

THE IMPACT OF RESIDENTIAL LIFE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Higher education provides a transformative experience for students, allowing the opportunity for continuous change and the development of skills needed to grow independently and interdependently with students around them. Similarly, higher education equips students with the tools to continue changing and flourishing after graduation. For many higher education institutions, residential life departments are tasked with the responsibility of fostering the holistic development of students living on-campus. Residential life departments provide transformational experiences for students, including the role of developing college friendships. Yet, when considering the traditionally held benefits of on-campus student housing, ambiguity exists among higher education administrators and researchers regarding the permanence and long-lasting impact of these friendships after a student leaves the institution.

This study explored the structural and programmatic impact of on-campus housing at liberal arts colleges on the transition of student friendships into long term meaningful relationships post-graduation. Moreover, this study utilized a qualitative research approach to explore how the campus environment influenced long-term, meaningful relationships. Strange and Banning's (2015) campus ecology framework was used as the primary theoretical lens to understand the influences of physical, organizational, human aggregate, and constructed campus environments.

Keywords: residential life; relationships; campus ecology

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Introduction

Higher education institutions provide unique opportunities and experiences for students to develop holistically and undergo a transformative process that not only equips them with the skills needed to grow independently and interdependently with students around them, but also flourish after they graduate (Johansson & Felten, 2014). Through the transformative experiences acquired at higher education institutions, students also have the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships with other students, including long-term interpersonal relationships that last through their college years and beyond. Creating new peer relationships while in college is important for students because these relationships are known to impact educational outcomes, foster self-authorship, and serve as an integral aspect of a student's collegiate experience (Alemán, 2010; Bronkema & Bowman, 2018; Hope & Smith-Adcock, 2015; Smith, 2018). Moreover, "college-based friendships are a primary conduit for the development of emotional connection and intimacy. The quantity and quality of emotional connection with campus friends predicts college satisfaction and persistence" (Bronkema & Bowman, 2018, p. 51). For many students, "friendships serve as a support network during college and possibly throughout the rest of their lives" (Hope & Smith-Adcock, 2015, p. 86).

For many higher education institutions, residential life departments are tasked with the responsibility of fostering the growth of students living on-campus and can be bastions of student development, intentionally constructed in ways that promote the academic and social growth of students within a shared living environment on-campus (Peters et al., 2018). The physical proximity of students, facilitated through built spaces, such as residence halls, and intentional programmatic design can foster experiences that lead to personal development, foster academic achievement, increase a sense of belonging on

campus, and better an understanding of those with different backgrounds and identities, though students from marginalized identities sometimes have reported negative experiences (Bronkema et al., 2018; Gansar & Kennedy, 2012; Garvey, et al., 2020; Molina, et al., 2015). Residence halls can also provide various social environments for students, where they can connect and develop interpersonal relationships with each other (Bronkema et al., 2018; Yanni, 2019). These relationships formed in residence halls can provide students with simply a larger, more activity-based friendship group to better enjoy their college experience to a small cadre of only a few friends who provide support, advice, and a deeper meaningful relationship (Bronkema & Bowman, 2019; Gilmartin, 2005). The feeling of connectedness can be particularly strong on liberal arts colleges, leading to the creation of residential colleges at larger universities in hopes to mirror the more intimate feelings students experience at those smaller campuses (Jessup-Anger, 2012).

The majority of studies focus on the impact of student relationships pre-graduation, with very limited research on the permanence of these relationships. Furthermore, there is limited research regarding the long-lasting impact of intentional programmatic efforts facilitated by residence halls and residential life departments on student relationships post-graduation. The purpose of this study is to address deficiencies within the academic literature by exploring the structural and programmatic impact of on-campus housing on the transition of student friendships into long term meaningful relationships post-graduation. This study will utilize a qualitative research approach to explore the pre-graduation effects of on-campus housing on student outcomes and examine if these outcomes persist post-graduation. The campus ecology framework (Strange & Banning, 2015) will be used as the primary theoretical lens within this study, furthering understanding on how the physical, organizational, aggregate, and socially constructed environments can affect students. The

primary research question that guided the study is: what role does residential life play in developing long-term relationships in liberal arts colleges and universities?

