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<th><strong>Name</strong></th>
<th>Christian J. Barber</th>
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<td><strong>Thesis Title</strong></td>
<td>The Importance of Student Affairs to the College Experience</td>
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<td><strong>Thesis Director</strong></td>
<td>Gregg Amore, Ed.D. (Psychology)</td>
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Introduction and Purpose

The task that lies me before at this moment is one that has been residing in the back of my mind for the past three years, occasionally bringing itself to my attention and reminding me of its inevitability. The phobia of my honors thesis is not a result of its intimidating length, but rather the need to select one topic to focus countless hours of energy on writing. I knew from the moment I learned of this paper during my first year at DeSales University that when the time came to create my thesis, I wanted to focus it on one aspect of my college education that has not only positively affected me to a great extent but one that will also be a guiding force as I venture out into the world on May 17th, 2008. After a great deal of thought and consideration, it was undeniable to me that my involvement in the various areas of Student Affairs during my time at DSU is what has truly had the most lasting and significant influence on me as a student, a moral human being, and a practicing Catholic.

My intention for this thesis is to provide an in-depth look at several offices that fall under the auspices of Student Affairs and examine how they impact the lives of students at DeSales University on a daily basis. Each of the following sections will examine how the mission and philosophy of the University and the teachings of St. Francis de Sales are reflected in the services they provide for the student body. To ensure a comprehensive and accurate look at each office, I have conducted personal interviews with various members of the professional staff who interact with students each day. Besides discussing the strong qualities of each
office and the benefits they can provide to students, this project is also intended to evaluate areas that can be improved to better meet the needs of the community. It is my hope that by reading this thesis, those who are unfamiliar with the workings of the department will gain a better understanding and deeper appreciation for the many opportunities that it provides for the student body. However, it is essential to stress the fact that it is not the intention of this thesis to undermine the paramount importance of the institution’s academic programs. Instead, it is intended to show how a student’s academic experiences can be supplemented and enhanced through the many extracurricular opportunities that exist during the thousands of hours that are not spent in an academic classroom.

Finally, I have chosen to conclude my work with a brief discussion on how my four years of college have been so immensely impacted through my involvement in the department. Not only has it given me a multitude of opportunities for personal, social, and spiritual growth, but it has also been influential in the development of my future goals and what I hope to accomplish when I become a DeSales graduate.

**Overview of Student Affairs**

While each institution of higher education has its own unique structure for its Student Affairs department, it typically consists of the many offices that comprise a college student’s “life outside the classroom.” At DeSales, the department includes the following offices:

- Campus Ministry
- “Character U” First Year Experience
The Student Affairs department is overseen directly by the Dean of Students, who works under the Vice President for Student Life. In order to effectively support the goals and philosophies of the University, the department has its own mission statement that is specially designed to enhance the educational experience of students at Desales. The mission statement lays out three specific areas of focus:

- Promoting a total campus environment that fosters the academic, spiritual, social and moral development of each student.
- Emphasizing personal responsibility, deep respect for others, leadership development, concern for the common good and service to Church and society as standards and expectations for student life.
- Developing programs, activities, practices and policies that reinforce these values and offer students opportunities for personal growth, self-assessment and success in all aspects of their lives.

According to Mrs. Linda Zerbe, the Dean of Students, the offices that comprise the Student Affairs department provide the campus community with an “education outside of the academic classroom.” She stresses the importance of always keeping in mind the teachings of St. Francis de Sales, especially his Golden Counsels, when organizing an event or program for the student body. Dean Zerbe uses the word “intentionality” to describe the purposefulness and significance of the social, spiritual, and outreach opportunities that students are presented with by the Student Affairs staff.
Just as students gain knowledge that they will carry with them through life from their countless hours of academic work, so too can they acquire qualities and character traits that will drastically influence their personhood. Zerbe credits the strong Salesian values of the University with being able to incorporate ethics and morality into the mission of the department. According to her, students who don’t take advantage of the potential for growth through leadership opportunities and opening themselves up to new experiences “do not get the total experience that DeSales University has to offer.”

