

Themed Housing Group Report

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Abstract

In the United States, several top colleges offer themed housing in the form of “li to undergraduates. This model of housing offers a living-learning community surrounding a certain topic to students. Themes can enrich a student’s social, cultural, and/or academic university experience. In this report, we examine the structure and content of themed housing, specifically within the context of the Bechtel residence. We have concluded that themed housing is a viable option for Caltech, especially if we expand the definition to include needs-based housing, such as quiet housing or substance free housing.

Introduction

Themed housing. Themed housing, also known as “living-learning communities,” consists of a group of students with similar interests living together. Some common themes at other universities include food co-ops, LGBTQIA+ housing, language housing, ethnicity housing, service- or environmentally-themed housing, and academically focused housing. Specifically at Caltech, we have seen a demand for a different type of housing, needs-based housing. Approximately 31.1% of Caltech students are interested in substance free housing and 34.4% are interested in quiet housing(Bechtel Occupancy Survey II, 2017). We think expanding the definition of themed housing to include these students will make this type of housing more inclusive.

Unlike most larger-scale dorms at other schools, themed housing communities seem to be relatively small and specific. We have found, on average, there are roughly 43 students living in themed housing for every 1000 students. That being said, there are some successful small schools that have a higher rate of students in themed housing. Reed College, which has 1400 undergraduates, has 122 students in themed housing. Stanford has nearly one-fifth of students in some sort of themed house.

Ultimately, themed housing plays a crucial role for those students who would like a themed living situation or more cohesive dorm, but are not interested in Greek life. These communities vary in size and intensity. We will examine most of the common options in our report.

Caltech. The Bechtel residence will be opening in the fall of 2018, and we need to decide who will live in it. One of our main goals is to use the addition of a new on-campus residence to help solve some of the current problems with the housing system as well as maintain the core values all students love about Caltech.

To many students, the cost of Board is a hindrance to living on campus (Bechtel Occupancy Survey, 2017). If we alter the way board works, we might make campus a more desirable option for students on campus. Also, cross-house interaction is not as high as it could be; there are some houses with no interactions (Bechtel Survey, 2017). We would like Bechtel

to help create a new social atmosphere where we can increase the ability for students to interact with a more diverse group of people.

We also have a set of core values we determined integral to the current Caltech housing system:

1. Intellectual growth - supporting learning and intellectual development
2. Mentorship - learning and receiving guidance from other students, both academically and non-academically
3. Diversity - exposing students to peers from different backgrounds and experiences
4. Identity - developing an independent identity and sense of self
5. Support - fostering a community that cares for students and where students care for each other
6. Honor Code - upholding the spirit of the Caltech Honor Code
7. Choice - having options for where to live in order to suit different wants and needs

Our goal is to make sure Bechtel continues to uphold and add to these values.

Data/Results

Types of themes. We examined several different types of themed housing at peer institutions by talking to students, administrators, and visiting various campuses. We prioritized schools of similar size, caliber, student demographics, or location. One of the main things we looked at was the individual options at each school as well as their success.

One popular model is the food co-op, which often revolves around specific culinary tastes. In a food co-op, residents share chores like cleaning, taking out the trash, cooking, and doing the dishes. Some co-ops are vegetarian- or vegan- friendly, others are more organically focused, and others focus on mindfulness, sustainability, or other food-related themes. At Stanford, one of the schools that has a successful program, these communities range in size from 30-60 people. They have around seven residences participating in this program, which comes out to 3-6% of the student population.

At Caltech, the price and quality of board is a major factor in one's decision to live off campus. In 2017, 13% of students said it was the biggest reason they lived off campus and 33% said it was a contributing factor (Bechtel Occupancy Survey, 2017)). Therefore, we think a food-based themed suite would likely be a good option for future Caltech housing.

After speaking to the Director of Dining Services, Jon Webster, we confirmed that this idea would be possible if done within the board system. Students could enroll in board as normal, but be provided with the ingredients they want and the cooking space they need. Since Avery's kitchen is becoming a test kitchen, the food co-op could have a large, professional kitchen to cook in. When this idea was proposed to the student population, 34.1 % of students were interested in potentially living in that type of housing (Bechtel Occupancy Survey II, 2017). 19.4% of the respondents would be more interested in living in food co-ops than the current off-campus system (Themed Housing Group Questions, 2017, showing that this type of housing could be an improvement on what we currently have to students.

Another series of options of themed housing were more interest-based. In UCLA, HSU, and the University of Alabama, among others, a popular option is fitness/wellness oriented housing. Similar to food co-ops, people in this type of housing encourages students to work together to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Students have the ability to cook healthy foods and work out together. This type of housing also organizes events such as student-lead hiking trips or canoe trips. Some other themes we saw were more academically-oriented. Many schools, such as MIT, have language houses where students can practice a certain language and be more immersed within its culture. Some have housing based around humanities disciplines or science. When we visited Occidental College, we saw that in order to ensure these themes had members, they had only a few established themes. The rest of their themed housing fell under the category of “make-your-own theme” housing. In this system, students would come up with a theme they’re interested in and apply with a group of other students. Then, the housing office would read through all of the applications and choose the best themes. During the year, students would get a bit of funding to put on programs for the campus. At the end of the year, students could decide whether they wanted to apply for the theme again.

