

## STUDENT LIFE AT SAB

### A Home Away From Home

The opening of SAB's first on-site residence hall in 1991 ushered in a new era for the School, with students from across the United States and abroad converging for the first time at SAB with ballet slippers and suitcases in tow. With 64 students living in the Meredith Willson Residence Hall during the 10-month Winter Term and another 200 moving in for 5 weeks each summer, SAB's responsibility for the care and development of its students expanded beyond ballet training into areas once solely the domain of parents. Fifteen years later, the department of Student Life plays a pivotal role in caring for and shaping the personal development of the School's students. The department's current director, John Austin, recently took time with the newsletter editor to chat about how the department works today.

**Editor:** What falls under the "Student Life" banner?

**John Austin:** Student Life encompasses the totality of a student's experience at this school outside of their ballet training. The centerpiece of our program is the Residence Hall, which houses students year round. But there are other areas of Student Life that have an impact on both resident and local-area students: namely health care, academic supervision and counseling, and student activities.

**Editor:** How is Student Life involved in academics when SAB only offers ballet training?

**Austin:** SAB has a policy that students must be in the process of completing a high school degree unless they have already done so. There are two schools that we work with closely. Professional Children's School (PCS) is a private school located just five blocks away that has a long history of working with children who are pursuing professional careers. Professional Performing Arts School (PPAS) is a New York City public high school that has a performing arts curriculum. The majority of our intermediate and advanced students attend one of those schools, and a small number do independent study via correspondence.

**Editor:** Does Student Life have ongoing supervision of individual academic progress?

**Austin:** Report cards are sent both to resident students' parents

and to me. I have meetings with the principals at PPAS and PCS regularly, and if they're ever concerned about our students, they'll call me. If one of our resident students ever fails a test we know about it before a report card comes out. If necessary, we consult with parents to come up with a plan to make sure that struggling students spend enough time studying and get the support they need. Each student is assigned to a Residence Life staff member, and these advisors meet with students at the beginning of the year, when report cards come out, and again at the end of the year.

We also have volunteer tutors to give kids who need it lots of one-on-one attention.

**Editor:** If a student becomes ill or has an injury while at SAB, what happens?

**Austin:** First let me say that students must get a physical before they come here each year to make sure that they're in good dancing shape. They have to prove they have all necessary immunizations, and we must be informed of any preexisting medical conditions so

that we can alert our medical team.

In the event of injury or illness, we first have students use our onsite resources. If they are injured in class, we'll send them to our staff physical therapist for a consultation. If they have a cold, they'll see our staff nurse. We have regular doctors that we work with and a pediatrician at a practice right across the street from Lincoln Center. There are three off-site orthopedists and two podiatrists that will see our students. A staff member accompanies all students under 18 to the doctor, and depending on the situation, those over 18 as well. Parents are consulted and informed every step of the way.

It's important to note that our health program is about much more than dealing with illness and injury. We have a number of resources and programs to promote the health of our active teen dancers. We have a staff nutritionist who does one-on-one consultations with students to help them develop individual nutrition plans. We have a staff psychologist who is available for weekly appointments to talk confidentially with students about any of the stresses and problems they might be facing. We have a Pilates instructor and fully-equipped Pilates room for students to use by daily appointment.



Advanced students in their Residence Hall bedroom; Photo by Ellen Crane

**Editor:** How do you monitor the coming and going of students who live in the Residence Hall?

**Austin:** The Residence Hall is staffed 24 hours a day. During the Winter Term when we're looking after 64 students, we have 20 adult staff members, with six of us actually living in the Residence Hall. In the summer, our staff grows to accommodate our 200 resident students, with 13 staff members living in the dorm. No matter where they are going, all students must sign in and out of the dorm and have their plans approved by a staff member on duty. Each student's sign-out card is marked with a code that indicates the parent's pre-determined permissions. Can the student use public transportation? Can he or she go anywhere alone? If students want to go someplace outside their regular permissions, their parents may call and make a one-time exception.

**Editor:** How can parents find out how their child is doing, and what happens if a parent urgently needs to get in touch with a resident student?

**Austin:** Parents can call the main Residence Hall desk 24 hours a day and reach a staff member who can immediately locate the student. And, parents can call any time to check up on their children. We really develop close relationships with most parents, especially parents of students who are at SAB for three or four years. By the end of those years, I feel that I know some kids' parents better than I know my own.

**Editor:** Student Life runs an educational program called "Finding Your Way." What is that?

**Austin:** We recognize that the students who are living with us during the Winter Term are away from home at a time when most 14 to 18 year olds start to develop their own sense of values and decision-making skills—when they're learning how to become responsible young adults. That's a skill set usually learned from parents. Most youngsters living at home adopt their parents' values and ideas. SAB doesn't really teach values, but we teach our students how to develop their own. We expose them to a variety of thoughts and perspectives. "Finding Your Way" programs cover different areas that can be summed up by the word DANCE, which stands for: Diversity, Alcohol and drug education, Nutritional wellness, Community service and Exploration. All intermediate and advanced students are invited to participate in seminars, activities, and organized outings that relate to these areas, and resident students must meet a minimum participation requirement. We award "SAB Bucks" in \$5 denominations as an added incentive for participation, and students can cash in their awards at a big "SAB Bucks" auction at the end of the school year.

**Editor:** What else do students do in their "down time"?

**Austin:** For both the Summer Course and the Winter Term, our activities coordinator puts together a schedule of pre-paid activities that usually includes Broadway shows, dance perform-

ances, and professional sporting events. Parents can choose those they'd like their children to take part in à la carte. In the summer, we plan in-house activities most nights, so there's usually something to do if you decide not to participate in the group outings. We've got game nights, crafts, baking, movie nights, and karaoke. During the Winter Term, our four student "community development assistants" are responsible for planning "Fun Fridays" to help the students relax at the end of their busy weeks.



Students unwind with an art activity in the Residence Hall kitchen.

**Editor:** How does living in the Residence Hall compare to the experience of teens who leave home at 18 and move into a college dorm?

**Austin:** We are certainly dealing with the same kinds of issues faced by college students. "I'm away from home for the first time. I have to do my own laundry for the first time. I have to wake up by myself in the morning." The big difference is that most of our residents are much younger. Because of the similarities, I hire staff members who are graduates of higher education programs that have trained them to work with college students living away from home. Our students are young adults, and we're teaching them life skills and accountability, but we're doing it with a safety net. We try to let them know that it's okay to mess up, to make mistakes, but we're going to teach them how not to make the same mistake again. And we very much try to instill that sense of responsibility in our students.

**Editor:** What kind of feedback do you receive from parents?

**Austin:** I frequently hear from parents that the existence of SAB's Student Life program made their child's being at SAB a possibility. They are so grateful for the fantastic experience that their children have here. It's really very nice to hear from parents that we made all the difference in a student's being able to come to SAB to pursue their ballet training. ❖