

John Boccacino:

Hello and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. I'm John Boccacino, Senior Internal Communications Specialist at Syracuse University.

Steve Herndon:

My job is essentially in a nutshell, creating a structure that clearly defines our contributions and approach to how we're going to partner with students in their learning and development, around community engagement, around identity and belonging, around health and safety. These are all sort of values for us, but I think critical experiences and values for our students' success at the university.

So for me, it's really about supervising the staff, but also creating the structure and the infrastructure that allows us to actualize those three sort of values or tenets, so to speak, in a way that allows us to be active partners in students' learning and development. And that's going to look very different for students who live in a residence hall versus students who live in an apartment versus students who live off campus. But ultimately, our overall commitment is to students' learning. My job is to build the structure and provide the leadership to the staff.

John Boccacino:

Our guest today on the 'Cuse Conversations podcast is Steve Herndon, the Assistant Vice President for Student Living here at Syracuse University. Steve joined the university community in January as a respected leader in residential education, housing, and student development, combining the valuable ways residential living both builds a strong community and impacts a student's holistic development. We are thrilled to welcome on Steve to really pull back the curtain a little bit on residential living and the profound impact that it has here at Syracuse University. Steve, thank you for making the time to join us today.

Steve Herndon:

John, thank you for the invitation. I'm happy to be here and happy to talk and to share more about student living and the role that we play in our students' learning and development.

John Boccacino:

Now as we sit here recording this podcast, we are getting ready. Hard to believe Syracuse Welcome is not that far down the road. You have been on the job for roughly six months, and I wanted to take this opportunity. We didn't want to hit you right away, first day on the job, introducing yourself to our podcasting audience and the community, but you've got a big milestone coming up. This is your first fall semester, your first Welcome. You'll be here on campus. What has your impression been so far of Syracuse University, its students, and the living experience?

Steve Herndon:

I would say my impression so far has been it's been a very welcoming community. When I made the decision to leave my former institution after being there for 19 years, I was looking for a new experience, but also looking for an experience where the environment would be conducive for my success and my ability to thrive. And for me, that's being in an environment that's truly committed to the holistic development of its students and staff, and in an environment where my identities are welcomed and affirmed. And thus far in my six months, that's been my experience.

Why I love student living and see the potential of student living is that our students learn a lot of valuable information and develop critical skills for their development in communities. That's what student living stands for, community engagement, identity and belong. And to have the opportunity to create that experience for students and to be a partner in their journey is truly a blessing. And I see lots of potential here at Syracuse University.

And then again, everyone, colleagues, my supervisors, the leadership of the institution have been very welcoming to me, and Syracuse is beginning to feel like home. Now in my almost six months, it'll be six months on July 23rd, in my almost six months here, I have recognized that I made a wise decision in choosing to be a part of the Syracuse community.

John Boccacino:

And for our audience, to give some perspective, you came to Syracuse as, again, a very respected leader in residential life and housing matters. At the University of Dayton was your most recent stop; you were there for nearly two decades. What was it about Syracuse that really called out to you, that made you leave one great institution like Dayton to come to the Orange?

Steve Herndon:

I think the university's commitment to the, again, the holistic development of its students, recognizing the value for learning and the potential opportunity within student experience that the student living staff has to contribute actively to our students' learning and development. As I said, students learn in all aspects of their experience at SU, whether that's in the classroom or beyond the classroom. So to have the opportunity to create structures and partnerships and collaborations across the division and across the university that allows us to actualize that experience in a collaborative way is what excites me. I'm excited by learning. I love the messiness of it. I love the reciprocal nature of learning in that as I teach, I learn. Learning for me is a concept that does not necessarily follow the pathway of hierarchy; that because I have a title, then I know more than others. There's lots that I know and lots that I've experienced, but I can learn from anyone around me.

And there's so much potential in my opinion here at SU to make a difference, and to be able to do that in a part of the country, in that I'm moving to New York, I'm moving to a new city. I'm going through the experience of being new again. I just recently turned 50 on Christmas Day, and to go through new again, to be new again has been very exciting for me. It's also given me a valuable perspective on the complexities of being new. There's lots of exciting times. There's also some very challenging times and overwhelming times; all that are a part of that transition and acclimation. And as I've experienced some of the highs and lows, it makes me more sensitive to the experience our students are going through.

So I look forward to the opportunity of being a more sensitive and informed leader as I serve as a partner in our students' learning to develop. There's just so much potential here that I'm excited.

