

A DORM IS A DORM IS A DORM

A residence hall by any other name would be just as nice.

By Colette M. Shaw

AS DIRECTOR of residence life, it is my job to help the campus community understand that learning is at the core of the department's mission, and that word choices are important when describing our learning environment. In 1987, when I was hired as an orientation counselor, I was taught this lesson at one of my first training sessions. I heard a colleague use the word *dorm*, for which she was harshly reprimanded by the session facilitator: "A dorm is where someone sleeps. A residence hall is an active place where students interact and learn."

At the time, I bought the rationale, and I have not uttered the D word since. My colleagues affirm me—at least indirectly—when they correct the pitifully ignorant souls who have the audacity to voice that one ugly syllable that never seems to go away. I even nodded in smug approval several years ago when a former supervisor explained to a fresh new RA staff that saying the word *d*rm* would make them sound antiquated. I did not spend much time thinking about the fact that the four of us on the staff who used the term *residence hall* in our everyday language made us the oddball majority. Even at thirty-four, I do not use the word, as much out of fear of an evil glance or even polite correction from a

coworker as for heartfelt acceptance of the choice.

For some reason, this year, as I conducted another round of RA training, I cringed a little when I heard

RAs poke fun of our president when he praised them for their outstanding work in our d*rms. I silently questioned whether the seemingly endless effort to change the residential culture through a well-intended language change really missed the whole point of the change. I can't honestly say that any more high school seniors in 2001 talked to their friends about their nervous excitement about living in the residence halls than did in 1967, when I was born.

When training was over, I decided to look up the definitions of *dorm* and

residence hall on my computer's thesaurus. I started with *dormitory*. The nine synonyms offered by my program included "sleeping quarters," "barracks," and "residence hall." When I entered *residence hall*, the computer gave me an identical list, except that *residence hall* had been replaced by *dormitory*.

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The following day, I spoke with a friend, Conal, who works in residence life at another university. I told him about my dorm dilemma and he shared a recent experience. Conal was interviewed by a local newspaper for an article on recent housing changes. He was eager to read the piece and see his name in print . . . until the paper arrived. As he read his quotes, Conal saw that the reporter had replaced the term *residence hall* with *dorm*. It is standard practice for journalists to replace words that the public might not understand with more colloquial language. Unfortunately, my friend was left fearful that his colleagues might read the article and think he used residence-life version of the F word in a widely read publication—the ultimate betrayal.

I recently conducted an Internet search of the term *residence hall*. In a matter of seconds, I had 189,000 hits. I was eager to see what sorts of nondormant activities took place in the real lives of students. I found thousands of links to college residence life offices and RHA Web pages, but for the life of me I could not find a real, live student's personal site. As much as the opportunity to help plan the annual RHA barbecue and see the carpet colors in Allen Hall at Iver-son University intrigued me, I did not feel any closer to *students*. I confess that I did not peruse all 189,000 sites, but I did my best to explore as many as I could before my contact lenses shriveled into raisin-textured disks.

After a quick date with a bottle of saline solution, I went back to my search engine and typed in the four letters that make seasoned housing professionals shudder. This hunt offered something completely different. The very first link (of 218,000 offered) led me to www.realcollegelife.com/dorms/jvd/dormcam.htm, where I had access to multiple student rooms that were equipped with cameras to show me what they did while they were not in the classroom. Believe me, they were not d*rmant! If you are leery about acting as voyeur, note that you can instead have access other than the literal window into students' lives (which alone is an educational tool for everyone in our profession). Visitors to a student site can interact with the host through e-mail or instant messaging, and find out everything we want to know (or don't want to know) about their real lives. I was flattered that the sites even asked me to answer

questions about *my* favorite movie and favorite food. Not only was I learning about these resident students, but they also wanted to get to know me! Whether they intended it or not, students had created a place where administrative and faculty hierarchy disappeared and opportunities for shared learning abounded.

I did some informal assessment around my campus to hear current and former resident students' impressions of words that even my blueberry iMac could not distinguish. I asked what sort of visual image *dorm* conjured up as compared to *residence hall*. The results varied when they were asked to describe their vision of each option, but 100 percent of the students I queried said they felt they had lived in a dorm (or course the students who had been resident assistants apologized for their answers).

Okay, I admit it: when I hear the word *dorm*, I think of something positive. It reminds me of *The Facts of Life*, where fictional students lived together under the leadership of Mrs. Garrett and, despite their differences,

became a community. The residents of that dorm laughed and cried and learned important life lessons about themselves and their complex world. *Dorm* reminds me of my own freshman year of college, when I moved from a rural town in western New York to the global community of the sixth floor of the Midrise Residence Hall at Old Dominion University. In that dorm, I did not just reside in a hall, as the literal definition might suggest.

I was challenged to understand cultures, religions, and values that differed from my own. I had conversations that lasted into the night and developed friendships that remain strong today. Most important, I learned right from the first day I moved in that I had to define myself because no one knew me or my past. I loved that dorm. I love it still.

Will someone out there join me in the secret society of d*rmm whisperers? Do you think we could make it safe again for individuals within our earshot to say the D word without ducking? Could we accept the messages our students, media, and hearts tell us about our rhetoric and adapt appropriately? Despite the charge from our peers that we are using archaic speech, I think we might be the true *avant garde*.

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