When asked to envision the growth and changes that the department will likely experience in future years, Dean Zerbe is excited to work towards a closer collaboration with the DeSales faculty. With the recent promotion of Father Christopher Hudgins, OSFS, to the position of Assistant Dean of Students, the department hopes to make a proactive attempt to collaborate with the academic departments on future programs. Dean Zerbe also noted that the Student Affairs staff will continue to adapt to the continuously changing needs and interests of the student body. As the name implies, the department exists to make the college experience of each student as enjoyable and educational as possible and will continue to ensure that happens.

With heavy involvement in all areas of Student Affairs, Dean Zerbe has experience working with nearly every student population on campus. However, it has been her experience as an advisor for Character U that has been most rewarding for her. Through her weekly meetings with her small group of Peer
Mentors, she has been able to “get to know the students on a personal level and really connect with what is going on in the lives of students at DeSales.” When asked what one aspect of her position she would like to improve, Dean Zerbe once again mentioned her strong desire to establish a stronger working relationship with members of the academic staff. She hopes to see more faculty members getting involved in various social and “outside the classroom education” aspects of students’ lives as well as directly involve her department in future endeavors of the academic departments. Dean Zerbe believes that through strong and effective communication and collaboration, both groups will be able to provide students with a more comprehensive experience during their time at DSU.

**Campus Ministry**

One of the principal objectives of the University is to provide its students, whatever their religious affiliation may be, with opportunities to strengthen their faith and spiritual life. Obviously the teachings of St. Francis de Sales are at the forefront of many programs and services that the Campus Ministry staff hosts for the University community. Magdalene Riggins, Assistant Director of Campus Ministry, says that she and Father John Hanley, OSFS, Director of Campus Ministry, use their office’s mission statement as a guide for meeting the spiritual needs of students. According to the mission statement, “the gentle spirit and practical teachings of St. Francis de Sales pervade every activity of Campus Ministry, helping each student to ‘Live Jesus’ in his or her daily life.”
As a part of the core education curriculum, all undergraduate students at DeSales are required to complete a minimum of two theology courses and one Value Seminar in order to receive their respective degree. These classes provide students of all religious affiliations with a better understanding of the Catholic Church while assisting those who practice Catholicism in gaining a deeper appreciation for their faith. Students also have the opportunity to continue their acquisition of knowledge through involvement in the many services that Campus Ministry offers. The office, which coordinates Sunday masses and various prayer services throughout the academic year, encourages students to get directly involved as a lector, greeter, or Eucharistic Minister. There are also plenty of more informal opportunities for spiritual development, such as prayer and discussion groups, weekend retreats, Helping Hands, and the annual Locks of Love hair drive.

Involvement in any of these programs allows students to “grow in their spirituality and faith, which should be a natural part of the college experience” according to Mrs. Riggins. She emphasizes that college is a time for young adults to ask questions, explore, and learn about themselves and their faith. The office strives to make DeSales a home for students during their time here, assisting them transition to college life during their first few weeks on campus as well as helping to guide them in a direction that will permit future spiritual development after graduation. Mrs. Riggins is pleased to see the weekly masses on campus become more like an actual parish, characterized by a sense of community and shared values among those in attendance. She also highlighted the tremendous success of
the recent addition of weekly collections that gather funds for local charities. The fall 2007 semester, for example, concluded with well over $1,000 collected through the generosity of student attendees.

Since there are many students who are not of the Catholic faith, as well as many who are but do not practice on a regular basis, the Campus Ministry staff is often challenged to reach out to those who are unfamiliar with what their office has to offer. Mrs. Riggins, who serves as a professional staff advisor for the program, believes that the implementation of Character U has been a very effective means of connecting with a new population of students. As a result of the influx of interest in Campus Ministry events, the office has coordinated a multitude of new programs such as spiritual chats which focus on the role that faith plays in the various majors of students on campus. While she is delighted to see many new faces, Mrs. Riggins stresses the importance of respecting each student’s “freedom and individual choices” while maintaining a “delicate balance” between being welcoming and overbearing. Very appropriately, the office takes their philosophy on this issue from St. Francis de Sales who said “do everything through love, nothing through force.”