John Boccacino:

Yeah, no, for sure. I mean, it is a time of excitement. It's a time of new beginnings for our students who will be moving in, both the new students and the returning students. The whole theme of this podcast is pulling back the curtain on student living and residential living. And when someone hears your title, AVP for Student Living, what exactly are the primary responsibilities of your job, and how do you envision your specific function making a difference in that development of our students?

Steve Herndon:

As the AVP of Student Living, I oversee the student living staff that live in our residential communities, as well as the supervisors and leadership to whom they report. So for north campus where our residence halls are located, south campus where our apartments are located, all of that falls under student living. But also off-campus living. I'm not sure everyone is aware that off-campus living also falls under student living as well. I think my job is essentially in a nutshell, creating a structure that clearly defines our contributions and approach to how we're going to partner with students in their learning and development, around community engagement, around identity and belonging, around health and safety. These are all sort of values for us, but I think critical experiences and values for our students' success at the university.

So for me, it's really about supervising the staff, but also creating the structure and the infrastructure that allows us to actualize those three values or tenets, so to speak, in a way that allows us to be active partners in students' learning and development. And that's going to look very different for students who live in a residence hall versus students who live in an apartment versus students who live off campus. But ultimately our overall commitment is to students' learning. My job is to build the structure and provide the leadership to the staff that allows us to do that.

John Boccacino:

How did you go about ingratiating yourself in the community and getting to know the people you would be calling as colleagues?

Steve Herndon:

I think much of my time thus far has been meeting with my staff, my team in student living and different groups and configurations, because it's important for me to know their history, their narratives individually and collectively as staff who have worked here at the university and have knowledge that I don't yet have about the institution, and really wanting to get to know and build those relationships. I recognize that for the relationship to have potential, it has to be informed. And it can't be informed by what I assume I know about people, but rather what I actually know. So spending time with my team and building that relationship, helping them to understand who I am, what I value, what they can expect from me, but also what I need and expect from them as we partner in the support of our students and their learning.

A lot of time has been spent in different groups getting to know the staff and having an understanding of their experience, their perspective, and what their assets are and what they bring to this experience. Likewise, I've been meeting with campus partners, actually my Director of Residence Life and I have been doing this, Lauren Murphy. She's also new, so that's been great too, that I've been able to share this experience with my Director of Residence Life.

But getting to our campus partners and getting an assessment of what do you know about student living, and what are your assumptions about student living, and where do we have opportunities to collaborate in ways that allows us to leverage our gifts, talents, and resources more strategically as we all work towards the shared outcome that we want for our students. That's what the spring term has been for me because that's the foundation I need to lay in order to build off of that successfully and strategically as I think about the long-term sustainable success.

John Boccacino:

If you don't mind me asking, what were some of those assumptions that campus partners might've held about student living and residential living? What have you been trying to do to maybe assuage some fears or to get the narrative in the right frame of mind?

Steve Herndon:

Well, one of the assumptions I'm very comfortable with, which is their recognition of our willingness to collaborate and the talent that exists within the department. I think anytime you have new leadership, I think the assumption is this person's going to come in and just make all of these sweeping changes. I don't see the futility of that. I think it's a very dangerous tactic in that it can create harm in ways from which you don't recover.

And so I think I'm comfortable with their assumption about the talent, because there's lots of talent on this team, and people that I'm inspired by, people I love working with, people that are going to do, have done, and will continue to do amazing work. I'm also pleased with the assumption about our willingness to collaborate because we always want to collaborate.

I think some of what I learned early on from campus partners was that there were quite a few campus partners that didn't necessarily have a lot of interaction with student living, so I see an opportunity to build relationships there. I think are some of those other natural assumptions that the relationship only has to be actualized through an event because an event is a very tangible way. So this sort of transactional approach that we plan an event together and then that's the nature of our relationship I learned has been the primary experience in some respects. I think as we've moved to a curricular approach for how we actualize learning, I see some opportunity for us to have a more in-depth understanding of one another so that we can partner more strategically.

There was nothing honestly that anyone was assuming that I was so uncomfortable with that I didn't see the potential. I think in a lot of ways student living is a bit of an enigma, a bit of a mystery to the campus community, and I see all kinds of opportunity and possibility and potential in providing a more accurate understanding of the department's identity, but also the potential for our contributions to students' learning and development and how that can occur through collaboration with partners.

John Boccacino:

I want to say, Steve, I think you're a wise leader to come in and recognize you don't want to change the ecosystem without understanding what's working and where there might be opportunities for growth. In your analysis in your first six months on the job, can you share for us a little bit what you've come to understand about short-term goals, and then a long-term vision for where residential learning, where student learning could go on campus?

