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# Residential learning communities : what are they? why do we have them? are they here to stay?

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## Residential learning communities : what are they? why do we have them? are they here to stay?

### **Abstract**

Higher education administrators have been challenged with creating optimal learning and developmental environments, and have identified residence halls as one area on college campuses that can be used as a tool in promoting learning. In order to be more purposeful in creating learning environments, housing administrators have created residential learning communities. The communities discussed in this paper have centered around freshmen interest groups, academic areas and majors, and common interests. The majority of information available to this point has been very positive. However, more information is needed before it is certain that the communities are worth the money that institutions are spending to implement the communities.

The question remains: Are residential learning communities here to stay? I believe that Cross (1998) said it best when she answered her own question about the future of learning communities. She said, "the current wave of interest in learning communities is not, I think, just nostalgia for the human touch, or just about the efficacy of small-group learning, but a fundamental revolution."

**RESIDENTIAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES:**

**WHAT ARE THEY? WHY DO WE HAVE THEM? ARE THEY HERE TO STAY?**

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**by**

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## Introduction

The American College Personnel Association released The Student Learning Imperative in 1994. The Imperative called for improvements in the quality of undergraduate education and stressed the importance of combining the in-class and out-of-class experiences of undergraduate students. Later that year Schroeder and Mable published Realizing the Educational Potential of Residence Halls (1994). In the book's forward section, Marchese answered the Imperative's call. Marchese stated that residence halls were one of the key areas where improvement of undergraduate education could take place. He believed that residence halls were the ideal venue due to the great numbers of students who reside in the halls and because of the many opportunities that existed to influence these students.

Marchese's idea put residence halls in the spotlight and prompted institutions to take a deep look at their residence halls. Residence hall systems were challenged to come up with housing options "to reinforce classroom learning and to enhance students' commitment to college" (Pike, Schroeder, & Berry, 1997). One response from campuses across the nation was the implementation of residential learning communities (Schroeder, 1994).

The purpose of this paper is to review research on residence halls that led up to the development of residential learning communities and to look at several different residential learning community models that are currently in place at American colleges and universities.

### Review of Research on Benefits of Residence Halls

A great deal of research has been done on the impact of residence halls on college students' academic development, cognitive development, and personal development. The research on the impact of residence hall environments concerning academic achievement has produced some mixed results, while research on student cognitive and personal development has favored

students living in residence halls. Examples of studies on students' academic, cognitive, and personal development are described in the following section.

### Academic Development

The research that has been conducted on students' academic development has primarily been based on grade-point averages. Several researchers have found that students living in residence halls experience higher academic gains than students who do not live in residence halls (Astin, 1973; May, 1974; Chickering, 1975; Nowack & Hanson, 1985; Simono, Wachowiak, & Furr, 1984). However, there is also research available that indicates no substantial differences in academic performance between residential and nonresidential students (Houstras & Brandt, 1970; Blimling, 1994).

Blimling (1994) completed a meta-analysis of 21 studies on grade performance and students' residential status and found that living in a residence hall provided students neither an advantage nor a disadvantage academically compared to living at home. That is, academic achievement as measured by students' grades did not differ significantly between residential and nonresidential students. Blimling did find a small statistical advantage to residential students versus those students living in private off-campus housing or Greek housing.

### Cognitive Development

Pascarella (1993) took academic achievement of residential and nonresidential students beyond grade-point averages and into the area of student development. Pascarella's research on the cognitive impacts of living on campus versus commuting to college favored living on campus. His study measured the cognitive development of students during their first year of college and found that freshmen residential students had a significantly larger gain than commuter students in

critical thinking.

Pascarella (1989) found that one of the factors that encouraged cognitive development was students' social and intellectual interaction with other students and faculty members. Pascarella pointed out that students who reside on campus have greater interaction with faculty and peers than those students who live off-campus. In addition, students who experienced greater intellectual and social interaction with faculty reported higher levels of institutional and educational satisfaction (Endo & Harpel, 1982). Clarke, Meer, and Roberts (1988) completed a study involving faculty presence in residence halls. They found that faculty involvement was associated with increased student interest in academic goals, career interests, social relationships, and institutional satisfaction.