With each passing year, the office of Campus Ministry continues to change to best serve the spiritual needs of the campus community. Mrs. Riggins stated that one of the most enjoyable parts of her position here at DeSales is getting to know students on a personal level. She finds it immensely rewarding to see how a student’s faith and spiritual life can develop tremendously during his or her time here. Besides continuing to provide services to students interested in Campus
Ministry, Mrs. Riggins hopes to take proactive steps to eliminate the “stigma” that she feels is occasionally associated with the office. She wants the entire campus community, students and staff, to view the office as a resource for all people, regardless of where they currently are in their spiritual journey.

Character U: The First-Year Experience

Although it was nearly four years ago, I can remember like it was yesterday the anxiety and uncertainty that clouded my brain as I prepared to move to DeSales University and begin my first semester of college. I soon learned that my feelings were shared by many of my classmates and college peers in general. It is undeniable that all young people, at least to an extent, will have some difficulty transitioning to the drastically unique lifestyle of a college student. It is with this in mind that the Student Affairs department introduced Character U, the first-year experience program at DeSales University, in fall 2006.

As with all aspects of student life at DSU, the teachings of St. Francis de Sales play a prominent role in the program, specifically his Golden Counsels. Each month, a particular character trait is carefully chosen to assist with what students typically experience throughout their first year. For example, patience is the focus of September, as students progressively become acquainted with campus and develop a sense of comfort and belonging in the community. The program is carefully designed to provide each and every student with the resources and
guidance needed to not only make a smooth transition into the campus community, but to excel during their future years at DeSales.

The Character U program, which falls under the auspices of the Counseling Center, is overseen by the Coordinator of the First-Year Experience, Ms. Wendy Krisak, a graduate assistant for the Character U program, Mr. Chad Serfass, and the Director of Student Activities & Orientation, Ms. Marcie Tom. The structure separates the approximately 400 first-year students into eight “Pods”, which are led by one PACE peer educator, four upperclassmen peer mentors, and two professional staff advisors. Each student leader is assigned ten first-year students with whom they will work throughout the entire academic year. Prior to their arrival on campus in August, the freshmen class will be in contact with their peer mentor and ten teammates over the course of the summer via e-mail, phone calls, postcards, etc. This way, students have already begun establishing friendships and making connections before they even step foot on campus for the orientation program.

As previously mentioned, the Character U program has not yet even completed its second year, but it has already had an unparalleled impact on the campus community in terms of student involvement and participation. The Character U staff coordinates monthly speakers and “Pod Challenge” events which reflect the character trait of the month. In addition, the program provides encouragement and incentives for first-year students to experience the diverse assortment of social and educational opportunities that other departments on campus make available to them.
Much like the approach taken by the Campus Ministry staff, graduate assistant Chad Serfass views the program as an additional resource for first-year students to make the most of their college experience without encroaching on their freedom and individual choices. He does however, see it as an opportunity for young people to “step out of their comfort zone” and experience something totally new and unfamiliar that they otherwise may have never done. Mr. Serfass also acknowledges the social benefits of being active in Character U, specifically the opportunity for new students to “hone their social skills and abilities to interact with peers and co-workers later in life.” When asked if students who are uninvolved with the Student Affairs department have an “incomplete” experience at DeSales, he replied with the following analogy: “The ‘complete college experience’ is much like a fine sports car. If everything is running smoothly you will get great gas mileage, years of enjoyment, and even turn some heads. College is not much different. If a student only has the academic side, then they are letting the air out of the tires on the other side of the car and it will not perform to its total potential.”

As mentioned, Character U is less than two years old and still has a great deal of modifying and growing to do. Nonetheless, it has already become a part of the culture at DeSales and has improved by leaps and bounds over its inaugural year. Mr. Serfass is excited to see how the program will change in coming years, specifically the expansion of the program to include other departments on campus. At this time, completion or incompletion of the program will only be recorded on a student’s co-curricular transcript. It is the hopes of the staff that in future years
Character U will collaborate with academics to make the program a more comprehensive experience for first-year students.