Steve Herndon:

I would say some of the short-term goals is that the curricular approach that I made reference to earlier in our discussion in conversation, the department had already implemented that approach, and it's an approach I'm familiar with as I implemented it at my former institution for my department. It's one that I have consulted on, and I was here actually a year ago as a consultant for student living. And now a year later, here I am as the AVP. So the foundation was in place already for us to approach learning in a more developmentally sequential fashion that allows us to focus on outcome-based learning and not satisfaction data. The department understood that, and the staff and the department understands that and is committed to moving forward. So I haven't had to do a lot of convincing the team regarding the approach that's already in place.

It's how do we further actualize that so that that approach is influencing how we engage with one another, but how we approach our work across the entire department. And so that's been helpful in that regard that there's some foundation in place that I can build off of. I think people want to collaborate with us. I think our partners want to be a part of that journey with us, and I've already seen evidence of that. So there's those pieces that are in place that I think give tremendous potential for us to move forward and to be successful as an active partner in our students' learning.

John Boccacino:

It's a challenge to get all these people from different backgrounds to try to form that community. How does one go about, with the help of the residence life staff, the incredible RAs we have here, the residence directors, how does one go about trying to take this monumental task of bringing first years together to develop community?

Steve Herndon:

Well, I think it first starts with how are we preparing staff? I can't ask them to contribute to the environment that we want for our students if they can't do that for themselves and among themselves. So some of it has been, how are we preparing staff, training staff differently to be able to situate a lot of what we want for our students and their experience so that they are able to be those active learning partners in what I consider to be this four to five year journey for our students.

But I think some of it is, we've got to be prepared to make sure that our environments are such that people know that they matter, they know that they belong. That has to start individually as we build relationships. So as RAs are building relationships individually with students on the floors, that's going to start during move in, and to some degree even before move in as questions come in or as there's opportunities for the student living staff to connect with students prior to their arrival.

How accurate are we in communicating our values and the value of the living experience for our students in terms of any correspondence that we would be a part of before students arrive? When they arrive, do they know that they matter? Do they know that? Are we creating environments where I can walk into the environment and know that I've been thought about, that someone cares about me, that someone knows that I exist. As the staff begins to have more of an understanding of the individuals that make up the community, how are we using that individual knowledge to build collectively so that we're building a sense of accountability among community members that only serves as a resource and a source of strength as you navigate the ups and downs, as I said, of being new and as acclimating to a new community in that transition?

I think as part of that, how are we helping our students to understand and normalize some of the parts of the experience that feel extraordinary because they're uncomfortable? So in some ways, as we build those relationships and get to that place of trust and being that resource for students, how do we also help them in understanding and normalizing discomfort, which is going to be a natural part of the experience? And how are we being a resource and providing not just resources, but an opportunity to dialogue and to have support as one navigates that discomfort collectively and individually? That has to start though from day one.

John Boccacino:

I love that approach. It's almost like, not to oversimplify, but you want people in these communities to be comfortable being uncomfortable, because that's really the only way you can kind of grow is if you go through these shared experiences and these challenges. I also love the curriculum driven approach to it.

Because if you think about it, programs are great, they have a benefit, but it could be a one-off. It's not something you feel like you can build upon as much of an actual class framework of this curriculum. Where did you learn and embrace that philosophy to have it be more of a classroom curriculum type style, more so than traditional programs?

Steve Herndon:

One of the professional associations to which I belong is ACPA, College Educators International. I would say back in the late 2000s, 2006, 2007, residence life departments started moving to this curricular approach model where you have an educational priority that is your aspirational vision for what you want students to learn. It's not your mission. Your mission, for me, is really about the environment. What is our commitment to the environment so that it's conducive for learning? But the educational priorities, your aspirational vision for learning, and then from there you have your learning goals, and then department level outcomes for each of those learning goals that are sequential in nature. That provides the framework for any educational plan or curriculum that you create.

I attended in 2010 what was then called the Residential Curriculum Institute. It's now called the Institute on the Curricular Approach because the trend now is that divisions are adopted. Divisions of student development or student affairs are adopting this approach now, hence the changing title because our audience has expanded. But that's where I started learning about the approach.

John Boccacino:

Is it possible to anecdotally point out some examples from what you've seen on campus of how this curriculum-based approach has fueled development, has led to community connections?

Steve Herndon:

First of all, we're beginning to see that students as well as, I believe, parents and supporters are seeing that, A, learning happens outside of the classroom. The first step is recognizing that all aspects of learning contribute to our students' development. Learning in the classroom, but also learning beyond the classroom. And so what I appreciate about the curricular approach is it allows us to be able to have a very structured way and an organized and developmentally sequential way of us capturing and implementing learning beyond the classroom.

