For CHC peer mentor Stephanie Crowley ’17, working with first-year honors students is not a job but an opportunity to help out her neighbors.

“Every year I get to meet a new set of 46 people who are so excited to be here,” she said. “I’m hesitant to even call this a job because I love directing my residents to opportunities on campus. They don’t know yet that UMass has everything!”
Crowley, who has been a peer mentor for two years, says her residents have unique backgrounds and a range of academic interests. One of her residents is active on Sycamore House Council, one writes for the student newspaper, and another is on campus after spending a month in Kenya, for example. Part of her job is creating a sense of academic community among these residents.

Peer mentors are highly trained student staff who live and work with students in first-year residence halls. Unlike resident assistants, peer mentors have a specific focus on academic engagement, supporting students as they navigate the numerous academic programs and services on campus and transition to the demands of college coursework. They become experts in UMass majors, advising services, research opportunities, and more.

Every Sunday through Thursday evening, the peer mentors hold office hours in a Residential Academic Success Center (RASC) located in each first-year residence hall. The RASC is an informal environment where residents can stop by without appointments and speak one-on-one with a peer. At the RASC, mentors answer a broad range of questions and give advice. They may discuss strategies for studying, notetaking, and time management, or provide answers about class registration, campus research opportunities, and office hours with professors. In the Commonwealth Honors College Residential Community, peer mentors direct students to programs and resources unique to honors and high-achieving students, like the International Scholars Program and the competitive College of Natural Sciences iCons program.

According to Crowley, a major part of the job is reminding students that faculty and advisors really are accessible and eager to get to know them.

In addition to holding RASC office hours, peer mentors plan events for their residents, usually focused on an academic theme. Past events have included study abroad information sessions, faculty chats, and strategies for choosing majors and minors. In November, the Sycamore House peer mentors planned an event on course registration that helped students practice signing up for classes independently. In February, the Sycamore peer mentors invited UMass Amherst Chancellor Kumble Subbaswamy for a chat with residents in the Commonwealth Honors College Events Hall. The chancellor sat with students and peer mentors for an informal question-and-answer session that covered topics ranging from diversity on campus to lab fees. For their spring “Career Week,” peer mentors have planned a range of internship and career-related events, covering resumes, LinkedIn, and elevator pitches.

Because peer mentors live with the students they advise, they become personable,
trustworthy guides. From time-to-time they knock on doors to invite residents to events, or spend a few hours in the floor lounge just doing homework and setting a positive example.

By the end of the academic year, Crowley always sees new friendships formed among her residents. “Before long, they have this built-in community at such a big school,” she said. “Peer mentors help show students that there’s always someone there for them—because there is.”

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