One Thursday evening in early October, I went on rounds with two resident assistants in C complex. This idea was the brainchild of Nick Testa, this year’s president of the student body and one of the RAs whom I accompanied.

Now, most of you know what I mean by resident assistant rounds, but for those of you who don’t, I’ll explain. Each evening the RAs in all of our residence halls wander through the rooms and apartments on campus. There are two reasons to do that: first, the RAs are on the lookout for health and safety issues. But more importantly, and especially in the residence halls for first-year students (such as C complex, where I went), the RAs are making sure that the first-year students are adapting well to college life.

Now, imagine the surprise of these first-year students, men and women alike, when the president of their University walks into their rooms or apartments unexpectedly. I am happy to report that they seemed to accept me easily, and stopped what they were doing to introduce themselves, say hello, and get acquainted.

I am also happy to report that I found them doing what you might expect a group of first-year college students to be doing on a Thursday evening in October, five weeks into their University of Hartford experience. Quite a few were assembled in small groups watching television “Friends” was by far the most popular show, followed closely by the baseball playoffs and a college football game, while others were just hanging around the common areas talking.

In one room I found a dozen young men clustered around two tables playing poker (I was delighted to find that students still play card games, having spent many hours of my own college life doing that), and in another I found three guitarists who had just met each other jamming together for the first time. Some students were engaged in the ubiquitous student pastime of instant messaging (the computer of choice, I can report, is now a laptop). In two cases I found three girls in a room chatting while one of them was also chatting via computer with a distant friend.

And, yes, I was absolutely delighted to find some of these students studying: two were doing an organic chemistry assignment, one was reading an art history text, and three students were working on essays for a Rhetoric, Language, and Culture class. I also found two students assembling a project for a sculpture class.

But what really impressed me about these students was their diversity. From all over the country and the world, of many different American racial and ethnic groups, these students were mixing easily with each other. They had in common only one thing, really. They were all students at the University of Hartford.

This aspect of college life—students’ socialization, as the sociologists would say—is frequently overlooked when talking about the importance of diversity in a college environment. Forming friendships with people who are different from you is an essential aspect of a university experience. Learning about people from different religious, ethnic, or racial backgrounds, learning about people from different parts of the country or the world, are just as important lessons as those learned in class.

Over the past five years the University has had many accomplishments—I could cite lots of statistics that would support the real resurgence of spirit here. None is more important, however, than this: we have increased the percentage of students of color in our undergraduate student body from 13 to 17 percent. We have done this by seeking the best possible students without regard to race and by working hard to make the value of a University of Hartford experience known in schools and communities around the country and world.

At the same time, we have been able to increase the number of our international students this year, despite a world made more tense by terrorism and international strife, and increasingly more immigration procedures that have resulted from this. International students at the University now number 384; about four percent of our undergraduate student body is international.

Throughout its history the University of Hartford has offered a first-quality education to students from the widest variety of backgrounds. It is an important part of our heritage. Once a predominately local university, we now serve students from 46 states and 70 countries. But we continue to be dedicated to serving students of promise whatever their background.

So, over 20 percent of our undergraduate students are either American students of color or students from outside the United States. All of our students, whatever their background, benefit from this. I could see that quite clearly on those Thursday night rounds—either at the poker tables, in front of the television, or working out some thorny chemistry problem. These students were learning as much about each other as they were about the world around them. That is precisely what a university education should be.