

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 experience 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 sort of values on campus, 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 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. 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 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 building. 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 so much 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's been six months on July 23rd, in my almost six months here, I have recognized that I made a wise decision 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 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, 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 all aspects of their experience at SU, whether that's in the classroom or beyond the classroom. So to have the opportunity to create structure 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 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 residential communities, as well as the supervisors and leadership to whom they report for north campus where our residence halls are located, south campus where our apartments are located, and 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,

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 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 wanted 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 saw an opportunity to build relationships there. I think there 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 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 providing a more accurate understanding of the department's identity, but also the potential for our contribution 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 there actually a year ago as a consultant for student living. And a year later, here I am as the AV had already [1 Tw 7.26 .approach, Tj 0 Tw 13.5.2] nial

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 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 RA's here, the

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 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 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, 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 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



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 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 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 a 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 debating, 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 [00:27:29]. To be a lawyer it's a very expensive commitment. So as I graduated, I was an undergraduate student at North Carolina



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 I 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 me as I'm an extrovert. No, I'm an introvert, and so I just like to relax. I like why my home has to be very comfortable for me because I need 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 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 foundation 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. I'm 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 who 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 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.