Literature Review

Research has often shown that residential life can play an important role in the development of college students (Graham et al., 2018; Smith, 2018). Additionally, the development and continuation of relationships in college has been shown to foster student success (Aleman, 2010; Bronkema & Bowman, 2019; Hope & Smith-Adcock, 2015). For both of these areas of literature, group identity can have a very profound impact. For example, women can possess stronger emotional connections with their campus friendships (Bronkema & Bowman, 2018) and women first-generation students living in residence halls have demonstrated higher rates of belongingness compared to their men counterparts (Garvey et al., 2020).

Additionally, transgender students can have greater feelings of loneliness when separated from their peers due to housing assignments (Pryor et al., 2016) and queer students that live in residence halls can experience increased microaggressions and possess perceptions that they could not live authentically (Mollet et al., 2020).

The Role of Residential Life

College and university residence halls have the potential to significantly influence a variety of academic and social outcomes for students, including student grade point average and the student's decision to join social groups (Ong et al., 2013, p. 143). Scholars have long concluded that living on campus is one of the single most important college experiences for students, in terms of contributing to a wide range of learning, cognitive, attitudinal, psychosocial, and educational attainment outcomes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Moreover, residence halls have the capacity to influence broader student outcomes, including fos-

tering individual student development, encouraging a strong sense of community among peers (Schroeder & Mable, 1994), as well as facilitating student "outcomes related to college satisfaction and academic achievement" (Bronkema & Bowman, 2017, p. 624) through the design of residential environments.

Residential life has been connected to student development, as the residence hall experience provides a "situation in which a student is confronted day in and day out by radically different value systems – religious, political, economic, racial, or philosophical – presented by friends, classmates and roommates" (Wallace, 2012, p. 97). Residence halls provide higher education institutions with spaces to organize students into comprehensive living communities where the student, as an individual, is viewed as a single person rather than being viewed as a number among the thousands of students that comprise the student population within a college or university (Devlin, et al., 2008). Problems of anonymity and loneliness are often reduced within residence halls and there is a "shift in emphasis from big group activities and all-college extravaganzas to the smaller occasions and functions where personal identity is able to develop" (Beamer, 2020, p. 90). In such smaller spaces, students have opportunities to engage in what might be perceived as less intimidating activities, such as residence hall governance, that allow them to experience personal growth (Rosch & Lawrie, 2011).

Residence halls are often considered to be designed environments, constructed in ways that encourage students to connect learning inside and outside the classroom (Wawrzynski et al., 2012). As such, the very type of residence hall design can produce varying levels of interactions between students (Brandon et al., 2008). Designed environments that are indicative of strong programmatic structures include living-learning communities, which provides an environment that is "designed to facilitate students' socio-academic relationship-building on campus through students living

together and potentially co-enrolling in courses” (Smith, 2018, p. 5). Effective designed environments, such as living-learning communities, are a result of programmatic design efforts within a residential environment that are focused on improving the teaching and learning experience for students and their associated educational outcomes.

Based upon the dominant perspective within residential life research, living-learning communities are often able to provide seamless educational experiences for undergraduate students, bridging students’ academic experiences with other aspects of their lives while also integrating their development between academic and social learning (Inkelas et al., 2006). For many undergraduate students – especially first year college students – each new semester brings on a new range of opportunities and challenges regarding peer relationship development. This relationship construction can shape the ways students engage with the institution, as well as their ultimate educational success (Astin, 1993). To support the educational success of students, residential life departments employ administrative interventions, such as living-learning communities within residence halls, which help students connect socially and academically with one another to further engagement and learning goals (Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

Relationships and the Campus Environment

The relationships a student develops while on campus have been shown to be connected to their success. Students with at least one campus friend have higher GPAs, are more likely to graduate, and report higher overall emotional connection (Bronkema & Bowman, 2019). Friendship is crucial for the transition into college, and students who participate socially have higher self-efficacy and a better overall adjustment (Connolly et al., 2018). Students who have close friends, particularly those that are responsive to their needs, even report higher reasons for living (Hope & Smith-Adcock, 2015). Social relationships improve students’

commitment to the institution (Oja et al., 2018), and the most negative influence on students’ perceived campus community are feelings of loneliness (Noel-Elkins et al., 2019). There are additional benefits to friendships across lines of gender and race, although there is still a tendency for students to develop homogenous relationships (Bronkema & Bowman, 2018, Park, 2014). Students of color report more frequent interracial relationships that, when meaningful, can serve as safe spaces to converse deeply about race and identity (Aleman, 2010). Within gender homogeneous relationships, women friendships deepen intimately after college and serve as support for family life and careers (Aleman, 2010).

