing appliance and, quietly thanking them, exited the room to go on about her business. Frequently, those responsible for a university hall of residence must "play the advantage rule" and carry on as though nothing has happened; seeing no evil, hearing no evil and speaking no evil. The task was to find vacuum cleaners, not make judgments about the sexual activities of students. This does not mean, however, that one turns a blind eye to every sexual exploit. The "monkey" re-found her sight and voice when discovering that one resident of a twin room was forced to seek alternative accommodation in the House for two nights running when her room-mate decided to entertain her boyfriend overnight.
Or what about General Jaruzelski, the Polish General who imposed martial law in the face of civil unrest? There are many times, especially during the examination period, when students who have finished their exams want to party at the weekend and their noise presents a problem for those who are still studying. At such times, martial law may need to be imposed and those who are ready to party turned out of the residence so as not to disturb those needing to study. Protection of those studying takes precedence over those socialising, particularly during exam periods. Another such role model is Big Nurse from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. This type of symbolic intervention may be required when drunkenness threatens to get out of hand. A student might be escorted to his or her room, guarded until he or she has dropped off to sleep and then checked to ensure they are lying in the recovery position to prevent asphyxiation in the event of vomiting.

*Mother Theresa* also comes to mind as a potential role model, as does *King Solomon*, renowned for judicial wisdom. Symbolic intervention of this kind may be required when a student receives news about the death of a close family member or friend. Similarly, a student may wish to talk over an incident with a boyfriend or girlfriend, or to talk about things that are happening back home. Such students often seek a listening ear who will be non-judgmental and discreet. At other times, students may put you in the role of adjudicator or a mediator in disputes of one sort or another. This seems to be especially prevalent amongst law students who seem to think they are now *Rumpole of the Bailey* or a junior partner at *LA Law* after successfully completing first year law.

Complaints about food are also commonplace in any hall of residence. It is impossible to be *Mother* for 260 students from more than 20 different countries. Food does, however, play a very important part in ensuring that a reasonable level of contentment is maintained in a university hall. For this reason it is necessary to take on the role of *The Galloping Gourmet* from time to time and to make meals a special occasion where students can be made to feel particularly cared for and therefore important. The use of table cloths, candle light, a glass of wine and flowers can change the atmosphere of an institutional dining room very quickly. On such occasions we find that students are slow to leave the Dining Room, they linger over conversations and seem to enjoy each other’s company more than usual. Similarly, home baking is provided in the lead-up to and during exams, in an attempt to acknowledge the stresses at this time of year, and in an attempt to provide some little extra support that might have been available at home.

In cases such as these, one must be ready to adapt to the needs of the moment and work out what symbolic role a student may be putting you into as well as the symbolic role which may be most helpful in responding to the situation at hand. It is most often the case that one will reflect on an interaction with students in a university hall after the event, not during it (Fulcher, 1994). Then, as one gets to know students better, it is easier to think how each student might respond in different situations and how one’s own behaviour as a staff member might be modified to achieve the most helpful outcomes (Maier, 1979).

As a Professor of the University, Leon is frequently approached by students who want to discuss how they might best respond to a particular essay question. More often than not, however, he is the person who gets called in when the heavy-duty behaviour control measures are required. It is clear that in the case of the older Pacific Island male students, Leon is more likely to get a positive response than the younger male Deputy Wardens. As the Professor, Leon represents a symbol of authority which students tend to take seriously. The difficulty he finds with such a role, however, is that it can then be hard at other times for some students to accept him in a supportive or light-hearted role when the situation requires it.

Therein lies one of the important principles which must be borne in mind when seeking to use symbolic interventions in managing risk-taking behaviour in halls of residence. It is all too easy to adopt one particular style of interaction for all situations and in so doing, undermine one’s effectiveness. The challenge is to develop different styles of intervention for different situations. It is particularly important to intervene in such a way that a resident is always provided with a way of saving face, even in the most challenging of situations. Not too infrequently, this means...
deliberately controlling the urge to grind their noses in the aftermath of incidents which seemed totally unreasonable. This is particularly challenging for student staff who are the ones invariably, who have to deal with the most irritating incidents at the most inconvenient times of the night.

Overall, we would argue that the wider the range of interventions available within the administrative team of a university hall, the better the chances are of responding to the variety of risk-taking behaviours presented by students resident there (Eisikovits, Beker and Guttman, 1991). For this reason, those making staff appointments need to be wary of the recruitment principle which seeks to appoint more people like us so that the place will run smoothly. Recruitment which emphasises diversity in a staff team has been found to be more effective in ensuring that a range of symbolic interventions are available to help manage risk-taking (Fulcher, 1981; 1991).

**Conclusion**

To conclude, it has been argued that direct intervention is indeed required in halls of residence, given some types of risk situation. These are most notably situations which involve a direct risk to physical safety and security. In other risk situations, the intervention may be far more subtle or even non-existent. However, interventions need to be directed towards establishing and maintaining a culture of shared responsibility, as compared with intervening in each little incident that comes up during the course of a working week.

Our major task as student services professionals can be said to involve encouraging residence workers, cleaning, catering and office staff and students to treat one another with respect as well as providing supportive confrontation whenever their social behaviour infringes the rights of others. In this respect, a university hall of residence offers an important social curriculum in the lives of university students which goes hand in hand with their academic courses of study. Although few academic staff recognise this fact, the other 23 hours (Trieschman, Whitaker and Brendtro, 1969) outside the lecture theatre are - for many students - by far the most memorable times of a university education. With a little bit of care and attention, it is possible to manage a hall of residence effectively and help students learn how to manage their own risk-taking behaviour. This is a challenge facing student services for the twenty-first century, one that will demand sustained attention. As personal, family, social and economic pressures mount for students, so will the potential increase for risk-taking behaviour.

**References**


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