**Counseling Center and Student Development**

For most young people, their college years are a time of great academic learning, personal growth, and positive experiences. For some students however, these years may include some hardships and difficulties that hinder them from taking advantage of all that the University has to offer and becoming the person they aspire to be upon their graduation day. In order to effectively support and help students through their personal struggles, DeSales employs two full-time professionally trained counselors to assist students with their needs. The office is overseen by the Director of Counseling and Student Development, Dr. Gregg Amore, and the Assistant Director of Counseling, Ms. Wendy Krisak, who also serves as the Coordinator of the First-Year Experience. In addition to the professional staff, the Counseling Center also employs a team of eight specially trained upperclassmen students called PACE (Peers Advising Counseling Educating). The programs and services of the Counseling Center are designed to not only provide adequate assistance to those dealing with various emotional or psychological issues, but to also incorporate proactive outreach to promote physical and mental wellbeing among the campus community.

Unlike some other areas of the Student Affairs department, there is often a stigma or shame that is attributed to someone who participates in therapy or any
sort of treatment from the Counseling Center. This is an issue that the staff has addressed head-on in recent years by incorporating student development into the objectives of the office. Dr. Amore, who currently oversees all programs that focus on student development, stresses that there are benefits for all students to utilize the Counseling Center’s services, regardless of what is occurring in their personal lives. A firm advocate for the teachings of St. Francis de Sales, Dr. Amore places great value on the incorporation of character development into the college experience. Besides the Character U program, the Counseling Center provides guidance and opportunities for students to develop “important life skills like self-confidence, leadership, and effective communication.” Dr. Amore’s role in the department is to ensure that the various opportunities for self-development that DeSales students have, such as Character U and New Student Orientation, give them the tools to “improve the quality of their college experience and create a more positive outlook on their future.”

For students who encounter difficulties that may become detrimental to their wellbeing or the wellbeing of others in the community, they are encouraged to meet with a staff member from the Counseling Center to explore their issues and pursue a remedy. Whether a student is experiencing personal (relationship difficulties, homesickness, depression, etc.), educational (time management issues, poor study habits, etc.), or career-related (unsure of what major to choose, anxiety about graduating, etc.) issues, the office staff is able to provide confidential and compassionate guidance to assist in seeking a resolution to his or her difficulties.
Rather than simply give them a “cure” as a doctor would give an ill patient medication, the counselor’s goal is to impart knowledge and insight to students and serve as a guide in helping them solve their own problems. According to Ms. Krisak, doing this will “assist students in becoming better prepared for their journey through life.” By following the philosophy of Christian Humanism, the staff is able to provide each student with the care and compassion that all individuals deserve. She also mentioned the importance of “emotional intelligence,” a quality which allows people to better understand the cause of their feelings, how to effectively cope with them, and what steps to follow to eliminate unpleasant emotions.

Just as Dr. Amore stressed the importance of reaching out to the entire campus community through student development, Ms. Krisak also emphasized the importance of the staff’s proactive attempts to establish a relationship with the student body and provide educational services while eliminating the stigma that people attribute to those who seek counseling services. For example, each year the Counseling Center hosts events like the Wellness Fair, depression screenings, eating disorder screenings, and the Great American Smokeout in conjunction with the Health Center staff.

Working to ensure the health and happiness of each student at DeSales is of paramount importance to the Counseling Center staff. Ms. Krisak aims to create a “sense of home” for the students and provide them all those same comforts. In addition to the many previously mentioned programs overseen by the Counseling
Center’s professional staff, the student employees that comprise the PACE team are yet another source for student’s to receive education and assistance with any sort of wellness issues that they may encounter.

Established in fall 2004, the PACE team includes 8 students who are carefully nominated and chosen by faculty and staff to become Certified Peer Educators through the Bacchus Network. The team provides an alternate source of support for students who may not feel comfortable meeting with an adult counselor. PACE has also established its presence on campus through programs that educate the community on topics relevant to college students, such as eating disorders, sexual health, internet safety, and the potential dangers of alcohol use. In addition to working with the DeSales community, the PACE team has reached out to the surrounding area in a variety of ways, including bi-annual workshops for high school peer educators, a charity walk to raise awareness and funds for organizations that work with victims of sexual assault called “Walk a Mile in Her Shoes,” and collaborative efforts with the Coalition for a Smoke-Free Valley. PACE has been recognized for its accomplishments by the Bacchus Network with awards for Outstanding Chapter and Outstanding Affiliate at both the national and regional levels over the past three years and continues to work to make the DeSales community a healthy and happy place for all of its members.
Center for Service and Social Justice

One area of the Student Affairs department at DeSales that strongly reflects the message and values of St. Francis is the Center for Service and Social Justice. The office gives students the opportunity to volunteer their time and energy to help those in the local community and across the globe who are in need of assistance. One of its other main goals is to create awareness about domestic and foreign issues that negatively impact the quality of life of others. Involvement in this office’s many service opportunities, which range from cooking dinner for the poor in the local community to traveling abroad to spend a semester break performing volunteer work and disaster relief.