The nature of a relationship, while on campus, can influence the impact on a student. Existing literature includes various definitions of meaningful relationships and what makes them unique from other types of relationships. Dalton et al. (2010) makes a distinction between ‘acquaintances’ and ‘true friendships’, which involve trust, commitment, and intimacy. Winkle-Wagner et al. (2019) defines a ‘meaningful friendship’ as long-term, supportive, and spanning across social and academic contexts, while ‘instrumental friendships’ are short term and bound by a particular course or program. Bronkema and Bowman (2019) used the term ‘close friendship’ to define support cliques that provide emotional support during life’s challenges. The term, ‘spiritual friendship’ is used to define those relationships that help students understand who they are and their place in the world (Mollet et al., 2020). Vast terminology aside, these meaningful relationships are more authentic and contribute to students’ moral development, academic success, and overall support (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019, Dalton et al., 2010). As an exception to the rule, romantic relationships can be meaningful friendships but can often negatively impact academics and other friendships, especially for women (Gilmartin, 2005). Romantic relationships are also more likely to terminate and cause distress (Bronfman et al., 2016).

An emergent trend in more recent literature describes the ‘modern’ ways in which students build and maintain relationships. Since the 1980s, Americans are reporting declines in close friendships, with some saying that they have no one to discuss important matters with at all (Mollet et al., 2020). In an era of individualism, college relationships may be influenced by individual housing and spatial demands of a new generation (Molina et al., 2015). The introduction of social media allows students to collect friends and followers on platforms, based on self-interest, without having a deepened commitment or connection first (Dalton et al., 2010). Technology also allows for maintaining ties with parents and high school friends, so students may feel that developing college relationships is less of a priority than it once was (Graham et al., 2018). In developing romantic relationships, students are moving away from deepened authentic relationships and opting instead for shorter-term physical connections (i.e. ‘hooking up’) (Arnold, 2010). Because of this, campuses can be more purposeful in educating students about the value of more meaningful friendships as part of their college experience (Shushok, 2011).

Conceptual Framework

College campuses are places and spaces which can be strategically designed to promote learning, engagement, and inclusivity. Strange and Banning’s 2015 campus ecology model reasons that the design of a campus can allow students to develop “a capacity for complex critical reasoning, communication, leadership, a sense of identity and purpose, an appreciation for differences, and a commitment to lifelong learning” (Strange & Banning, 2015, p. 2). The model theorizes that institutional design can be manipulated to meet educational purposes but also to meet the needs of increasingly complex students (Strange & Banning, 2015). The authors outline four critical aspects of the campus environment that influence student behavior: physical, organizational, human

aggregate, and constructed environments.

The physical environment is important for prospective student recruitment and includes the built environment (buildings, parking lots) and human-made material objects (artwork, symbols of campus pride). When walking on campus, these physical elements can communicate what the institution values. Design of physical spaces can also elicit social interaction. The organizational environment is deliberately constructed to meet university goals. The organizational environment includes divisions of power, responsibility, and work among administrative departments. Organizational environments can vary along dimensions of institutional complexity, centralization, morale, stratification, production, routinization, efficiency, and formalization. Human aggregate environments are the cultures and subcultures created by dominant characteristics of the student population, acknowledging that the campus environment is in part created by the students who inhabit it. Lastly, the constructed environment includes socially constructed perceptions of the campus environment. These are subjective and can change from person to person based on individual characteristics and assessments.

This model informs our work by implying that physical and organizational environments, including residential hall structures, designs, policies, and administration, are not the only aspects of residential life environments that could influence the development of meaningful interpersonal relationships. Strange and Banning’s (2015) campus ecology model is most appropriate to be used as a framework for study because it sees the environment as created by institutions but also created by the students in them. As we seek to understand how long term meaningful interpersonal relationships are created and maintained, it is important that the human aggregate and constructed environments also be considered as potential influences on relationship building. For the purpose of this study, we will use this model as an inclusive framework to consider all campus environments

(physical, organizational, human aggregate, and constructed) as potential influences on students' capacity to develop long term, meaningful, interpersonal relationships.

Research Design and Methods

To understand the role residential life plays in developing long-term relationships in liberal arts colleges and universities, we employed a phenomenological qualitative research design. Phenomenological research emphasizes the individual's subjective lived experiences and seeks to describe the perceptions of a phenomenon or experience from the point of view of the participants (Creswell, 2014). Drawing on its philosophical origins, Van Manen and Van Manen (2014) describe that the application of phenomenology to education has taken very theoretical approaches, but also has practical applications and is very suited to "exploring everyday meaningful experience from a phenomenological attitude" (p. 613). This type of qualitative research, as a method, is designed to gain a better understanding of how participants experience and give meaning to a particular phenomenon. For this study, that phenomenon is the formation of long-term meaningful friendships (Van Manen & Van Manen, 2014).

