

Reflection/Study Abroad

ISSN: 2162-3104 Print/ ISSN: 2166-3750 Online
Volume 4, Issue 2 (2014), pp. 191-195
©*Journal of International Students*
<http://jistudents.org/>

The Global Neighborhood: Programming Initiatives with International Living-Learning Communities

Sarah McClanahan (Graduate Student)
International Student Services
University of South Carolina (USA)

The United States is currently enrolling more international students than any other country in the world. In 2011, approximately 764,000 international students were enrolled in higher education in the U.S., comprising 19% of the world's total students studying internationally (Institute of International Education, 2012). This rise, as well as the rapid globalization occurring within the United States, has brought about a need for students and staff in higher education to be equipped to communicate cross-culturally and have an understanding of global issues. International living-learning communities (I-LLCs) are a way for universities to provide opportunities for domestic students and international students to live together and gain global knowledge through first-hand experiences and programs directed at international issues. While I-LLCs are not necessarily common across the U.S., many institutions are in the process of creating such programs in order to expand the global focus of their institutions. The purpose of this article is to lay a foundation of what I-LCCs are and to discuss ways to effectively program within these communities.

What Are International Living-Learning Communities (I-LLCs)?

Living learning communities (LLCs) were developed to provide students with a community to connect personal, professional, and academic experiences on a daily basis. I-LLCs specifically have stemmed from international houses, the first being established at Pennsylvania University in 1908 by Dr. Waldo Stevenson. Dr. Stevenson befriended a group of Chinese students and after learning of their difficulties, he opened up his apartment as a safe space for cross-cultural discussion. Soon after, an international house opened up in New York, and over the course of the next century spread to six different countries: the U.S., France, Australia, England, New Zealand, and Canada (Lott, 2012). As an offshoot of international houses, I-LLCs have become an opportunity for Housing departments to provide a safe haven for cross-cultural dialogue within their on-campus housing. For the purposes of this article, an I-LLC is considered to be an internationally-focused campus community where international and domestic students live together within a residence hall.

The benefits of I-LLCs are numerous. In addition to an increased knowledge of other cultures, research findings have shown that students involved in multicultural education initiatives gain numerous benefits including reduction of prejudice, an ability to think critically about social

issues, and increased confidence in uncertain situations (Hornak & Ortiz, 2004). Programs are typically offered that encourage the development and involvement of students on international issues. These issues include, but are not limited to, cross-cultural communication, cultural awareness, international politics, social justice and international education. With the proper facilitation and planning, these issues can be discussed in a safe and educational environment, allowing both domestic and international students to learn from each other. These communities are a tremendous opportunity to positively influence the students who are involved; however, I-LLCs are unique and require extensive sensitivity and planning in order to reach their full potential.

Steps to Effective Programming

Do Your Research

It is vital for student affairs professionals to know what is currently working at other institutions. Bowling Green State University sponsors “The Residential Learning Communities International Registry” (2012) on their Residential Learning Communities International Clearinghouse website, which provides information on other I-LLCs and how they function. Programmers do not need to reinvent the wheel; it is important to take advantage of the successes of other institutions. Being able to research and take best practices of other I-LLCs can be a priceless asset, but it is important to keep in mind that each institution is different. These differences make it necessary to pick and choose only those aspects of other schools’ programs that are congruent with your institution. For example, programs designed for a large-scale I-LLC would either need to be adapted or not used within a smaller community of 20 residents.

Identify Key Players

When considering establishing or improving on an I-LLC, it is important to pinpoint the offices on campus that already are invested partners in the promotion and facilitation of international issues. These potential key players can be sought out by networking with offices who are not yet involved, but who would benefit the LLC. Common offices that identify as key players with international LLCs can include, but are not limited to: international student offices, foreign language departments, international admissions, and study abroad offices.

For example, the new faculty principal, Dr. Lee Walker, of The International House at Maxcy College at the University of South Carolina made it his first priority to build connections around campus. In addition to International Student Services and the Study Abroad Office at USC, Dr. Walker and the staff at Maxcy have also begun building academic ties with departments and faculty campus wide. One example of this outreach is Dr. Walker’s new program, “A Research Assistant Exchange.” This program allows Maxcy students the opportunity to be paired with a faculty member and work as a research assistant. This program provides residents with academic development and also allows Maxcy to further establish invested partners across campus by getting faculty members involved with its residents (L. Walker, personal communication, September 19, 2012).

Know Your Students

Research the key populations of students at your institution. Each institution has differing dynamics and mixtures of nationalities and cultures. An example of this can be seen by looking at specific percentages of international student populations by state. For example, in Iowa,

approximately 40% of the international students pursuing higher education are from China, making China the leading place of origin in the state for international students (Institute of International Education, 2012). Contrarily, in Texas, the leading place of origin for international students is India, with approximately 20% of international students hailing from that country (Institute for International Education, 2012). Awareness of the student populations on a national, state, and institutional level will guide the programs that will best serve the needs of an I-LLC student population.

Become Culturally Aware

It is important for faculty and staff associated with the I-LLC to educate themselves on cultural differences. Having a basic knowledge of intercultural issues, differing religions, and cultural customs will not only prevent potentially offensive programs from taking place, but will also facilitate the development of programs that will best meet the needs of international students. Take advantage of the resources offered by the international student services and study abroad offices as they can be extremely helpful educational resources on cultural differences. Offering intercultural communication training to staff, faculty, and residents is a necessary foundation for successful intercultural experiences for all involved with an I-LLC.