Led by the office’s Director, Ms. Jaime Gerhart, students who are engaged in programs hosted by the Center for Service and Social Justice put the teachings and Golden Counsels of St. Francis de Sales into action. In particular, the virtues of devotion and love are made visible through the willingness of students to provide assistance to others, many of whom are complete strangers, without any sort of remuneration. As mentioned, several dozen students dedicate their winter and spring breaks to partaking in arduous volunteer work in extremely poor urban areas or places that have been impacted by natural disasters. In addition to not getting paid for their labor, each student is typically responsible for financing his or her transportation, specifically if it is an overseas excursion. The amount of love and devotion that is expressed through such actions clearly shows that the Salesian spirituality that DeSales University is founded upon, is alive and well in students.
In addition to performing service work, the office also serves as an advocate in raising awareness of ethical global issues, such as recent occurrences in Darfur and free trade. While issues such as these are important, the office is also actively involved in reaching out to various populations in the local community, specifically those who are physically or mentally challenged. The Best Buddies program gives students opportunities to reach out to such people and make a positive impact on their lives by developing friendships through social outings and frequent communication. In addition, the office hosts multiple events each year for Catholic Charities, an organization that provides services to the foster children and their caretakers. Annual events such as the campus-wide “trick-or-treat night” each Halloween, Christmas Party, and Spring Picnic are designed to give the foster families opportunities to share a bonding experience with themselves and other families in similar situations.

In addition to the virtues of devotion and love that are expressed in social outreach, peace is another Golden Counsel that can clearly be seen in this sort of work. Students involved in this aspect of the office’s mission have the opportunity to see how important it is for people in our country to be aware of injustices occurring to other human beings across the globe and how they can take action to work for peace.
Judicial Affairs

Unlike many of the other offices that comprise the Student Affairs department at DeSales University, the Office of Judicial Affairs is not one that students typically want to be involved with. At first glance, this seems like a logical sentiment for a student to have since the primary responsibility of the staff is to investigate incidents in which individuals violate a campus policy and serve them with a sanction that is fair and adequate. Although some students may view it as a place to go only when they run into trouble, Judicial Affairs works closely with several other departments and organizations to positively contribute to the campus community, especially Residence Life, PACE, and the Alcohol Task Force.

Another addition to the Student Affairs department in recent years, the Judicial Affairs office is led by the Student Judicial Affairs Coordinator, Mrs. Jennifer Bunting. According to her, the office closely follows the Student Affairs mission statement but supplements it with three additional guidelines to more effectively incorporate Salesian values into what the office does:

1. The student should accept responsibility for his or her actions.
2. The student should accept the subsequent consequences of his or her actions.
3. Give students guidance to learn from their actions and not make the same mistakes in the future.

Mrs. Bunting emphasized the fact that when a student receives a sanction from her office, it is intended to be “educational rather than punitive.” As previously mentioned, when students are found to have committed or participated in a violation of a university policy, they are eligible to receive a sanction that is comparable to the severity of their actions.
In order to accomplish her goal of providing an educational component to a student’s sanction, Mrs. Bunting will often require students to participate in some form of community service or social outreach rather than simply paying a fine. If a student is sanctioned for a first time alcohol violation, he or she will likely be required to attend a one hour workshop on alcohol education conducted by PACE. The program is intended to give students a better understanding of the potential risks of alcohol, the physical effects it can have on the body, and the legal repercussions of underage drinking. While it is not intended to scare students away from drinking, it is designed to make them more aware of what they are putting into their bodies and how to make responsible decisions to keep themselves safe.

