r. Floyd Hoelting is one of the national leaders in the student housing industry. As the executive director of the Division of Housing and Food Service at the University of Texas at Austin, he has to have a big personality and big shoulders. Hoelting is known in the industry for his creative initiatives and the quality that he drives at the university. Some of his accomplishments include over 100 percent occupancy throughout his career, organizational diversity, food service, transformational learning environments, new facilities and planned infrastructure upgrades, and strong diverse staff recruitment and development. A frequent industry speaker and consultant, SHB recently had the opportunity to interview Hoelting for this issue.

SHB: What is your background, and how did it lead you to student housing?
Hoelting: I was one of 11 children so at an early age I knew all about group living. Seriously, I have been in student housing for 43 years. I joined the military out of high school. Our family didn’t have any money for college and that was the only way I was going to break the mold. After I got out of the military, I went to Emporia State University in Kansas, 10 miles from the farm/ranch where I grew up. I got my bachelors and masters degrees there. I never lived on campus; I couldn’t afford it. I lived in a shared apartment that cost $10 per month. When I was between my junior and senior years, one of the vice presidents for student affairs at the university asked me if I would be interested in working as a graduate assistant in the dean of students office. My goal at the time was to get a law degree. I was a veteran and I was four years older than most students; they hired me even though I wasn’t a grad student. I served as a gopher for the dean of students office; I did a little bit of everything. And I found that I really liked everything that I did. I decided to get my doctorate in higher education. I went to Oklahoma State University. While I was testing, my wife was in line at the placement office looking for teaching jobs in the area. There was a man next to her who heard her mention that I was looking for a job. They talked and as it ended up, he was the director of housing. He talked to me about a job called head resident, which paid room and board, tuition and fees, and $200 per month. I’ll never forget how rich my wife and I thought we would be on that stipend. I was a head resident my first year, an area coordinator my second year, and my third year I was the assistant director for men’s housing. At that time, we had men’s housing and women’s housing. I finished my doctorate. From there, I went to Western Illinois University, where I was director of residence life. I was there for five years, and then went to Illinois State University, where I was director of housing and food services for 17 years. Fifteen years ago I came here to the University of Texas in Austin as the director of housing and food service.

SHB: What changes and evolutions have you seen in the industry during your career?
Hoelting: We do a lot better job in housing and food services now than we did 40 years ago. It’s a career now. When I first entered this business it was a job to help pay expenses while one worked on a degree. It used to be very transitory with staff coming and going. It didn’t have the professional feel and structure it does now. We are light years from where we were. The product itself and total industry has evolved tremendously during my years.

SHB: In your opinion, what is the best model for a university to run student housing?
Hoelting: It’s what we refer to as the Purdue Model, where all functions of housing are under the university housing operation. The director of housing is responsible for all of the dimensions of the housing and food operation: budget, facilities, conferences, food services, residence life, information systems, assignments, and contracts. These areas are all parts of the housing mission, and it works best when they function under one agency and leader. This model seems to work better than having the different segments of housing under several different department heads and vice presidents.

SHB: Under either model, do you think some areas should be contracted out or should all be handled by the university?
Hoelting: I believe in selective contracting. Depending on the institution, some needs are better contracted. Operations that carry heavy liability requirements or require large outlays of money and/or equipment are candidates for contracting out. Examples might be elevator repair and maintenance, food service, fire safety, cable TV, laundry and custodial services. There are probably 50 or 60 services that a campus might successfully contract.

SHB: What are some of the biggest challenges you and your peers face?
Hoelting: An interesting question. The Big 12 housing directors recently discussed this question at our yearly meeting. Several key challenges most housing directors across the country deal with each year are the escalating costs of labor, equipment, whole food, utilities and...
maintaining facilities; aging facilities and infrastructures; food services must be flexible, high quality and dynamic; occupancy-up/down sizing efficiencies; staff morale; crisis preparedness; risk management and litigation; and managing changes in building systems, food preferences, technology, resident computing, e-business and proxy access, legislation, ADA, hazardous materials, life safety, and building codes. A big issue I hear from almost all housing directors is a dislike for universities taking budgeted housing monies and using them for other areas within the university. Currently, sustainability is one of the hottest issues in higher ed. In every component of housing and food services, students are demanding it. It is beyond a trend. It is integrated into the modus operandi of campuses today. Sustainability is driving and changing how we do business in housing and food service.

