

CASNR Living Communities:

Helping students make the transition

By Colby Haggard, Elk City, Okla.



Lisa Bailey (left), Rita Sanders, Magen Stevenson and Whitney Hacker relax in the CASNR Living Community common living area. (Photo by Colby Haggard)

Managing time for studying, sleeping and meals. Trying to make friends, meeting your professors, getting lost and being homesick. All of these fears become reality for new and transitioning college students. However, the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources is taking steps to ease those fears and help students adjust to their new lives on campus.

CASNR has entered into a new era of student housing and development at Oklahoma State University. During the past two years, OSU expanded student housing and replaced some of the traditional dormitory-style housing with new suites and apartments.

To coordinate with the expansion, CASNR developed a new living program called the CASNR Living Community to complement the ongoing Freshmen in Transition program.

These two programs for student living are housed in Suite A, which now stands where residence halls Willham North and Willham South once stood.

"CLC and FIT really help students make the step to college," said Mary Ann Harris, CASNR coordinator of student development.

Freshmen in Transition

While living communities for upperclassmen are new, the CASNR Freshmen in Transition program has been going strong since 2000, helping new students become future leaders on campus. Originally located in Zink and Jones halls, FIT provides a mentoring program for incoming CASNR students, offering academic and social support while they transition into their new lives as college students.

"The mission of FIT is to live, learn, lead and succeed," Harris said.

FIT is open to incoming freshmen enrolled in one of CASNR's fields of study. According to CASNR, the program is a combination of small-group support, mentoring, leadership and service. Through the program, students gain a sense of community and fellowship by living together and participating in leadership activities.

In Fall 2006, 52 FIT students occupied the third and fourth floors of the CASNR Village with three FIT student academic mentors and a community mentor. A faculty member also serves on each floor.

In Suite A, each student has his or her own room and shares a bathroom with one other person. Each floor has a large common area with a kitchen, television, wireless Internet access and study area. Harris said the design was integral in making the program social-based and functional.

"The building was designed with smaller individual rooms than other housing," she said. "This makes people want to leave their rooms and hang out in the large common area, creating closeness among the students."

According to CASNR, one of the greatest assets to the program is the relationship between the FIT students and their student academic mentors, or FIT SAMs. FIT SAMs are upperclass students who live in the FIT residence hall and serve as a built-in support system for the freshmen.

"We encourage them to be involved with not only the university as a whole but also with CASNR," said Erin Winegeart, an agricultural economics and accounting double major and FIT SAM.

"We want to show them all of the possibilities on this campus and to make their transition as freshmen at OSU as easy as possible," she said.

At the beginning of the fall semester, FIT SAMs assist FIT students with the concerns and questions of any incoming student and serve as small-group leaders in the FIT section of AG 1011: Agricultural Orientation. These groups meet weekly and work together to perform service activities, as well as schedule dinners with faculty and organize educational programming.

"Small groups encourage students to make friends with people they otherwise might not reach out to, which makes a closer bond with everyone in the FIT program," said Scott Murdock, an animal science major and current FIT student.

CASNR Living Community

With the FIT program's success, CASNR has started a new program modeled after FIT. The CASNR Living Community is a little less structured and provides opportunities for freshmen, as well as upperclass students.

CLC takes students and puts them into a group living situation where support is gained through relationships formed with other students and faculty mentors, Harris said.

The CASNR Living Community is located on the first and second floors of the CASNR Village. According to CASNR, this program provides an opportunity for less formal mentoring than FIT.

Six faculty members from CASNR serve as faculty mentors to the CLC and its students. Faculty mentors work with CLC students to promote personal and academic success.

Rita Sanders, an animal science major and CLC student, said she was most impressed with the faculty/stu-

dent activities for CLC members. In the CASNR Living Community, three faculty mentors serve on each floor. At least once a month, the faculty and students will meet for an activity.

"Last month, we went out to dinner together," Sanders said. "I really enjoyed this because it truly gives the students in CLC a chance to get to know their faculty."

Jared Crain, a plant and soil science major and CLC student, said FIT is more structured and has more required activities than CLC. The CLC program has activities but allows participants to have a large amount of time to get involved on campus, study and "just be college students."

"The FIT program has several FIT SAMs, where CLC study is more independent," Crain said. "Each floor of CLC has a community mentor, but participants have to take their own initiative for their academic success."

According to CASNR, participants in the learning community form a bond with each other as well as with their faculty mentors.

"CLC is a great opportunity to get to know faculty and live in a very independent living group that has the same interest for their major: CASNR and ag majors," Crain said.

Harris said CLC is made up of 60 percent freshmen and 40 percent returning students. Students do not have to apply to CLC or pay a \$150 activity fee like the FIT students do.

"There is no other model like it," Harris said. "CASNR is the only college on campus with this type of specialized living community."

OSU is evolving, and CASNR is changing with the times, as well. CLC and FIT help students make that step. According to CASNR, students now have additional educational programs, leadership, professional development and networking opportunities, giving students a head start in developing themselves for success on campus and in their future careers. ☺

Students interested in CLC or FIT can learn more by visiting <http://www.reslife.okstate.edu>, <http://www.casnr.com> or <http://www.fit.okstate.edu>.



The College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources Living Community is part of The Village housing that was completed in Summer 2006. (Photo by Shanna Boyett)