Mrs. Bunting also extends her office’s involvement in alcohol-related issues on campus through the Alcohol Task Force, which is comprised of representatives from faculty, staff, University Police, and the student body. The group meets on a regular basis to discuss current trends or problems occurring in the campus community that are in any way related to alcohol. Earlier in the academic year, they conducted a campus-wide internet survey to gain a better understanding of the role that alcohol plays in the lives of students at DeSales. The Alcohol Task Force has also collaborated with Athletics on several programs sponsored by the NCAA CHOICES grant, which promotes alcohol-free social events for the campus community. Currently, the group is in the early stages of establishing a shuttle service for DSU students that will transport those without vehicles to various locations on campus and throughout the local neighborhoods.
During her interview, Mrs. Bunting expressed excitement over what lies ahead for her office in future years. She hopes that her work with groups such as the Alcohol Task Force and Residence Life will make more students aware of the positive services the office has to offer students. Like many other offices in Student Affairs, Mrs. Bunting hopes to further improve her office’s role on campus by incorporating more “educational opportunities for students on relevant topics such as sexual assault.” She also hopes that students who she comes into contact with due to policy violations will understand that the situation is “just a bump in the road, not the end of the world.” By going through the judicial process, students will hopefully become more conscious of their actions and take into consideration the negative consequences that they may entail. It is by making mistakes and hitting those “bumps in the road” that students will truly “learn from their life experiences and be able to grow and develop as a person.”

Multicultural & International Affairs

As the student body population and local community continues to diversify, the need for multicultural education and programming on the DeSales campus proceeds to grow. Another fairly recent addition to the Student Affairs department, the Office of Multicultural and International Affairs provides students with the chance to participate in experiences and learning opportunities designed to give them a better understanding of ethnicities and cultures different than their own. By incorporating the Salesian values of the University into its various forms of
multicultural education, the office provides students with an appreciation for the uniqueness and diversity of God’s creation.

The office is responsible for hosting a variety of programs and events for the campus community that focus on diversity pertaining to race, ethnicity, religion, and the arts. The Director of Multicultural & International Affairs, Mr. Kerry Sethi, highlights one or more of these topics each week of the academic year in the popular “Wednesdays in the Commons” series. Free and open to all members of the local community, each event features a performance exhibiting a particular culture or art form. Events such as Celtic Fest and Chinese New Year give students an interactive experience of holidays, customs, and foods that are unique to other cultures. Other guests include musicians, painters, and poets who give students a new insight and admiration for various types of creative arts.

The office also sponsors several large special events throughout the year, including summer months. Typically during the spring semester each year, student volunteers will assist in the planning of “Tunnel of Oppression, Tunnel of Hope,” an interactive program designed to give students a first-hand look at the serious dangers of hatred and prejudice. Not only is it intended to depict the destruction that discrimination can have on people, but it also aims to show participants the importance of respecting others as they are, regardless of their differences.

When most college students are away on summer vacation, Mr. Sethi and several of his student workers host the Hispanic Initiative each year. The event, which is separated into a version for middle school students and a version for high
school students, allows children from the community to get a taste of college life. Participants take part in classes, educational field trips, and social programs at the end of each day. The goal of the Hispanic Initiative is to instill a love for learning in young people and encourage them to continue their education in college upon their high school graduation. While the participants are the ones intended to benefit from the event, DeSales students who assist with the program can also get a lot out of it as well. Living and working with the young students for several days will present them with many challenges, but also many opportunities to experience the Golden Counsels of love, devotion, and patience.

**Residence Life**

For many students, a college campus becomes much more than just a bunch of big brick buildings filled with classrooms and offices after the first few weeks of their first semester. Those students who choose to reside in on-campus residence due to their families living a far distance away or a desire to experience independent living outside of the family home, often come to view DeSales as a second home rather than just where they go to school. By living in a residence hall, students have a multitude of opportunities to establish a closer connection with their peers and the campus community while developing qualities and skills that will be tools for life.

With many drastic changes to the University over the past several years, the Office of Residence Life has made many additions and improvements to better meet
the needs of students who wish to live in on-campus housing. The addition of new facilities, professional staff, and student paraprofessional staff over recent years has provided the opportunity for students to reside on campus throughout their entire traditional undergraduate term. As of the fall 2008 semester, students have the option of living in one of eight residence halls, some of which include Wellness and Social Outreach Living-Learning Communities, or the University Heights. To supplement the addition of new facilities and staff, the Office of Residence Life has also created a new mission statement to incorporate the philosophy of the University into the residential experience.

