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## Case Study: Residential Life Before and During a Pandemic

### **Introduction:**

Because the COVID-19 pandemic is particularly disastrous for groups of people in high-contact living situations, UC Berkeley Residential Life has tested the limits of its traditional organizing system while housing well over a thousand students in the 2020-2021 school year. Residential Life is a prime example of a complex organizing system that exists to ensure the holistic wellness of Cal students who choose to live on campus. In order to enable interactions that facilitate this well-being, Residential Life arranges human, physical, and digital resources according to organizing principles centered around safety and community. This case study explores how the Residential Life organizing system has shifted from its traditional structure during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In order to ensure that students have their basic needs met and are supported in their academic, mental, social, and emotional health, Residential Life retains an internal organizational structure of professional and student staff that partners with Cal Housing, Cal Dining, and University Health Services (UHS). To highlight both the advantages and disadvantages of Residential Life's emergency response at a feasible scale, this case study will look at the operations of one residential life unit. A unit is a group of geographically proximal campus-owned or affiliated buildings that are supervised by the same professional and student staff team. The operations highlighted in this study are 1) living space 2) dining 3) social connection 4) policy enforcement and 5) COVID response.

### **What is being organized?**

Two main categories of resources, human and physical, can be analyzed at more granular levels within each operational domain and contrasted based on the pre-pandemic and mid-pandemic version of the organizing system. A resource that transcends domain boundaries is digital communication via email, text, and Slack. Digital resources are transmitted between staff and residents, staff and staff, departments and residents, and departments and staff. Thus, this system is classified as Institutional Organization and Classification.

**Living space** requires the physical organization of rooms, shared floor bathrooms, and lounges within each building as well as the arrangement of the residents who inhabit those spaces. A crucial component of space management is maintenance, which requires the organization of human resources such as custodians, maintenance workers, and front desk staff. **Dining** requires the organization of human resources such as cooks and servers as well as the organization of ingredients for each meal and the eventual meals themselves. **Social connection** requires the organization of residents who live on the same floor as well as the management of money in order to purchase items for programs to bring residents together. These purchased items must then be organized by Resident Assistants. **Policy enforcement** requires the

organization of Resident Assistants who serve on 12 hour overnight duty shifts as well as the Resident Director on Duty who oversees these shifts. The cellphones used for calls while on duty must be organized in addition to the keys used to help locked out residents.

While the domains described above apply to both pre-pandemic and mid-pandemic operations, **COVID case response** requires the physical resources necessary for twice weekly covid tests for all residents, identification of residents who have tested positive for coronavirus and all of their close contacts, physical spaces for isolation/quarantine, and staff to oversee the operations of the isolation/quarantine buildings.

### **Why is it being organized?**

In the pre-pandemic world, the purpose of the Residential Life system was to maximize all forms of contact between students, staff, and resources in order to build social connections during a challenging period of early adulthood. However, the pandemic forced Residential Life to shift its priorities and minimize physical contact between all people involved in the system. Thus, this new system is organized to prevent transmission of COVID from residents to residents as well as from residents to staff and vice versa. This intentional arrangement enables interactions between residents and living spaces, food, and each other in ways that avoid physical contact, shared aerosol space, and communal surfaces. The deliberate placement of live-in student staff on every other floor enables closer interactions between residents and staff that ensure the policies which help hold the organizing system together are followed. However, these goals are in stark opposition to Residential Life's usual commitment to connecting people through physical proximity and in-person events, and this creates tension and dysfunction as resources are being rapidly rearranged in line with the changing state of global, local, and campus affairs.






### **How much is it being organized?**

While physical safety is always the baseline goal of the Residential Life system, it directly competes with the principle of maximizing human contact during the COVID era. As a result, secondary organizing principles play a critical role in determining the tradeoffs inherent in designing the system, especially during a pandemic. Some of these secondary organizing principles are ensuring students' basic needs are met in a timely fashion, supporting the social and emotional well-being of students and staff, and minimizing the organization's liability for COVID-19 outbreaks.