I would say early on in my tenure here, what I've been most excited about, and I'm hopeful that our students will be as well, there's a strong partnership that we have with the Barnes Center around conflict management, around thriving, around what does it mean to be a prosocial bystander, and how are we helping students to understand their agency around health and safety and social issues that are going to impact their development. I've been very pleased in terms of how this platform or this approach has served as a platform for how we go about building our relationships with other partners as we work towards our shared goals and outcomes for our students and their living and learning experience.

I'm seeing even further development with the intercultural collective around that as well. That's a relationship that was already in place as well, but I see possibilities in the beginnings of those relationships going to a deeper level, a deeper level of understanding that allows for us to be journey partners across and collaborators across the experience, and that that partnership doesn't have to be solely defined by a transaction.

And so I would say right now in my six months, what I believe students will experience is they're going to experience a lot, and I think it's going to be around critical needs and issues that have relevance for their

experience at SU, but it's also preparing them for life beyond SU. So how are we helping them to develop the skills and the agency to be able to play a role in their care for themselves as we are committed to caring about them and providing that, but also in addressing the environment so that it's conducive for that skill development to occur? That's what I'm most excited about. That's where I see a lot of potential. I think as we seek to actualize this, what's going to happen is it's going to have tremendous benefit for our students.

John Boccacino:

I want to shine a light on something that our audience might not be aware of, the added emphasis that has been placed at Syracuse on creating both the living learning communities, which we have more than 20 of those, they are award-winning. It's such a great resource. And also the multicultural living learning community as well that we have here at Syracuse.

Steve Herndon:

I appreciate you bringing that up because I was providing oversight. Thank you, John. Living learning communities doesn't report directly to me; it has a dotted line report to me. But living learning communities play a significant role in how we execute the value or the learning goals and outcomes of this department. The Director of the living learning program, Dan Cutler and I, work very closely together in terms of actualizing that. And so I appreciate you bringing that up because I missed that in my response to your question about my general oversight.

But living Learning communities play a significant role. I'm very thankful for the living learning community staff. They have been great to work with. I love working with Dan and his team, and I see a lot of potential. That program is extremely solid and it's already proven to be an impactful practice. What I'm hoping within the context of the curricular approach is how do we further integrate the living learning communities in such a way that we're more seamless in our approach in terms of what the student living staff are providing as strategies, and the living learning community strategies that are coming up.

John Boccacino:

For students who happen to be listening to this podcast, there is an orientation about the living learning communities coming up on August 23rd. Highly recommend you go to [experience.syr.edu/llc](http://experience.syr.edu/llc). We'll link to it in the podcast as well to learn more about these. If you had to, Steve, make a pitch, what is it about the living learning communities here at Syracuse that are so special and so unique?

Steve Herndon:

Their diversity, their intentionality, the staff. The staff is amazing. The staff does a wonderful job, in my opinion, in partnering with our faculty colleagues in creating an experience that's centered around learning, both in the classroom and beyond. It's the perfect structure for the integration of learning. As I shared earlier, I think sometimes we can get into debates about the merits of this aspect of learning or that aspect. They all matter and all are important and critical to our students' development.

And so what I appreciate about this practice and the staff associated with this practice is that there's that understanding and commitment to ensuring that our students have a holistic experience and that all aspects of learning have been considered and planned for and thought about as we prepare for their arrival and prepare for their learning. So the number of opportunities, but also the diversity of opportunities that you referenced, but the staff also play a critical role in this.

This has proven to be an impactful practice. The program in and of itself really is remarkable, and I've been thoroughly impressed with it and look forward to being more a part of it in my arrival and in continuing that relationship with Dan and the staff.

John Boccacino:

One of my favorite parts, Steve, about talking to people here on the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast is getting to the why of their passions. For our podcast audience who's listening, you had both a bachelor's and a master's degree in English from North Carolina State University. Connect the dots; how does one go from earning two degrees in English to being this respected student living, residential learning faculty and thought leader when it comes to best practices? How did you end up at this point?

Steve Herndon:

I've always loved learning, even as a child. As I entered college, at one point I wanted to be a lawyer. I recognized I didn't really want to be. I like to argue, I like to deconstruct arguments [inaudible 00:27:29]. To be a lawyer it's a very expensive commitment. So as I graduated, I was an RA when I was an undergraduate student at North Carolina State University. But when I graduated, I accepted a teaching assistantship in the English department. And while I loved learning, at the time didn't see my passion for learning, I didn't see my place in the classroom. And so it really started when I just accidentally ran into a former supervisor on campus one day. She mentioned that there was a residence director position becoming available in the spring and that she would encourage me to apply. I applied, I was offered the position.