### Personal Development

Residence halls also play an important role in the personal development of students. Residential students are more likely to be involved on campus than students living off-campus. When students are involved on campus several positive gains in personal development can occur. Students involved in out-of-class experiences are more likely to hold leadership positions, to be challenged with personal and social issues, and to be exposed to people from different backgrounds. Kuh indicated that highly-involved students are "encouraged to develop more complicated views on personal, academic, and other matters, and provided with opportunities for synthesizing and integrating material presented in the formal academic program" (Kuh, 1995, p. 146).

There seems to be little doubt that college students see out-of-class experiences as important to their development. A Grinnell College student is quoted by Kuh in his article on the personal development of students involved in out-of-class experiences:

One of the things I remember my mother telling me was not to let my studies interfere with my education. What she meant, I guess, was that there are important things to learn at college in addition to classes....she was right. (Kuh, 1995, p. 149).

The research described above has shown that traditional residence halls can play a role in the academic and personal development of students. However, Schroeder pointed out that "traditional approaches to residential life usually disregard the significance of essential conditions that foster learning and personal development-- such conditions as the creation of reference groups with common interests, shared and controlled space, transcendent values, and broad-based member involvement" (1994, p. 169). In order to be more purposeful in promoting student learning and development, residence life programs across America have created residential learning communities. These communities bring together under one roof students with common interests and then purposefully promote student interaction with faculty and peers, student involvement in leadership opportunities, and other out-of-classroom activities that foster student learning and development.

### Residential Learning Communities

#### Learning Community Definitions

Michigan State University is credited with pioneering the concept of living learning communities during the 1960's. Learning communities at Michigan State were developed around academic programs and around common interests among the students. An example of a living learning community that involves the common interests of students is the Multi-Racial Unity Living Experience, built around the concept of seeking to find more effective ways to live and work in an increasingly diverse world community. The community members do not take similar academic courses, but they do participate in a variety of organized activities based on multi-racial

unity (Michigan State University).

Astin (1985, p. 161) defined learning communities as "small subgroups of students... characterized by a common sense of purpose... that can be used to build a sense of group identity, cohesiveness, and uniqueness that encourage continuity and the integration of diverse curricular and co-curricular experiences. Astin then added to the definition of learning communities by focusing on residential learning communities. Astin saw residential learning communities as communities that "encourage continuity and the integration of diverse curricular and co-curricular experiences."

There appears to be some disagreement as to the definition of residential learning communities. Researchers such as Astin believe residential learning communities must include a focus on education that takes place within the classroom. Institutions such as Michigan State University view residential learning communities as an opportunity to bring together students with common interests and do not necessarily involve formal classroom learning. For the purposes of this study I will take into the account both residential learning communities based on academic programs and residential learning communities based on common student interests outside of the classroom.

### Purposes of Learning Communities

Colleges and universities have developed learning community models on their campuses to meet several educational outcomes for students. Many of the purposes are described in Alexander Astin's What Matters in College (1993). Astin listed several factors that enhance the general educational outcomes for students: student-student interaction, student-faculty interaction, student-oriented faculty, discussion of racial/ethnic issues with other students,

tutoring other students, socializing with diverse students, social activism, and time spent studying. Housing administrators have taken Astin's factors into account when developing learning communities.

At the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education learning communities are designed "to arrange the curricular time and space of both students and faculty to foster community, coherence and connections among courses, and more sustained intellectual interaction between students, and among students and teachers" (DiBrito, 1999). The following examples of learning community models directly relate to Astin's factors that enhance general educational outcomes and the Washington Center for Improving Quality of Undergraduate Education's list of purposes of learning communities.

### Residential Learning Community Models

Learning community models can be divided into three basic categories: Freshmen Interest Groups, academic areas and majors, and common interest themes. Descriptions and examples of each of the models is provided in the following section.

#### Freshmen Interest Groups

Freshmen Interest Groups (FIGs) are the learning communities that are the most common of all the three types of learning communities, particularly at large institutions. The overall goal of FIGs is to create a small, effective academic community within a larger setting. Residential FIG members live together in a residence hall, generally on the same floor, and are commonly co-registered in three courses of general studies with the guidance of peer mentors and faculty members. The FIG members are also linked by a first-year seminar class (DiBrito, 1999).

Peer advisors and faculty representatives are an important component of the FIG model. The peer advisors are generally upper-class students who serve as role models for the first-year

students within the FIG. The peer advisors are responsible for planning activities for the group of students, acting as mentors to the students, and assisting with study sessions. FIGs are generally managed by faculty members. The faculty members serve as academic advisors to the group members if the FIGs are based on an academic program. The faculty members implement special discussion groups within the learning community, aid students within study groups, and assist with special activities such as field trips. The faculty members are generally linked to a first-year seminar class within the institution.

