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Living and Learning Communities: One University's Journey

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Abstract

University housing has the capacity to offer more than comfortable living spaces, and campuses across the U.S., including our own, are exploring models of residential learning communities that provide both academic and social support students while cultivating a strong sense of community. In this article, we describe our campus foray into offering a new residential learning community model. We explain its origins, its evolution, and the questions we face now that we have successfully created a second approach to living learning communities on our campus.

Keywords

Academic Success, Persistence, Learning Satisfaction

Exploring Variations within Residential Learning Communities

Although providing adequate housing, meals, and custodial services on university campuses remains fundamental to residential life, it is no longer the sole priority. Residence halls have become incubators for intentionally designed social and learning experiences. As a result, these spaces function as communities that advance scholarship and character among their members. According to Wilson, Anderson, Peluso, Priest, and Speer (2009), character develops through membership in a group of like-minded academics who clarify and sharpen a person's values. The more students are drawn to the values of a community, the more likely they are to return (Jaffee, 2007; Frazier & Eighmy, 2012). Moreover, the academic values and support experienced by an individual within a community builds academic capacity beyond that of an isolated learner (Zhao & Kuh, 2004; Purdie & Rosser, 2011).

Residential learning communities are not a new phenomenon on campuses (Huerta, 2004; Jaffee, 2007; Summers, Beretvas, Svinicki, & Gorin, 2005; Tinto 2000; Yancy et al., 2008). However, with the exception of articles focused on STEM Living Learning Communities, there is a paucity of available literature that focuses on residential communities coalescing around careers. Yet national and international demands for highly qualified and trained professionals cannot be ignored (Aaronson et al., 2014). Universities are at the forefront of preparing young men and women to work collaboratively and collectively to generate creative solutions for uncertain times.

The following article examines two types of residential learning communities at Southeast Missouri State, a mid-size state university along the banks of the Mississippi River. Southeast Missouri has a rich history dating back to the post-civil war years. Currently, it serves approximately 6,000 students with a 74% freshman-to-sophomore retention rate, and it has 13 residence halls (Southeast Missouri State University, 2017).

Community Incubators of Success

Vincent Tinto, a leading researcher in the area of college student persistence and retention, has maintained that academic progress alone does not dictate a student's persistence. He found that "successful students find a supportive community of faculty, staff, and other students" (Soldner, Lee & Duby, 1999/2000, p. 116). Not surprisingly, a review of the history of residence halls shows that they were initially conceived to help create supportive communities along these lines, not only as living quarters "but also to provide educational support services to the university by creating and maintaining a learning environment...for the personal, scholastic, and social improvement of the residents" (Frederiksen, as cited in Wallace, 1980, p. 23). The idea of helping students achieve their educational goals

by creating a sense of community in the residence hall is not new (Blimling, 2003). Berger (1997) argues that positive feelings of community and sense of belonging engendered through residence hall experiences helps students become more “fully connected, or more integrated, into the broader campus social system” (p. 441). Greater integration, or involvement, means that students have more opportunities to create connections with other students and with the institution, which helps make them a part of the campus community (Astin, 1999; Boyer, 1987; Hart, 1996; Mosier, 1996; Zeller, 1996).

Unfortunately, at our campus, factors such as design, location, intention, and programming have not always been aligned in ways that create these intentional, supportive academic and social communities. The potential for increasing the value of the residence hall environment encouraged administrators and faculty alike to investigate the opportunities these halls could provide to enhance student learning and help students build connections to others at the institution.

Reflecting on our two models

In general, Southeast Missouri State understands the value of residential life and student community. A 2010 study comparing suite-style and community-style residential settings revealed that at the conclusion of a student’s first semester, students’ GPAs were notably different. The suite-style residents demonstrated higher grade point averages than community-style residents. Further, results indicated that suite-style students were more academically oriented than students in the community style of living (Skinner, 2011). Our president has challenged the campus to reach 80% student retention in the next three years, and residential learning communities will be part of that effort. Before implementing changes, however, we needed more precise information about the impact of varied residential learning communities. So, we decided to explore student perceptions of two types of residential learning communities.

On our campus, theme-based communities have a broad content focus, like honors, agriculture, and computer science. Resident Assistants (RAs) over-see the community content and are responsible for planning and implementing theme-based activities. Live and Learn communities have a direct academic component. The challenge for both Themed Communities and Live and Learn Communities is creating an environment that fully engages students in meeting their desired learning outcomes.