It was in graduate school that I determined that I could live out my passion for learning and development through student affairs, primarily through housing. So my official career I would say began in graduate school as a residence director providing direct supervision for RAs in one of the residence halls on campus. And then from there, my career has taken the path that it has taken.

In terms of my degree, my degree has been very helpful to me as a student affairs practitioner and educator. Being an English major helps you to appreciate and become comfortable with the interplay between the front stage and the backstage as I call it, that how individuals show up in the foreground or on the front stage is often influenced by backstage experiences and narratives. And for me, an effective educator is one who can ask the right questions to gain an understanding of the backstage narrative and experiences that are influencing how one is showing up in the foreground. That's been very helpful for me in my supervisory relationships, conduct, as well as just providing overall support.

Often people will show up in ways that make us uncomfortable so someone is upset or angry, but usually recognizing anger is a manifestation of fear. And so getting an understanding of some of what we don't know or don't see helps us to recognize what is the source behind why you're showing up how you're showing up? So it's less about how you're showing up and identifying the source so that you can be an active advocate and support and resource for that student or staff member in the moment. I still rely upon the skills that I gained in graduate school. Again, constructing arguments, but also asking questions to get a better understanding of what's beneath the surface that I don't know and can't see. That's a skill I use today as a seasoned professional in higher education and in student affairs, and housing and residence life.

John Boccacino:



I want to give you an opportunity to go a little bit beyond the job. We know you're passionate about lifelong learning, being a student affairs practitioner. What are some ways you spend your free time? Any hobbies you like to use to occupy your time?

Steve Herndon:

I love to cook. Learned to cook for my mom, learned to cook out of necessity. But what became a necessary skill has become something that I love. I love to cook. I love to bake, not as much as I love to cook because I could be a little bit more liberal with seasoning and recipe construction with cooking. You have to be a lot more precise with baking, but I enjoy both. I love tennis. I love college basketball. I love to read. And just love to spend time just relaxing.

I'm an introvert, so people have mistakenly, I think when they see how passionate I can become about certain topics. And I genuinely love people and love to interact with people. I'm intrigued by people. I'm intrigued by their narratives, their stories, what makes them who they are. I think in many ways, sometimes people mistake that as I'm an extrovert. No, I'm an introvert, and so I just like to relax. It's why my home has to be very comfortable for me because I need it to be a place of relaxation. It allows me to replenish my energy, but it just allows me to feel comfortable. I don't need a lot to entertain myself, just the comfort of home thinking [inaudible 00:31:44]. But those are some of my passions and some of the things that I have loved all of my life and continue to love.

John Boccacino:

Is there a favorite dish you like to cook? And is there a favorite restaurant in central New York so far you've gone to?

Steve Herndon:

I have not found a favorite restaurant in central New York yet, as I'm still exploring. What I love to cook, anything that's related to southern food, soul food. It's what I grew up on. It's what I watched. My mom, who was a tremendous cook, as our home was the central hub for holidays, particularly Thanksgiving. I watched all the preparation, enjoyed the food. And so anything that's southern or soul food, I love.

My favorite meal and one that I often cook, like if I were to invite you to my home, we start with my favorite meal, sort of the foundational meal would be fried chicken, collard greens, candied yams or any kind of sweet potato dish, and macaroni and cheese, and then some kind of bread, most likely corn and something to drink. It used to be sweet tea, but I don't drink sweet tea anymore. I'm diabetic, so I have to watch what I eat and drink. That would be the meal. And probably some kind of cobbler for dessert, any fruit-based cobbler. I'm more savory than sweet, so I definitely lean in that direction, but also recognize that dessert is a critical part of the meal and completes the meal.

John Boccacino:

Steve, you're really pulling out the taste buds here in me making me satiate and dream about the lunch break coming up here shortly. It sounds like a delicious meal you could cook and prepare. And just the fact I wanted to give you that opportunity because people need to know that you're more than just this incredible resource, this incredible thought leader when it comes to student affairs and residential living. I have thoroughly enjoyed getting to meet you and tell your story here on the podcast. He is Steve Herndon, the new Assistant Vice President for Student Living here at Syracuse University. Steve, keep up the great work and best of luck.

Steve Herndon:

Thank you. Thank you, my friend, and I enjoy it. Thank you again for the opportunity for me to share student living story, but to share my story as well.

John Boccacino:

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. My name is John Boccacino, signing off for the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast.