

Learning to Lead: Residence-hall program emphasizes getting involved

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The door was covered with black streamers and spider-web chunks of cotton. Inside were more black and orange streamers in the narrow, dimly lit hallway and a room full of ornamental gravestones and pumpkins.

This wasn't a haunted house, though, and the comfortable couches gave a hint to what the room actually was: the University of Illinois at Springfield's newly decorated and revamped Leadership for Life Service Wing in the Lincoln Residence Hall, which went all out in October in preparation for Halloween.

More colleges nationwide are beginning to offer specialized living communities such as the LLSW for students. At UIS, the wing emphasizes leadership and giving back to the community.

"I was very excited, a little apprehensive," said Kelly Thompson, director of the university's Volunteer and Civic Engagement Service, who set up the wing. "You can learn a lot about yourself through service."

The wing is one of two at UIS focused on special interests and holds about 30 students this year.

"This is something UIS is just getting involved in," she said.

Letters explaining the wing and applications were sent to all incoming UIS students. Representatives for the wing also had a table set up during preview days, when students could get information about the different campus groups in which they could participate.

The LLSW requires that students perform 30 hours of community service every semester, which many students say they find easy because the wing is so active. Students recently held a Trick-or-Treat for Canned Goods event, collecting items for the Central Illinois Food Bank. They reached their goal of more than 2,000 pounds of food so quickly that they decided to double it.

Students also have helped out at St. John's Breadline, M.E.R.C.Y. House and the Springfield Overflow Shelter.

Recently, a few students paid to make candy bags for the children at St. John's Children's Hospital.

Charles Olivier, the sophomore resident assistant and one of the students who made the candy bags, was a part of the Service Learning Wing last year before it was developed into the Leadership for Life Service Wing for this year's freshmen.

"This year has been amazing. Now there have been so many opportunities and it's so much more fun," he said.

Many of the freshmen say they are glad the wing is so busy. It has contributed to a more active first year because the students volunteer both on and off campus. It's also a great way to make new friends, they say.

"It's a great way to get involved on campus and in campus life," said Mark Frakes, a freshman who lives in the wing. Also, he said, "It pays off. We've become very close-knit and I would recommend it to any incoming freshman."

Lawrence Salley, a freshman, said he joined the wing because he "never really did any volunteer work, and I wanted to see what it was like."

"I wanted to make a difference."

He said he quickly acquired the name "Preacher Boy" from his peers for his love of gospel music, although he doesn't consider himself very religious.

Now, he is not only a top contributor for volunteer hours, he also is involved in the Midwest Campus Compact Citizen-Scholar AmeriCorps program. The program requires 300 hours a semester, but he hasn't had a problem meeting that obligation yet.

The M3C is a program for students and is offered at only seven Illinois colleges, including UIS. Though many members of M3C live in the LLSW, it's not required.

Another LLSW freshman, Xuan Pham, is involved in M3C. Her favorite place to put in service hours is the Hospital Sisters Mission Outreach in Springfield, where volunteers sort and package donated medical supplies to be sent to other countries. Many doctors invest their time in it too, and she

thinks she has found her calling there.

"I want to be a doctor and then go to Africa to get my degree," Xuan said.

Moving with her family from Vietnam to Chicago at the age of 14 was hard for Xuan, but she has found some thoughtful and helpful friends at UIS.

"When I need someone to talk to, they're always there to listen to me," she said. "They are like brother and sister to me."

Mark agreed.

"I made more lasting friendships with the wing than if I had been somewhere else," he said.

Allison Hester, another LLSW freshman, said she was welcomed to the wing with a big party thrown for all the residents who had birthdays in August.

"I still have the birthday card they signed," she said.

Allison's favorite event so far has been the Special Olympics Bowling Tournament. It was the first event of the year, on the weekend before classes started for the semester. The wing had a good turnout of helpers who assisted the children, gave out medals and took responsibility for anyone who needed help.

"I needed to get out of the dorm room and it turned out to be really, truly amazing," she said.

Afterward, she realized her views on helping out had changed.

"One person volunteering actually does make a difference," she said.

That's one of the reasons the wing puts so much emphasis on volunteering to become a leader. Some students have had many other volunteering experiences before coming to UIS.

But the wing is dedicated to showing them that leadership isn't all about commanding others — leadership is made up of many parts.

"I'm really proud of all the residents in general," said Charles, who credits the wing with giving him a clearer focus in life.

"I knew I wanted to be an accountant," he said. "Whatever I decide to do, I'll place an emphasis on giving back."

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