Themed Communities

Since the early 2000s, the Office of Residence Life has offered theme-based communities. These communities are facilitated by the Resident Assistants (RAs) and include faculty members through the programs offered on the floor. The RA’s

role with Themed Communities interlaces their responsibilities on the floor with their studies (Blimling, 1995; Murray, Snider, & Midkiff, 1999). At Southeast Missouri State, RAs work in the content community in which they have an area of interest. In order to lead a theme-based community, RAs must be in their second, third, or fourth year, and maintain a minimum grade point average (GPA) of 2.8. An intangible requisite for these RAs is their interpersonal skills. They must demonstrate openness to diversity and awareness for everyone participating in the community, not simply a small group of friends (Blimling, 2003). Finally, because the academic community is bounded by a theme, the RA must also be able to build relationships with faculty teaching content related to the Themed Community.

Connecting with content faculty facilitates a tighter coupling between the academic department and the Themed Community. RAs plan the programming for the residential learning space where faculty come to teach, listen, and spend time with students who share similar interests. While no set curriculum controls these events, RAs team with faculty to find opportunities beyond the classroom. For instance, an agriculture teacher may take students on a field trip to experience how hybrid cotton planting, studied in a class setting, can be applied to the fields resulting in a 40% greater yield per acre. Such an experience allows students to discover and construct knowledge for themselves and connects them with a broader community (Kerr & Tweedy, 2006). Through these opportunities, learning spaces for the University go well beyond the classroom and university campus.

Students who join the residential Themed Community do not join as a cohort. They each have their own class schedules. Some attend classes with others in the community, but not necessarily. However, the diverse schedules of themed community residents can become an asset. Because students bring varied experiences to their Themed Community, they can have rich discussions around different topics and ways of learning. RAs moderate these conversations, challenging the variety of ideas and helping students learn more about their own values (Blimling, 2003).

Live and Learn Community

The College of Education's Live and Learn Community has been in existence for four academic years, and it grew out of campus interest in exploring a more structured form of living learning community that tied residence hall experiences with coursework. At the same time, we were interested in exploring a living learning community structure that would be open to residents, but could also accommodate commuter students interested in particular fields of study. In contrast to Themed Communities, this new Live and Learn model includes a highly-structured design with added coursework. When it began, the intent was to

locate it in the newest residence hall, and the assumption was that the majority of students in the Live and Learn Community would live in that residence hall.

During the first year, 2013-2014, any student who declared majors in either the Department of Middle and Secondary Education or Elementary, Early and Special Education attended three core classes together (a freshmen seminar, speech, and an introduction to the teacher education course). The faculty coordinator for the community taught the freshmen seminar. Two of the courses were taught in the residence hall. The first group consisted of 23 students who needed various combinations of the required coursework: three did not need the freshmen seminar and eight did not need speech. In addition, seven students in the first cohort did not live in the residence hall assigned to this Live and Learn Community, three lived in other residence halls, and four were commuter students.

The second year of this community, 2014-2015, course arrangements changed. The faculty coordinator wanted to have class contact with the students throughout the academic year. Consequently, in the fall, participating students took the freshmen seminar and speech. All but four of the students in this Live and Learn Community enrolled in the freshman seminar taught by the faculty coordinator. Of these four, three wanted to be in an honor's section of the seminar. Both freshmen seminar and speech were taught in the residence hall, and both instructors worked together in course planning. In the spring, students were enrolled in the introduction to the teacher education program (taught by the faculty coordinator in the residence hall) and an introduction to psychology course. The 23 students were majors from both departments and all lived in the assigned residence hall.

During the third year, the College of Education's Live and Learn Community divided into two communities. One community served students in the Middle and Secondary Department, and the existing community served students from the Elementary, Early and Special Education Department. Each community had its own faculty coordinator. The original coordinator obtained Faculty Honors status in order to serve those students in both communities who had a concern about not meeting honors coursework requirements. Of the 22 students enrolled in the Elementary, Early and Special Education Community, just four lived outside the assigned residence hall. In contrast, only eight of the Middle and Secondary Community students lived in the residence hall.

An RA who majored in education was assigned to each community in order to give additional support to the students. In 2013-2014 and 2014-2015, the original community had been supported with a Graduate Assistant as well. The Graduate Assistant position did not continue after the first two years. In 2015-2016, student mentors were also added to help students prepare for the state assessment required to be accepted in the education college. (The Live and Learn Communities paid the testing fees.) Both communities did service learning and

visited a Charter School associated with the College of Education. Additional field trips were planned to address students' need to conduct observation of classrooms. Each faculty coordinator planned monthly, evening educational activities. Students were expected to sign a contract agreeing to participate in these additional activities.

