



Tanna Kinnaman/DN

Jeniffer Schmidt, a junior biochemistry major, moves into her room on the seventh floor of Abel Hall Monday.

NO VACANCY

Residence halls feeling the crunch

By Doug Peters
Senior Editor

Three years ago, UNL housing administrators found themselves in a bad situation — too many rooms, not enough students.

Today, they face the flip side of that dilemma — where to put the increasing number of students who have flocked to the University of Nebraska Lincoln's residence halls.

The residence hall occupancy has been increasing steadily since the early 1990s, when the halls were below capacity. This year's increase of about 550 students has taken administrators by surprise and left them searching for solutions.

"If somebody a year ago would've told me, we'd be 500 or 550 up this year, I'd have laughed at them," said Doug Zatechka, housing director.

But it happened. In fact, residence hall occupancy has increased by more than 1,250 students in the last three years.

The latest increase has put about 400 students in temporary rooms, Zatechka said. In addition, all guest rooms have been eliminated, and about 200 upperclass students waiting for rooms may have to find off-campus housing.

About 270 students have been assigned temporarily to triple rooms, Zatechka said, and about 125 students will live in residence hall lounges.

Students in lounges and triple rooms will be given priority as rooms open up because of cancellations or attrition, he said. Housing officials estimate that 40 to 100 spots may open up during the first week of classes because of no-shows.

Because additional spots will open throughout the fall semester as students leave school, move into Greek houses or off-campus housing, Zatechka said he hoped to have all students placed in permanent rooms by the end of this semester.

The housing crunch may inconvenience some students, he said, but conditions for students in temporary rooms would be comparable to those for students in permanent rooms.

Almost one-third of all students who are placed in triple rooms choose to stay there, Zatechka said, even if other rooms open up.

Zatechka said students had been placed in

lounges at three different times during his 18-year tenure at UNL.

Triple rooms, he said, have been used every year since he arrived at UNL.

Keeping the halls full has some obvious drawbacks, he said. In the past, students could make room changes with few problems.

This year, that will be different. Room changes will be difficult, if not impossible, at least for a while. That, Zatechka said, is the biggest problem facing students in the housing crunch.

What happens, for example, if enrollment continues to swell?

"Somehow," Zatechka said, "we're going to have to find more beds."

One option would be reducing the number of single rooms, which are popular with upperclass and graduate students, Zatechka said. Another would be to move up the application deadline for upperclass students.

Both solutions would reduce the number of upperclass students in the residence halls, a number housing has worked for three years to increase. But freshmen are required to live on campus, so upperclass students will be forced off-campus if enrollment continues to increase.

He said now was not the time to make decisions based on future enrollment predictions.

"We are not making any plans of what we want to change, and what we don't want to change ... " he said. "I want to do that in conjunction with the students and the Residence Hall Association."

Despite the drawbacks, Zatechka said, full residence halls actually benefit students. Full residence halls mean lower room and board rates. Students have consistently said low cost was a major reason they chose to live in the halls, he said.

UNL already has the lowest room and board rates in the Big Eight, Zatechka said. Compared to UNL's peer group of institutions, rates are an average of \$1,400 less a year.

Despite the benefits, Zatechka said it could be difficult to find a balance between reasonable occupancy and reasonable rates — especially if the trends of rising occupancy and the popularity of residence-hall living continue.

"I don't think we'll ever hit it perfectly," he said. "I don't think any school ever does."

UNL housing campaign caters to upperclassmen

By Doug Peters
Senior Editor

A UNL housing campaign launched three years ago to bring upperclassmen back to campus has helped pack halls to capacity — and beyond.

Though hundreds of students are in temporary rooms and hundreds more are on waiting lists, housing administrators hold on to their successful strategy.

In the residence hall world, says associate housing director Glen Schumann, too many is a heck of a lot better than too few.

Just three years ago, the flow of students into the halls wasn't even a trickle.

Administrators struggled to fill the halls to keep room and board rates down.

Their solution was to bring older students back to the halls through a large-scale advertising campaign, promises of low rates for returning students and new services that cater to upperclass students.

It worked. Nearly a third of this year's 550-student occupancy increase is a result of upperclass students returning to the halls. Many more were turned away or put on waiting lists.

This turnaround has pleased administrators, but it hasn't necessarily surprised them.

Faced with a steady exodus of students in the early 1990s, administrators were forced to re-evaluate the way the residence halls operated. They gathered student input and addressed the wants and needs of their customers, Schumann said.

By conducting satisfaction surveys, holding open forums and having informal talks with students, officials found that cost, privacy and convenience were the main factors in

bringing older students back to the halls, he said. Schumann added that cost had been the most important of those factors.

Administrators then launched a promotion asking students to return to the halls and promising to keep rates down.

"In the past three years, so long as you live with us continuously," Schumann said, "your charges won't go up unless brand new services are introduced."

New services, such as rooms being wired for Internet access, have increased the costs, he said, but only by small amounts. In other words, students who have lived in the residence halls since 1992-93 are paying for room and board based on 3-year-old rates.

In addition to holding down costs, housing officials developed upperclass halls in the Cather-Pound complex. All the rooms in the complex were turned into single rooms because privacy was a big concern for older students, Schumann said.

Housing officials also took steps to make residence hall living more convenient for students, he said. Cafeteria hours were adjusted, Schumann said. "Grab-and-go" breakfasts were made available and some smoke-free floors were established.

The recent influx of students into the residence halls may require some changes in the way the halls operate, Schumann said, but housing will continue to cater to the wants and needs of the students.

"We need to fine tune our program every year," he said.

Without fine tuning, Schumann said, past problems will return.

"We learned something the hard way. We were in a downward spiral. We don't want that to happen again."