

Getting WISE about housing

New living and learning community designed for women headed for technical fields

— by Michele Coffill

Like many freshmen, Amanda Alkema didn't know which living center she would call home during her first year of college.

When she learned where and with whom she would live, Alkema realized she lucked out. She is one of 46 students housed in the Koeze-Weed Living Center, home to Grand Valley's new Women in Science and Engineering program. WISE is an academic living and learning community designed for first-year women majoring in science, mathematics, engineering or computer science.



WISE roommates Megan Keber, left, and Holly David look at books and papers in their room. New this year, WISE houses first-year women who are interested in the sciences or engineering.

Photos by Bernadine Carey-Tucker

they visited the WISE program at The University of Michigan. "Our initial reason for the program was to have a way to support first-year female students who have an interest in a non-traditional, like math or science, occupation," Pace said.

Like many freshmen, Amanda Alkema didn't know which living center she would call home during her first year of college.

When she learned where and with whom she would live, Alkema realized she lucked out. She is one of 46 students housed in the Koeze-Weed Living Center, home to Grand Valley's new Women in Science and Engineering program. WISE is an academic living and

"I didn't choose this living center, but I'm glad I'm here," said Alkema, a math major from Grand Rapids. "It's smaller; there are less people here. If I was in another place, I would probably only know people from my floor."

One of the perks Alkema and other WISE residents enjoy is displayed on the stairwell between the first and second floors. Photos of the residents along with their names and majors are taped to the wall, making it easy to quickly locate someone to help with homework.

"For example, my calculus class is kind of difficult," Alkema, who graduated from Grand Rapids Christian High School, said. "But there are others here taking the same class, maybe just a different section. So, if you don't understand something, there's usually someone to help."

More perks at WISE include on-site academic tutoring, an on-site computer lab and on-site access to faculty members who hold regular office hours there. Organized social activities, from book club meetings to field trips, have been popular among WISE residents.

Theme housing around a common interest or curriculum is not new; at Grand Valley, there are three other learning communities (see sidebar on page 22). What is unique about WISE is the university-wide collaboration that has made it successful. Diana Pace, associate dean of students, broached it to others on campus two years ago after learning of a similar program in North Carolina. When an enthusiastic Grand Valley committee organized,

learning community designed for first-year women majoring in science, mathematics, engineering or computer science.

WISE fits well with the university's efforts to retain women in the sciences. In the fall, Grand Valley received \$1 million in grants from the National Science Foundation that will aid women faculty and women and minority students in engineering and the sciences. One \$500,000 grant will allow administrators to recruit and award scholarships to 32 students each year for four years. The NSF Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (S-STEM) Scholarship program also allows administrators funding to academically support those students. The other \$500,000 NSF grant, for which Grand Valley partnered with The University of Michigan, has goals to increase the representation and advancement of women faculty members in science and engineering careers, contributing to a more diverse workforce.

Paul Plotkowski, dean of the Padnos College of Engineering and Computing, said the timing of WISE plus the two NSF grants will help Grand Valley meet the needs of industry.

"Nationally, engineering enrollments have not been keeping up with the needs of industry for a number of years," he said. "Far too often, students who begin engineering programs 'step out' of college for financial reasons. The S-STEM program is intended to help students avoid or minimize the need to earn money to pay for college during the most demanding years of an engineering program."

Jessica Noble, student services coordinator for Padnos College, said WISE may aid engineering recruiting efforts. "For the residents, being able to see other women who are interested in these fields is a great advantage," she said.

Noble speaks from experience. She earned a bachelor's degree in 2004 in industrial engineering from Kettering University. During her freshmen year, she lived on an all-women hallway in the university's only dorm. It was clear then, she said, that several professors and male students didn't think a woman belonged in a technical field.

"I encountered some incidents that were on the edge of harassment — that was at my co-op," Noble said. "Also in classes, the guys would be surprised that a girl had the answer."

The number of women at Grand Valley who have declared engineering as a major has dropped slightly in recent years. In 2003, there were 26 first-year women engineering majors out of 160, representing 16 percent of the total. The percentage dropped to 12 percent in 2004 and 2005, and rose to 13 percent (22 of 166) in 2006. The number of women who declared computing/information systems as a major in 2006 is lower: four of 51 first-year CIS majors are women, 8 percent of the total.



Chantelle Collum, left, chats with Liz Schreiner in WISE's lounge area. The living center offers an on-site computer lab, access to faculty and organized social activities.



They will find camaraderie at WISE. Laurie Witucki, associate professor of chemistry and WISE faculty director, said one-third of first-year women engineering majors live there.

Witucki, who has been teaching at Grand Valley for six years, jumped at the chance to lead WISE during its first year, saying she wanted GVSU students to have the opportunities she did as an undergraduate at Cedar Crest College in Pennsylvania, a women's liberal arts college.



WISE faculty director Laurie Witucki, left, and Amanda Alkema meet in the living center's faculty office.

“In high school, I was scared of math and chemistry,” she said. “But I soon gained confidence by watching and talking with the women — both upperclass students and faculty — who became my role models.”

Witucki said she and others have been pleasantly surprised by the support for WISE from other campus departments. The Padnos College of Engineering and Computing donated equipment for a new computer lab; the Advising Resource Center established in-house tutorial times for chemistry, biology and math courses; Housing worked to renovate the building; and many professors have volunteered their time to establish office hours there and attend WISE programs.

“It’s been a very collaborative process. That’s what has made this work,” she said.

One marker that it was a good program came early in September. After only a week at WISE, some students asked if they could live there next year. Space will be limited, as a peer mentor program will be implemented with about six current WISE students returning as sophomores to serve as role models for new students.

If Web hits are an indicator of popularity, demand for WISE rooms could increase next year. Witucki said the number of hits received on the home page (www.gvsu.edu/wise) grew from 3,000 to 14,000 during two months last fall. That timeframe, she said, was when high school seniors considered housing options for the following year.

“We probably could grow to double the program, but I don’t think that we should do it in year two,” she said and laughed.

Specialized Housing Options

Along with WISE, Grand Valley has three other academic housing communities:

Honors College

Students enrolled in the Honors College can choose to live in the Niemeyer Living Center. Pros: can take classes in living center; have on-site access to faculty.

Art Majors

Art and design students can live in the Calder Residence Hall, adjacent to the Calder Art Center, where many of their classes will be held. Pro: rooms modeled like studio apartments.

Healthy Choices

Students living in Passport Housing (West A and B Living Centers) sign contracts that they will abstain from using alcohol, tobacco or drugs in the living centers. The Passport program includes social activities for students who want to avoid alcohol use. Pro: a healthy environment of like-minded residents.