Retention in these Live and Learn Communities has been high compared with both overall university retention and retention of residents in any type of on campus housing. Overall retention at the University ranged between 74% to 77% in the period we are describing. Retention for students living in campus housing in 2013 was 72%; in 2014, it was 74%; and in 2015 it was 75%. Retention in the original Live and Learn Community in 2013 was 77.27%. In 2014, it was 96.30%. In 2015, retention in the Elementary, Early and Special Education Community was at 84.21% while retention in the new Middle and Secondary Community was 76.82%. (D. Rogers-Adkinson, personal communication, October 27, 2016).

Community Inquiry

To get a better understanding of students' perceptions of these two types of residential learning communities, we administered a twenty-nine item survey to forty-nine residents, asking them about the quality of the learning environment, opportunities for building relationships, and academic success. Twenty four students lived in a Themed Community and 25 lived in a Live and Learn Community. Students from both communities reported high satisfaction with their ability to network and build relationships around common academic interests. Students also expressed commitment to their residential experience. Every survey participant indicated the desire to return to the community in the coming fall semester.

While students reported strong support for whichever model they participated in, students in the Live and Learn community had a slightly more positive perception of their learning environment. Seventy percent of the Live and Learn students believed the community helped them become more successful. Sixty percent of the students from the Live and Learn community felt that through their experiences, they were able to strengthen their study skills. Live and Learn students also reported high levels of satisfaction with advising (95% were satisfied or extremely satisfied) and with leadership opportunities (98% were satisfied or extremely satisfied). Ninety-two percent of students in the Live and Learn program reported that they liked having a dedicated faculty assigned to their community, and that access to a faculty member facilitated just-in-time advising.

Where we are now

The following issues and questions emerged from our initial investigations about the efficacy of the Live and Learn Community on our campus. These questions also provide fresh lines of inquiry for learning more about how students learn from each other, find purpose for their academic interest, and persist to graduation.

Parental Influence

Since the Live and Learn model has begun at Southeast Missouri State University, faculty and residential staff have noticed that parents are often the first to show interest in their student becoming involved in the learning community. We know anecdotally that parents often name their interest in the extra support they perceive their student will receive in the more structured Live and Learn Community. We would like to investigate who actually makes the decision about enrolling in the Live and Learn program. Do parents influence their student, or do the students have final say in choosing to be a part of a specialized community? And if the initial decision makers are parents, what does that mean for our programming?

Residence Hall Types

On our campus, we offer suite-style (four roommates share one bathroom) and community-style (many students share one large bathroom) living situations. Previous research at our university showed that first-year students in a suite-style building had a slightly higher cumulative GPA than students living in a community-style building (Skinner, 2011). In addition, because they allow for co-ed living, suite-style halls offer greater flexibility for housing learning communities. It therefore makes sense that all of the current Live and Learn and Themed Communities are housed in suite-style halls. However, suite-style housing on our campus is more expensive than community-style housing, which could create a barrier for some students. Moving both kinds of residential learning communities into community-style halls removes cost barriers but raises a major question about how best to operationalize the design of the Living and Learning Communities when each floor is single gender. How do we negotiate between the goal of making Living and Learning Communities accessible to students who will benefit, and the limitations of the way different residence halls are configured?

Roles of RA's

The role of the RA is an important one. RAs who work with Live and Learn Communities support what is done in the classroom through educational and community development activities. RAs in Themed Communities are responsible

for providing educational activities surrounding their theme but they don't have connections with the classroom, relying instead on the RAs themselves and their connection to major areas/departments. Is that loose association strong enough for students to feel connected to that major, department or faculty members? We need to learn more about the roles RA's play, and perhaps could play, in these two different models.

More than one year for the Live and Learn Community?

The Live and Learn Community is designed for one academic year. Theme-based communities typically maintain their housing and community relationships all four years. They aren't structured around required courses, and students' interest in the theme may well extend through their time at Southeast. Some Live and Learn students have voiced interest in continuing a relationship as a community, and in 2016, members of the current Live and Learn Community were chosen from the current group to become mentors for the new incoming freshmen. These students will continue living in the residence hall. Can we do more to create community for Live and Learn students who want to continue together without faculty involvement and common course work? Do we figure out how to transition Live and Learn Communities into smaller themed communities?

Non-Residential Students

Non-traditional students are rarely included in living-learning communities because they typically live off campus. It is difficult for them to have the same experience as students assigned to a residential community. However, the non-traditional student brings valuable life experiences and broad perspective on real-world problems and solutions, and we have non-resident students in our education programs. How can we involve our non-resident students in our Live and Learn Community?

We are excited about the evolutions in residential learning communities at Southeast. We see the future of Southeast housing focusing on the adoption of more Live and Learn Communities. We look forward to sharing more about our practice as it evolves.

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