That’s a RAP!

By Cassie McGrath

Everyone is anxious going into their freshman year of college. We seem to spend our whole lives trying to get into a good college, but when the time to start school actually comes, the overwhelming anticipation is enough to make anyone nervous. The most influential thing that calmed these nerves for me was joining a Residential Academic Program, or RAP.

I received my acceptance to the University of Massachusetts in December of last year. Seeing that, besides UMass, I had only applied to schools in cities, I did not anticipate coming here in the fall. However, at the end of the college selection process, I found that UMass was the perfect fit for me and I never looked back.

Soon after I decided on UMass, I came to visit campus in April. At the information session, students and instructors explained what a RAP is in detail. At the time, the concept was still quite confusing to me. It seemed like something that the school was glorifying as a necessity. I cast it off; however, if I had known what I do now, I would have tried to join that very day.

A few months later at New Student Orientation (NSO), RAPs were once again discussed. Still not convinced, I refrained from signing up. Later in the day, however, I took a tour around the school with an NSO leader and discussed RAPs with him. I do not remember much from the conversation, but I do remember him saying: “I have never heard anyone say that they regret not joining a RAP, I only hear people say that they wish that they did.”

This conversation got me thinking. College is the time to embrace every possible opportunity presented to you. Hearing that I could regret something was my worst nightmare. I decided to sign up. There were only two spots left, but I made it into the Communication Majors RAP in Pierpont Hall.

Joining a RAP gives students a lot of benefits. For example, I had the opportunity to reserve my housing in Southwest, the residential area where I wanted to live. What they cannot put on paper are the irreplaceable friendships you will make with people on your floor.

A huge benefit of being in a RAP is you get to take a class with a maximum of 30 other students. This is a class that I would have had to take in a lecture hall for my major. Instead, I get to sit with 29 friends and have stimulated and intelligent discussions. Being in a RAP class has also allowed me to become very close with my professor. In a big school, it is rare that a professor will remember you, but on the first day of
COMM191, our professor Mike Alvarez already knew all of our names. He is more than a teacher to us now; he is a mentor that has guided us through our first semester of college. My seminar teacher is the same way. He gives us the same assignments as the students in his lecture seminars, but we have the bonus opportunity of being able to talk to him one-on-one and get individualized feedback on our projects.

Furthermore, being in a RAP allows you to make connections with everyone living around you. Everyone always has their doors open, there is always someone to grab food with if you do not feel like eating alone. These are opportunities that are not as easily presented if you are not in a RAP. I have friends in other buildings that have come to my floor because of its open, friendly reputation. It is difficult to make friends in college, but being in a RAP forces you to get to know your neighbors; in that way, you become very close friends. I have since learned that the NSO leader that I talked to was correct. People do not regret joining a RAP, but rather they regret not joining one. You cannot quite understand their importance until it is an active part of your life.

When speaking to upperclassmen that were in a RAP, they will say the same things. I have even met older students that say that their best friends and roommates are from their freshman year RAPs. You may say that you are just as capable of becoming close with the people on your floor if you are not in a RAP, and you are not wrong. I know many people that have made great friends outside of a RAP. But, the big difference is that, in a RAP, you do not have to worry about getting over an awkward phase because on the very first day of school, you are introduced to your neighbors — your soon-to-be classmates and friends.

Part of joining a RAP also means that you become a part of a larger community. For example, today I was required to attend a session in Herter called the GPS Pathways Panel. The panel included information about spring RAP courses, Undergraduate Research and Studies, Social Identity and Diversity based courses, Community Engagement Coursework, Activism and Organizing, the Five College Interchange, Career Services, the Domestic Exchange and study abroad programs. Many of these opportunities are things that we have heard about before, however, as we become increasingly busy, they seem to escape our minds. I learned an enormous amount of important information that I would never have known to look out for. Being in a RAP might have forced me to stop Netflix and get out of bed, but it provided me with endless amounts of opportunities. UMass has so much to offer and attending this panel that was required by being in a RAP assured me that I would not miss out on anything.

I wish that I knew how important RAPs were even sooner. To me, it is more than just a class, but also a college experience that I will never forget. There is something special about being so close with the same people that are not only in your class and share your interests, but are also only across the hall. There is a level of support on my floor that makes me always feel welcome and in the first semester of college that is not very easy to find. I would highly recommend that all incoming students join a RAP. If I have not convinced you yet, keep in mind, that you do not even need to leave your building for class.