SHB: How efficiently do you operate?
Hoelting: I hold high in my legacy that we have never operated under 100 percent occupancy in 43 years. We usually operate between 101 percent and 102 percent occupancy for the year. We are very intent on developing a team that understands customer satisfaction and creates a product which allows us to operate at this occupancy level. We budget at 100 percent. That’s unheard of in this business and requires a creative, intelligent, hard-working, well-trained and diverse staff.

SHB: How do you view off-campus housing?
Hoelting: Off-campus housing is an integral part of the housing plan for most universities. Off-campus operations house university students just like we do. We have a lot of private dorms here at Texas. When I came here, there was a gulf between private owners and the on-campus department of housing. They didn’t talk to or trust each other. After watching extremely negative advertising campaigns for a year, I called a meeting of off-campus management and introduced a concept called “collegial competition.” I wanted to stop the practice of both parties running each other down to rent space. I told them that as long as we were at 100 percent or above and the negative advertising stopped, we would provide a link on our on-campus housing website to off-campus dorms. All of the private dorm owners got on board. They understood that if one of the off-campus dorms participated in a negative ad campaign, it would result in the end of the cooperative link to the on-campus web site. It has been very successful. Now we meet mainly to talk about initiatives like H1N1 and bedbug prevention. I’m really happy how we work with the private dorms here at Texas. We have a program where we know the number of empty spaces, not just student rooms but any space that might be used in an emergency. This allowed all of us to house people who were driven from their homes by the last two hurricanes that hit the coast.

SHB: How important is housing in attracting students to the university?
Hoelting: The University of Texas at Austin attracts some of the better students in the world. Housing is a critical part of us competing with other institutions all over the country for these students. Location is an advantage when you are on campus. A lot of parents want their children, especially the first year, to be on campus. The private dorms help in this initiative. Some are just across the street from campus. We strongly believe in having a developmental or academic imperative in our residence halls. We work towards a transformative learning environment in the halls. Every room, every lounge should be a learning environment. For example we have galleries in our halls: a gallery of great Texas women, a gallery of Texas rivers and a gallery of Texas cultures. The intent is to facilitate learning while residents are socializing or walking through the hall. That translates into behavior because these are places of learning. Each dining center has a monthly cultural dining series spectacular. We require and measure learning outcomes just as any department in the university. Students spend an average of 80 hours a week in our residence halls compared to 15 hours a week in the classroom. This isn’t just a place to eat and sleep. Every person on our staff works towards creating transformational learning environments. The grade point average of our on-campus students tells the story of our success in this endeavor. This commitment is something we discuss with our prospective students and parents.

SHB: You also run food service. How important is that to the on-campus student living experience at UT?
Hoelting: Food is a critical component. If students don’t care for the food, they are likely not to like their roommates, RA and the hall they live in. They’ll get out as soon as they can and tell many other students on the way. I think food is the most dynamic and important thing that a director can look at next to the room itself. Every day, I eat two, and sometimes three meals in our dining centers. Our food program uses the University ID card. In addition to Dine in Dollars, which can be used at most DHFS dining locations with a 10 percent discount, residents receive Bevo Bucks that allow them to eat in over 70 establishments around Austin, including several delivery services. Most housing directors will ask me why we want to give this money away after we have collected it. We do collect a 6 percent transaction fee, but we are handling all the transactions. I am a firm believer that on-campus dining, options are critical. Students get tired of eating the same thing. Regardless of the menu size and number of campus dining locations, students like to know they have options. It’s worth our customers’ satisfaction. It also keeps our food service sharp, because we have to compete for those Bevo Bucks. About 20 percent of the Bevo Bucks end up coming back to us. We have 100,000 people come to this campus everyday. Many of them eat with us. Our food service generates approximately $10 million annually in non-contracted income from those not on the food plan or visiting campus.