The challenge with mobilizing a residential COVID-19 response lies in the intense granularity with which the resources must be organized in order to enable physically safe interactions while also satisfying the demands of the secondary organizing principles. Because science and policy change rapidly in response to new knowledge, University Health Services makes policy that Residential Life is expected to enforce immediately. This means that digital communications are organized by the minute so that Residential Life staff are typically given at least an hour of notice before policy changes are announced to residents. Likewise, dining

resources are spatially organized by which dining halls they are allocated to and then further organized according to which dishes they will be used to make. During times of particularly high COVID case count called surges, these dishes are assembled into to-go packages and placed outside for residents to pick up at their leisure. The original implementation of this system scheduled residents in 10 minute blocks to coordinate arrival of the boxes and ensure no close contact during pick-ups, but this system quickly failed due to its inflexibility to accommodate for residents' schedules. Residents themselves are organized individually by University Health Services based on their most recent COVID test result. If they test positive, the resident and all of their floormates are sent to an isolation space that further coordinates each minute of the residents' interactions outside of their room. With such a large number of students and such granular organization of their movements, this system creates lots of friction as maximizing physical safety results in procedures that are more time consuming, socially isolating, and require extra communication with each campus partner.

## RES LIFE EVOLUTION

DOMAIN	BEFORE 2020: MAXIMIZE CONTACT	DURING 2020: MINIMIZE CONTACT
 <b>LIVING SPACE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-26-39 PEOPLE PER FLOOR</li> <li>-2-3 ROOMMATES</li> <li>-HALL/FLOOR LOUNGES</li> <li>-SHARED BATHROOMS</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-8-11 PEOPLE PER FLOOR</li> <li>-SINGLE ROOMS, NO GUESTS</li> <li>-LOUNGES CLOSED</li> <li>-SHARED BATHROOM (ADJUSTED DURING SURGE TIMES)</li> </ul>
 <b>DINING</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-CROWDED, INDOOR DINING</li> <li>-SELF SERVE OPTIONS</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-TO-GO DINING</li> <li>-OUTDOOR PICKUP IN SURGES</li> <li>-PRE-PACKAGED MEAL OPTIONS</li> </ul>
 <b>SOCIAL</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-HALL/FLOOR INDOOR EVENTS</li> <li>-SHARED MEALS</li> <li>-GUESTS</li> <li>-1:1 MEETINGS</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-VIRTUAL EVENTS ONLY</li> <li>-HOUSING BUBBLES</li> <li>-NO GUESTS</li> </ul>
 <b>POLICY ENFORCEMENT</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>RA'S ENFORCE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-NOISE</li> <li>-SUBSTANCE USE</li> <li>-ROOMMATE CONFLICT</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>RA'S ENFORCE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-MASKS</li> <li>-DISTANCING</li> <li>-GUESTS (NOISE/SUBSTANCE)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
 <b>COVID RESPONSE</b>	-N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-2X WEEKLY TESTING</li> <li>-ENTIRE FLOOR ISOLATED</li> <li>-SEQUESTERS AFTER BREAKS</li> </ul>

### When is it being organized?

The organization of living spaces through assigning students to their rooms and hiring staff members is done before students arrive on campus. In a pre-pandemic year, Residential Life

would change very little over the course of the year, as there exists a standard design for the system that is followed every year. However, given the volatility of the pandemic world, dining, social connection, policy enforcement, and COVID-19 protocols shift dramatically at any given moment depending on campus case count. As a result, the system is being rapidly maintained as students were moved to isolation spaces, dining routines were changed, and Resident Assistants altered their behavior to minimize resident contact on duty shifts.

**How or by whom is it being organized?**

Residential Life is part of the Division of Student Affairs and is thus organized by the staff and policies of that department as well as campus administration. The flowchart below reflects each level of the Residential Life organizing hierarchy, with solid black arrows indicating who organizes each subsequent human or physical resource. One of the biggest tensions in the pandemic version of the system is that the “who” organizing it are not the “who” whose daily lives are most affected by its arrangement. These new pandemic lines of organizing power are represented by the dotted lines.

Normally, University Health Services interacts with Residential Life infrequently, but during the pandemic they dictated both university-wide and residential policies. For example, if UHS states that a student should never be in the same indoor space as another student, all other campus partners must arrange their constituent parts to conform to this guideline. In addition, UHS is the only campus department allowed to access a student’s COVID test result, as this is sensitive medical information protected under the HIPAA policy. If UHS notifies a student of a positive test result, it could take hours for that students’ floormates to learn they’ve been exposed through the formal communication channels. Meanwhile, UHS then gains the power to rearrange where exposed students live, what they eat, and which daily activities they can partake in. In effect, UHS begins designing their own COVID-exposed organizing system with specific resources and interactions in mind.

