WHAT’S IN A NAME?

The Difference Between “Dorms” and “Residence Halls”

If you refer to the residence halls as “dorms” in front of a Housing and Residential Education staff member, you are likely to be told that the facilities are “residence halls,” not “dorms.” In fact, they might share with you that the word “dorm” is an ugly word to a Student Affairs professional. But isn’t this a matter of semantics? Does it really make a difference what they are called?

The dictionary defines a “dorm or dormitory” as “a room for sleeping, especially a large room containing a number of beds.” It defines a residence as “a building used as a home.” Just as more occurs in a home than just sleeping, more also occurs in a residence hall. The professional and semi-professional staffs of the residence halls provide programming, tutoring, socializing, counseling, emotional support, discipline, leadership skills acquisition and a myriad of opportunities to grow and develop. Over the years, residence hall staff have come up with a number of acronyms to illustrate the difference. For example, “DORM” stands for “Dismal Ordinary Room of Mine.” “RESIDENCE HALL” stands for “Really Exciting Sensational Individually-Designed Enlightening New College Experience that Houses an Abundance of Life and Love.” See? Doesn’t that sound better?

There is an old story about a wealthy jeweler on a cruise. She compliments the captain on his wonderful “boat.” The Captain explains that it is not a boat; it is a SHIP. However, over the next few days, the woman continues to refer to the vessel as a boat. While at dinner that night the Captain, not the most patient of people, finally says to her, “Madam, if you are going to continue to call this a boat, then I must counter by calling those expensive pearls you are wearing “beads” and that fine steak you are eating as just a piece of meat.” While all ships are, in fact, boats, all boats are not ships. The boat goes from one place to another on the water. There is much more occurring on a ship. All pearls may be nominally beads, but not all beads are pearls, and all steaks are meat but not all meats are steak. Ships, pearls and steaks are the higher, more special versions of those items, as are residence halls. A residence hall affects the lives and personal development of the students who live there. Learning occurs outside of the classroom. Living on campus in a residence hall has the potential to impact the student, both academically and personally, more than anything else in the University with the exception of the primary curriculum system. That’s why Top Universities such as Delaware State University have residence halls, NOT DORMS.