SHB: What is your philosophy on creating housing or floors for specific majors?
Hoelting: During my first years in this business we thought we needed to establish specific life-style floors (majors, interests, study habits, etc.). We learned that our greatest learning opportunity had been compromised. That was the opportunity to live with 50 new and different individuals and learn to understand and appreciate difference. Nowhere again in students’ lives will they have a learning opportunity as rich as the floor they live on. By putting students with the same majors or interests together, we had compromised our greatest learning environments. I believe that segregation for whatever reason has never worked and doesn’t work in the residence halls. We teach individuals about difference. We do that because this is the first, and perhaps the last time, they are going to live and work within a rich environment of difference. They meet people from all different kinds of environments when they live on-campus. The learning theo-
ry for this is called situated cognition. It is the primary reason I think students should live in a residence hall at least the first year when they come to a university. We want our students to be open to difference, open to change and open to learning from new people. Our philosophy is that engineers are going to be working with engineers for the rest of their lives. Why put them with just engineers and forfeit the greatest learning environment possible?

SHB: You said you thought it was a good idea to house freshmen on campus, but you can’t do that at Texas. Would you like all students to live on campus?

Hoelting: I don’t like to force students to live on campus, never have. I have worked in environments where we did make freshmen live on campus. If you can offer a good enough housing program, don’t overbuild, and live within your means, then all students can live in a situation that they want and choose to be in and be happier and more successful. When you force students on campus that don’t want to live there, they are likely not to like the food, their resident advisor, the hall coordinator, their roommate or their neighbors. The forced nature makes their disenchantment come forward. I’d rather house the people who want to live on campus and make a great environment for them. We welcome all off-campus students to attend our on-campus residence hall academic learning initiatives. We house all of the freshmen that request to live on campus.

SHB: How has the University of Texas changed since you’ve been there?

Hoelting: When I came here 15 years ago, we housed 5,300 students. Now we house 7,300 students. We opened our last hall two years ago. I believe in watching your inventory for a few years and seeing how the chips fall. I do not want to manage empty beds. I’d rather be a few short than have too many beds on campus that we can’t fill. The biggest changes have occurred in food services, learning environments, infrastructure upgrades, organizational diversity, staff training, new technology implementation, and staff wellness programs.

SHB: How do the rates for your on-campus housing compare to the options off-campus?

Hoelting: The rates are very similar. There are some off-campus projects that are very nice, and they go after a client who can pay those kind of rates. We don’t try to compete with that. About 70 to 80 percent of the private dorm spaces are comparable to ours. Our new halls are double rooms with a private bathroom. They are not luxurious apartments, but they are private. We like our younger students to have interaction on the floors. We don’t want all of our halls to have private, connecting or semiprivate baths. Community bathrooms, by the way, are not a thing of the past. Some of the newer halls across the country have smaller community baths, built for 10 or 15 to share, that allow for community interaction.

SHB: How do you address technology and connectivity today?

Hoelting: We are wired or wireless everywhere, including halls and lounges. We still have some computer labs, but they aren’t used nearly like they used to be. Now, our students have their own equipment and know how to use it. Some students still use the computer labs. Students subscribe for internet service through the university’s information technology services. Students select the bandwidth subscription level they want.

SHB: What do you think drives students and parents to come to university housing versus a private dorm or off-campus apartment?

Hoelting: The Number 1 reason students decide to stay is customer satisfaction. If that word doesn’t go out, then the potential customers won’t want to live here. I always tell my staff — we have 1,200 people working in this operation — that we do it the old fashioned way. We earn the privilege to have students live with us. We preach how to do it, show staff how to do it and reinforce it when they do it right. It is all about management. I spend about 2 hours a day out in the units watching and tweaking our product. We train and expect all staff to “see what needs to be improved and then improve it.” They constantly turn over rocks. I think it is critical for managers, including me, to be in the field picking up the nuances of this operation. Other decision-making factors include price and location. The green issue has also become a big factor. Students are avoiding driving, so the closer they live to campus helps. Food service, which I mentioned before, is another great factor. Isn’t this a great business to be involved in? We get to work every day with a great staff in a great and stimulating environment and help young people become successful contributing citizens. SHB