Develop Goals

It is vital to connect with the invested partners on campus and collaborate on learning outcomes and goals of the I-LLC. Without goals, there is nothing to work towards and an I-LLC is not likely to fulfill its purpose or reach its full potential. For example, a goal of the McTyeire International House at Vanderbilt University is to provide outlets for residents to improve the fluency of a pursued foreign language. Therefore, at certain activities, students are required to speak only in their target language with other speakers of the same language (Vanderbilt University Office of Housing & Residential Education, n.d.).

Other I-LLCs, such as the International House (I-House) at the University of California, Berkeley have initiated programs to prioritize and promote global leadership. Residents at the I-House are able to take part in the “Intercultural Leadership Initiative,” a five-month program that covers topics such as cross-cultural conflict resolution and leadership styles (International House University of California, Berkeley, n.d.). According to the I-House Director of Programs, Dr. Liliane Koziol, “All programs done within I-House and its Intercultural Leadership Initiative are tied in with one of its three foundational pillars: cross-cultural understanding and respect, developing life-long friendships, and developing leadership skills for residents and affiliates to promote a more tolerant and peaceful world” (personal communication, March 20, 2013). Depending on individual institutions, realistic goals will look differently, so it is important to establish goals that are attainable based on student population, institutional structure and campus resources.

Utilize Student Leaders

Take advantage of the knowledge and experiences of student leaders within the I-LLC, including hall government, resident assistants (RAs), and graduate assistants. Students are typically the most immersed members in an I-LLC and can provide valuable feedback on the effectiveness of its programs. They also understand the struggles and current issues facing students today and can provide relevant and useful programming ideas. At the University of Washington, Resident Director Kira Newman oversees the Global Experience Community. Newman realizes the importance of optimizing the strengths of her RAs, “My goal is to keep the RAs in our Global

Experience Community energized. If they are energized and excited, then odds are their residents will be too,” says Newman (personal communication, October 12, 2012). She utilizes her RAs in a variety of ways, ranging from having them create innovative programs to personalizing even the smaller tasks, such as weekly bulletin board themes.

Establish a Hub

Providing a centralized hub for internationally-related events and organizations can greatly benefit an I-LLC. It will provide a consistency that will assist in getting the word out to the university about the LLC. Utilizing social networking can be an important avenue for reaching out to today’s technologically savvy students. For example, at the University of South Carolina, the International House at Maxcy College uses a Facebook page to get the word out about international events and programs, in addition to posting photos from events. Not only is the I-LLC housed at Maxcy, but International Student Services and the Study Abroad Office also schedule most of their events to take place there, which further solidifies its reputation as the central location for all things international (L. Walker, personal communication, September 19, 2012).

Conclusion

Building a successful I-LLC can be a challenge, as there are unique and sensitive areas that need to be considered. However, continued globalization and increasing numbers of international students reveal the need for, and importance of, I-LLCs. I-LLCs have the potential to positively influence and educate both domestic and international students in numerous ways. The practical steps mentioned in this article can provide a foundation from which to improve the programming initiatives of I-LLCs, and the I-LLCs featured can provide ideas about best practices that can be adapted to fit the culture of your institution. As educators, we have the opportunity to make the world a little smaller and a little safer by providing students with an opportunity through I-LLCs to learn about international issues and to build relationships across cultures.

References

- Bowling Green State University International Residential Learning Communities Clearinghouse. (2012). *The residential learning communities international registry*. Retrieved from <http://pcc.bgsu.edu/rlcch/submissions/index.html>
- Farrugia, C.A., Bhandari, R., and Chow, P. (2012). Global student mobility: A changing landscape. In *Open doors 2012 report on international educational exchange* (pp. 35). New York: Institute of International Education.
- Hornak, A. M., & Ortiz, A. M. (2004). Creating a context to promote diversity education and self authorship among community college students. In M. B. Magolda & P.M. King (Eds.), *Learning partnerships: Theory and models of practice to educate for self Authorship*, (pp. 91-122). Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- International House University of California, Berkeley. (n.d.). *Educational initiatives for residents*. Retrieved from http://ihouse.berkeley.edu/programs/workshops_residents.php
- Institute of International Education. (2012). *Open doors 2011 fast facts*. Retrieved from http://www.iie.org/en/Research-and-Publications/~/_media/Files/Corporate/Open-Doors/Fast-Facts/Fast%20Facts%202011.ashx
- Lott, K. (2012, January). Welcome to our house. *Talking Stick*, 38. Retrieved from http://www.nxtbook.com/nxtbooks/acuho/talkingstick_201201/#/2

- Vanderbilt University Office of Housing & Residential Education. (n.d.). *McTyeire International House*. Retrieved from <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/ResEd/main/residential-education/living-learning-communities/mctyeire-international-house/>
- Zhao, C. M., & Kuh, G.D. (2004). Adding value: Learning communities and student engagement. *Research in Higher Education*, 45(2), 115-138.

About the Author:

Sarah McClanahan is a second-year graduate student in the Higher Education and Student Affairs program at the University of South Carolina. Sarah works as a Graduate Assistant in International Student Services where she coordinates international programming initiatives, including the Buddies Beyond Borders and Carolina Intercultural Training programs. She attended Iowa State University and obtained her BA in Communication Studies. She studied abroad in Scotland in 2010, where she fell in love with Celtic music and caught the travel bug. She has participated in service trips to El Salvador, Mexico, Spain, and has spent time traveling through Europe and China. Sarah can be reached at sarah.j.mcclanahan@gmail.com