The University of Missouri has developed a first-year student residence hall consisting of FIGs. The groups of students live in the same residence hall and take a cluster of three classes together. An example of one of their Freshman Interest Groups is labeled the Spectrum of Behavior. Students in this particular FIG are housed in Hudson Hall and are registered in general psychology, college algebra, and general biology. The students also participate together in a freshman seminar (Levine, Smith, Tinto, & Gardner, 1999).

### Academic Areas and Majors

A second type of residential learning community is found within a department of study. This type of learning community is generally referred to as coordinated studies, linked courses, or clusters. The use of these terms is related to the number of classes the residential learning community members take together. The coordinated studies model favors a full curriculum of integrated courses. This usually represents sixteen credit hours for the students and is usually found within academic majors. The linked courses and clusters are more common among learning communities. The linked classes are the simplest learning community and use block scheduling to link sets of classes together. The clusters are an extended version of linked courses,

clustering together three to four courses.

Minnesota State University, Mankato, has developed learning communities based on areas of study. Their learning communities carry titles such as Business and Economics, Biology and Life Sciences, Personal Financial Management, and The World of Psychology. The women who live on the Business and Economics floor in Mankato's McElroy Complex all take Economics 210 and the Principles of Macroeconomics together. The men who live on 1st floor McElroy Complex are involved in the Personal Financial Management learning community and take Personal Financial Management and Finance 100 together (Minnesota State University, Mankato).

Currently eight colleges within Iowa State University are working with residential learning communities based on area of study. The colleges that sponsor residential learning communities range from Engineering to Family and Consumer Sciences. The learning community in the College of Engineering is open to first and second year engineering majors. The focus of the community is to create a learning environment within the halls that assists students in the pursuit of engineering degrees. The students within the learning community take math and chemistry courses together. They live on a floor with a peer mentor within the same major. The residential learning community also includes career exploration programs, faculty mentoring, and social activities (Iowa State University).

### Theme Housing

The third type of residential learning community is referred to as theme housing. Theme housing does not always involve students engaging in the same series of courses. This type of learning community may not involve any similar course requirements. The theme learning communities are very diverse in topics and in how they are managed. Institutions have developed

theme housing around college mission statements and student's grade point averages. Some universities have even allowed for students to develop their own residential learning community themes.

Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa, has residential learning communities that emphasize its mission statement. The College's mission statement involves students making a commitment to lives of leadership and service. Therefore, one of the residence halls at the College has been dedicated to the promotion of service. The students who reside in this learning community are involved in year-long service within the community. The projects range from assisting the local parks and recreation department to assisting with an urban soup kitchen. Each service project is advised by a faculty member and the students attend service-related seminars for reflection (Wartburg College, 1999).

The University of Missouri-Columbia has a residential learning community based on women's issues. The program is named E.V.A. Success after Eva Johnston, who was associated with the University for over forty years as a student and faculty member. The goal of the program is to inspire women to reach beyond their expectations. The community provides programs centered around women's issues, upper-class mentor students, in-hall study sessions and computer labs, along with programs by local female leaders on career exploration (Dykhouse & Fanale, 1999).

The themes involved in residential learning communities are very diverse. Stanford University has four residences based on cross-cultural themes, Mexican-American, Asian-American, American-Indian, and African-American culture (Kuh, Schuh, & Witt, 1991). The University of Maryland offers a residential learning community around the theme of advocating

for children which contains students from a variety of majors who have the future goal of working with children. The University of Washington has developed a learning community centered around the needs of transfer students.

The use of residential learning community models has created several opportunities for institutions to promote student learning outside of the classroom. There are also a number of other benefits for institutions and students when residential learning communities are developed on campus.

### Benefits of Residential Learning Communities

#### Student Benefits

Learning communities give students the feel of a small college but the advantage of large university. The size of learning communities generally ranges from 12 students to 60 students. The smaller sizes allow students to interact with groups of other students and faculty members who enjoy similar interests. This in return assists students with the transition phase from their high schools into large colleges or universities. One student involved in the RISE learning community at MSU had this to say: "The RISE Program is a great program for incoming freshmen. It gives students a chance to make a huge university small and familiar" (Michigan State University, p. 11).