Designed to emphasize the character traits that serve as the foundation of Character U, the office’s new mission statement places strong emphasis on the importance of Salesian values in campus life:

In accordance with the principles of Salesian spirituality, the Residence Life staff strives to create a living-learning community in which students' rights and responsibilities are protected, differences are celebrated and appreciated, constructive social interaction is valued and advanced, and students are challenged to be contributing members of the community.

The Director of Residence Life, Mrs. Leah Breisch, believes that living on campus has a myriad of benefits for students and contributes a great deal to the overall college experience. According to Mrs. Breisch, residing on campus “allows a student to stay connected to campus resources and peers. There are many social and educational programming opportunities to assist students in their personal development.” A large majority of such programs are conducted by the paraprofessional student staff, known as Resident Advisors (RAs). Each residence hall features a staff of RAs that are responsible for planning and executing events
that focus on topics such as personal responsibility, social outreach, multiculturalism, wellness, and more. They are also a resident’s first source of support and guidance when dealing with any sort of interpersonal conflict or issue.

One of the most common difficulties for students who live on campus is learning how to effectively share a living space with a roommate. Although often unpleasant experiences at the time, Mrs. Breisch views such situations as opportunities for the staff to “teach students effective ways to solve their own problems and conflicts in a safe environment.” By providing students a careful balance of independence and support, the Residence Life staff allows students opportunities to learn from mistakes and difficult experiences. Permitting residents to take charge of situations and work to create a pleasant resolution will hopefully instill in them Salesian values such as perseverance, patience, trust, and cooperation.

In order for RAs to truly understand the dynamics of each building’s unique community, they must be a part of it and live with their peers. Likewise, many of the professional staff members also live in various residence halls across campus. The Associate Director of Residence Life and supervisor of the Welsh Hall RA staff, Mr. J.P. Kelliher, speaks highly of the personal development that students can experience from choosing to live on campus. For most students, college is the first time they will not be living under their parents’ roof and will have freedoms and responsibilities that they have never experienced before. By providing residents with both structure and freedom of choice, the Residence Life staff strives to teach
students “the importance of autonomy and independence as well as the necessity of taking responsibility for one’s own actions.” Mr. Kelliher described the staff’s approach as “we’re here to support students, not hold their hands.”

Both Mrs. Breisch and Mr. Kelliher state that resident students typically feel a closer connection to the campus community and develop stronger bonds with staff and students compared to commuter students. Based on research and statistics from DeSales University and college campuses across the country, there is strong evidence that on-campus living can have a tremendous impact on a student’s college experience. For example, DeSales students who live in campus housing have an average cumulative GPA that is 5% higher than peers who live off campus. In addition, students who live on campus have a higher retention rate which can likely be attributed to the opportunities to establish relationships with members of the campus community, such as the over 300 educational and social programs that the RA staff hosts for residents each academic year.

Although the Residence Life staff does not think that it is essential for students to live in campus housing in order to have a positive college experience, Mr. Kelliher believes that “living in a college residence hall is a one-of-a-kind opportunity with experiences and life lessons you can’t get anywhere else.”

**Student Activities & Orientation**

Although there are 168 hours in each week, the average student will only spend about 15 hours in a classroom. Although to be academically successful, a
person will need to spend additional time on school work, he or she will likely have a great deal of “free time” that can be spent on other areas of college life. In order to ensure that those unoccupied hours are not all spent isolated in a residence hall room or glued to a Playstation, the Office of Student Activities is responsible for coordinating over 100 events every year, many of which are free of charge, for the student body. Each semester is filled with dozens of opportunities for students to partake in programs both on and off campus, as well as special events like Senior Week. While much of what the office provides for the study body is social programming, each and every event is designed to both entertain and benefit those who participate. In addition, the office is also responsible for overseeing all student clubs and organization as well as New Student Orientation each fall semester.