Since two of our values are choice and diversity, we believe that the best model for interest-based themed housing would be make-your-own themed housing. These suites would allow for people from across houses to come together over common interests. We foresee a few problems with this type of housing, but we believe they can be easily solved. First, some comments we have gotten is that it is too close to the current housing system, as each of the houses have their own “personalities.” However, we think that themed housing is different. The requirement to put on events for other members of campus, the specific focus on a particular theme, and even the nature of the theme (not every interest is represented in every house) would be different than the house system. Another possible problem is ensuring students stick to a theme. However, we propose that requiring a faculty mentor (similar to the club application process, and could potentially be one of the faculty in residences) would solve this problem. Themed housing has been shown to have a significant benefit to students, but “lack of faculty and residential staff planning and accountability can significantly reduce the benefits” of themed housing (Frazier & Eighmy). When surveyed, around 50% of Caltech students were interested in this type of housing (Bechtel Occupancy Survey II)

We also saw housing centered around identity groups like ethnicity or gender identity at many schools (Amherst, UCSD, Stanford, Occidental, and more). However, instituting this option might not be the best thing for Caltech. At Occidental, a similar sized school, they had a very successful women’s house, but their queer house was unpopulated, as many queer people felt isolated living there and felt that the general campus was accepting of their orientation. When we talked to the Caltech feminist club, they felt similarly to the members of the Queer house; if we were to separate people by identity, they might feel like they do not belong in the general Caltech community. However, members of PRISM seemed interested, stating that they tend to clump together anyway, and having the option to live together for a year would be very beneficial to their community. In a campus-wide survey, only 4.9% of Caltech students think they would live in identity-based housing. Ultimately, we think that if students want identity-based housing, they should apply through the “make-your-own theme” option.

Another important topic we discussed was allowing for clubs to have suites in Bechtel. However, this option was not popular amongst clubs. As mentioned, the feminist club is against this idea. Also, members of the Caltech Y did not want a themed house for themselves. To them, the Y's purpose is to bring together students from different backgrounds and houses while ensuring that there is no bound on commitment: students should be able to contribute as much or as little as they would like, and the Y leadership does not want to be all from the same group of friends.

Implementation. Because of Caltech's smaller size, we envision that each theme would be able to occupy its own suite in Bechtel, rather than the typical 40-50 person communities at other schools. From our surveys, we concluded approximately 10-20% of Bechtel should be make-your-own- theme housing and there should be an unlimited number of needs-based themed housing spots.

We think that both groups should apply to the housing office before the normal housing lottery. If their theme is selected or they are approved to live in needs-based housing, then they would receive their rooms early and those rooms/suites would be taken out of general roompicks.

In order to ensure that students follow through with their theme in make your own themed housing, they should fill out a relatively extensive application with their theme ideas along with a supportive faculty member.

Though this implementation structure, especially regarding make-your-own themed housing, may not be possible this year due to the time constraints, this process could potentially begin for the 2019-2020 school year.

Discussion

A common concern about themed housing is insularity; when people surround themselves with only people who have similar interests, it can be hard for them to branch out. However, for communities based around identity, it can ensure that students have the ability to feel safe and welcome. At Stanford, students in the latino house Casa Zapata feel a very strong sense of community, being able to participate as much or as little as the please (Stanford Cross Cultural Blog, 2008). UCSD opened up new identity-based housing in 2016. The vice chancellor of housing at the school explained it was helping to create a positive image on campus. According to him, this move will increase grades, retention rates, and graduation rates, as people (Warth, 2016). However, according to a survey completed on campus, 81.8% of students did not think that identity based housing would be effective at Caltech, citing potential divisions between students it would create. Also, some students thought it would make the other residences in the community appear less accepting.

We also want to make sure that we have diversity within the themed houses; we do not want them to become "on campus allies" of the already existing houses nor do we want them to be exclusive entities. One proposed way to solve this problem is to put some sort of distribution requirement on each house. We recommend that there are members of at least two different houses (or some unaffiliated students) in each themed house.

There are many ways a theme can be created, but we feel strongly that all themes should come from the students themselves, as this will ensure that people would actually live in the houses. We also expect some in themed housing to want the theme to last longer than a year; they should indicate their continued interest to the Housing office when the applications for new themed housing come out.

For themed housing to work, the lottery/rotation system might have to be changed. A few options we have are to include themed houses as part of rotation, have themed housing only available to upperclassmen via application, filling themed housing in the regular unaffiliated lottery, or some mix of the three.

One option, implemented at Stanford, is to have the ability to “pre-reserve” a spot in a themed house. Basically, students would write an application to the themed house’s leadership (in Stanford’s case, the RA) if they are very interested. If accepted, this procedure reserves them a spot in the house for the coming year. The unfilled spots then become part of the general campus-wide lottery. With this system, Caltech can keep a familiar lottery and rotation system (unless, of course, freshmen are admitted into the themed house).

If we include themed houses in rotation, though, then there would definitely have to be some changes. There are some benefits (such as comfort/a safe space) to allowing freshmen in identity-based housing, but we hope freshmen feel welcomed in every community on campus. We are continuing to look into how this option may work, but having freshmen in themed housing before entering the regular housing system might hinder their social development, as they will not be able to interact with as many upperclassmen.

As mentioned above, we think that an application process would be the most effective way for themed housing to be implemented.

We also think it is very important to extend the idea of a safety net into themed housing. Some possible options could be to have a UCC/peer advocate/health ad/title IX advocate in each themed option. We could also have a cross-themed housing “excomm/safety net” that includes peer mentors that any student in themed housing can access, regardless of their house. We plan on talking to the counseling center to hear about what they have planned with the new peer advocate program, and how it might fit into the new Bechtel system.

Conclusion

Our current recommendation for Bechtel is to allow for some fraction of Bechtel to be themed housing. The other fraction, we believe, should go to other housing models. Depending on the long-term success of themed housing, our model can be extended or shrunk as necessary. We think that themed housing will be able to create new social groups for those who get kicked out of their houses due to their internal lottery number or are uncomfortable with the house system. Themed housing will interact well with the current system, as it will still allow for the rotation process.