A recent study completed by Pike (1999) described several benefits to students in learning communities when compared to students living in traditional residence halls. Pike found that students in learning communities had "significantly higher levels of involvement, interaction, integration, and gains in learning and intellectual development than did students in traditional residence halls" (p. 269).

The University of Missouri-Columbia has completed studies on their learning community

students in relationship to students who were not involved in the communities. Students enrolled in learning communities at UMC had higher grade point averages, were more likely to attend classes, were more likely to seek out academic assistance, and were less likely to be involved in discipline situations (DiBrito, 1999).

### Institutional Benefits

Institutions that have implemented learning communities have also benefited from their development. One measurable way that institutions have benefited is in student retention rates. The University of Missouri-Columbia measured the retention rates of learning community students versus those students not involved in learning communities. The University found that 89% of first year students involved in learning communities returned the next year as opposed to 81% who were not involved (DiBrito, 1999). Colleges and universities that have implemented learning communities have also seen a jump in the institutional satisfaction rates from students living in learning communities (Clark, Miser, & Roberts, 1988).

### Discussion

Institutions are spending millions of dollars each year in an attempt to create perfect living learning environments based on years of research of traditional residence halls. Yet, the number of research studies on the effects of residential leaning communities is limited. The research that does exist on residential learning communities has been limited to institutional research.

The advent of residential learning communities has opened up an entirely new area for research regarding any benefits that may result from their use. Several areas of research are needed on residential learning communities.

1. Researchers need to continue to explore the grade-point averages of students

participating in learning communities versus those living on traditional residence hall floors. Several institutions have created residential learning communities as a way of creating more conducive learning environments for students. It would also be interesting to complete a comparison study on large institutions versus small institutions involving residential learning communities to ascertain if the size of institution matters when using residential learning communities to promote academic development.

2. Another area of research that is needed involves students' attitudes and perceptions about the different residential learning community models: FIGs, academic areas and majors, and common interest living environments. Research on how the students respond to learning community models would be helpful to those institutions in the process of building their own learning communities.

3. Needs assessment research is needed before institutions build residential learning communities. Research that is conducted on the various types of residential learning communities will be able to tell us if students want more learning to take place in the halls. While many students favor learning communities, a common concern from students is that residence halls should be a place for students to get away from formal learning and take a break. Do students want more formal structures in the residence halls?

4. Institutions creating residential learning communities need to be concerned with how diversity is altered in the halls. Housing departments see living in residence halls as an opportunity to learn to live with those that are different than yourself as one of the benefits of living in the residence halls. However, the students who are involved in residential learning have at least one major interest in common. Do residential learning communities depreciate this goal of residence life departments? Further research needs to be conducted on how residential learning

communities effect community diversity.

5. Many institutions implement residential learning communities to increase student satisfaction. One important component of residential learning communities is the small numbers of students that belong to each community. The learning communities can make a large university appear smaller to students because they have found a community within their floor of people with similar interests. Therefore, another interesting way to measure the success of residential learning communities would be to look at the student retention rates of learning community members versus those living on traditional residence hall floors or those students living off-campus.

6. Satisfaction rates and student retention need to be taken beyond institutional research. It would be interesting to compare the satisfaction rates of students involved at small institutions versus large universities. Small colleges use the small atmosphere as one of their selling points to students. Are residential learning communities more successful at creating student satisfaction at large universities versus small colleges?

Those interested in residential learning communities should expect to see a great deal of research on these communities published over the next few years. Institutions are just starting to develop assessment tools to measure their residential learning communities. The research will guide housing administrators in future housing decisions. K. Patricia Cross (1998) has asked: "Are learning communities just another fad or an idea whose time has truly come" (p. 4). Only time and research will tell if residential learning communities are here to stay or are just a passing trend in student housing.

### Conclusion

Higher education administrators have been challenged with creating optimal learning

and developmental environments and have identified residence halls as one area on college campuses that can be used as a tool in promoting learning. In order to be more purposeful in creating learning environments housing administrators have created residential learning communities. The communities discussed in this paper have centered around freshmen interest groups, academic areas and majors, and common interests.

The majority of information available on residential learning communities to this point has been very positive. However, more information is needed on residential learning communities before it is certain that the communities are worth the money that institutions are spending to implement the communities.

The question remains: Are residential learning communities here to stay? I believe that Cross (1998) said it best when she answered her own question about the future of learning communities. She said, "the current wave of interest in learning communities is not, I think, just nostalgia for the human touch, or just about the efficacy of small-group learning, but a fundamental revolution" (p. 7).

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