Possibly one of the busiest offices in the Student Life department at DeSales, the Office of Student Activities is run by the Director, Ms. Marcie Tom, and the Assistant Director, Mrs. Tracy Gallagher. Like many other professional staff members in the department, Ms. Tom is constantly adapting to meet the interests of the current student population while continuing to follow the mission and philosophy of the University. Ms. Tom and her office are directly involved with students “from the moment they step on campus for orientation. The staff and upperclassmen peer mentors are there to assist students in making a connection with the DeSales community.” Her goal is to instill in each a student “a genuine love for the University” and enhance their college years with “opportunities to partake in programming that they may not be able experience anywhere else.”
As students continue their college experience at DeSales, the Office of Student Activities provides them with opportunities for character development in many of their programs. In fact, some of the most successful programs each year are ones that directly impact community members in need of assistance, such as the Date Auction for Charity and the annual Fall Fest & Buddy Walk. Events such as these provide students with fellowship and chances to bond with their peers while giving their time to positively impact the lives of other human beings. These expressions of love, devotion, and respect for others show that the Christian humanism of students at DeSales can be seen in all aspects of campus life.

When it comes time for students to bid farewell to their alma mater and venture out into the world, the office offers seniors the chance to come together one final time and bring closure to their college experience with Senior Week. Ms. Tom hopes to see the event, which debuted in 2007, “become a campus tradition that involves not only the seniors, but faculty and staff as well.” She hopes that by participating in Senior Week, students will “reflect on their experiences at DeSales and desire to give back to the institution as an alumnus.”

For students who desire to become more directly involved with the Office of Student Activities, there are several opportunities to develop leadership and communication skills. All student-run clubs and organizations, for example, are overseen by Mrs. Tracy Gallagher, the Assistant Director. Most clubs feature student officers who are responsible for leading meetings, hosting programs, and coordinating fundraisers. Taking on responsibilities such as these will inevitably be
challenging for students, but they will teach them the importance of Golden Counsels like trust, cooperation, patience, and perseverance. These virtues, as well as skills such as the ability to effectively lead a team and communicate with others, will be invaluable assets for students when they venture out into the working world after graduation.

The Importance of Student Affairs to My College Experience

As difficult as it is for me to believe, my time here at DeSales University is nearing an end. The past four years have been filled with countless experiences and interactions that have been instrumental in my growing into the person that I am today and the person I envision becoming in the future. I can confidently say that I have taken advantage of nearly all that the institution has to offer its students, at least as much as one human being can feasible do. The stellar academic experiences I have had along with an extensive “education outside of the classroom” have truly given me a complete college experience. It is because of this that I felt it necessary to focus this thesis on the topic in order to encourage future students to take advantage of all the incredible things that this department has to offer.

Like many of my peers, the various roles I have undertaken have allowed me to develop the ability to serve as a dependable leader who works for the benefit of others. I have also had opportunities to hone my communication skills, learning appropriate ways to interact with those on equal standing as well as those in authority who deserve a higher degree of respect. In addition to these are many of
the virtues that St. Francis de Sales viewed as of the utmost importance for human beings to develop.

By experiencing not just success, but also failures and shortcomings, I have come to better understand the importance of patience with others and myself. Collaborating on projects and sharing ideas with advisors and teammates has shown me that the ability to trust and cooperate with others is essential to reaching your goals. The many times I have struggled with my own self-doubt and insecurities only to come out on top have proved to me that confidence and devotion are virtues that can overcome any obstacle. When my academic and extracurricular obligations would occasionally become overwhelming and intimidating, I would rely on the virtues of hope and perseverance to bring me through the challenges that lay before me. Finally, it is the genuine friendships and bonds that I have developed with students, professors, and staff members that have convinced me that no human quality is more powerful or more rewarding than the ability to love and be loved by others.

The moral lessons and values that I have learned from the DeSales community are responsible for this one-of-a-kind college experience. This sort of knowledge is one that is equally as important to any education that can obtained in a classroom, according to President Theodore Roosevelt, who once said “to educate a man in the mind and not in morals is to create a menace to society.” As I and my fellow graduates prepare to venture out into the world in a few short weeks, we will
take with us not just the tools and abilities to change the world for the better, but more importantly we possess the drive and the passion to do so.