We recruited participants from a single liberal arts college in the southeastern United States. We chose to recruit from this institutional type because of the developmental outcomes associated with liberal arts education, including high quality interactions with peers and experiences with diversity (Bowman & Trolan, 2017; Jessup-Anger, 2012). The campus is a private four-year residential college that actively promotes its foundation in the liberal arts and its dedication to engaging and developing its students. The college enrolls just over 2,000 students, with multicultural and international students comprising 34% of the student body. Students are required to live on campus for their first two years and the campus has four residence halls and three on-campus apartment

buildings. We intentionally recruited participants for the study that were traditional-aged college students who lived in residence halls during their first year and attended the campus for their entire undergraduate education. We felt the lived experiences of students that transfer after their first year might be very different. Finally, we sought participants who graduated between three and 15 years prior to participation in the study. This qualification allowed the researchers to understand if meaningful relationships that were formed in college lasted post-graduated.

To recruit participants, one member of the research team emailed regional alumni groups for the college. A total of 12 individuals both responded to our call for participants and met the criteria for the study (see Table 1). Of the 12 participants, nine identified as women and three identified as men. We also asked participants to identify as either cisgender or transgender; only two participants responded to this question on the survey. A total of eight of the participants identified as White/Caucasian, with one participant each identifying as Asian/Asian American, Black/African American, and Hispanic or Latinx. One participant identified as biracial, with both Asian/Asian American and Black/African American identities. While People of Color are underrepresented in our sample, the demographics do match the overall composition of the campus's student population. All but one participant identified as heterosexual, representing a limitation of the study as queer students can have very different experiences in residence halls (Mollet et al., 2020). All participants lived on campus during their undergraduate career for at least two years, with seven of the participants living on campus their entire undergraduate enrollment.

Data Collection and Analysis

We used two primary methods of data collection: a short demographic survey and an interview. Prior to the interview, each participant was asked to complete a short demographic survey about

their undergraduate enrollment and salient identities. We used a semi-structured interview, conducted via the video conferencing program Zoom, which lasted between 45 and 105 minutes. To solicit participants' experiences with pre-college relationships, we asked 20 questions that explored their pre-college relationships, memories of living on campus, friendships formed during college, and the nature of their post-college relationships.

We used a multiple step process for data analysis, which began with each researcher using open coding to analyze eight of the 12 interviews. This allowed for two different members of the research team to code each interview. The first round of open coding was designed to learn more about common experiences developing relationship in college (Creswell, 2014). Following the initial round of coding, the research team engaged in a second round of coding and discussed the initial codes they discovered, harmonized the individual coding, and re-categorize the codes to uncover common themes, sometimes referred to as axial coding (Saldana, 2013). As recommended by Saldana (2013) for projects involving multiple researchers, one member of the team managed and organized the codebook. We used these first two rounds of coding to shape our Findings section.

Following the initial data analysis, the research team decided to begin a third level of a priori theoretical coding drawn from the four core aspects of the campus environment from our guiding conceptual framework (Saldana, 2013). This third level of analysis was done to allow the research team to uncover connections to the core concepts of Strange and Banning's (2015) campus ecology model within the data. Doing this allowed us to more holistically shape our understanding of the data and influenced our Discussion and Conclusion sections.

Denzin and Lincoln (2008) stressed that trustworthiness is essential in qualitative research. To help establish this, the researchers used member checking and peer debriefing. Each participant had the opportunity to review their

transcription to comment and clarify any misinterpretation of their experiences. Furthermore, we engaged in peer debriefing throughout the entire research process. A collaborative and team based approach was used to allow the opportunity for deeper discussions to take place. This proved particularly helpful as we conceptualized the most salient themes from the data.

Findings

Overview

Participants reflected on their experiences as residential students in college and on the relationships they made while living on campus. Overwhelmingly, participants differentiated between relationships that were surface level and those that were meaningful. Meaningful relationships were mutually beneficial, required accountability, and included some level of physical presence. Residential life provided opportunities for students to interact with others and strengthen existing relationships, usually in informal settings like dormitory rooms and common rooms. Surprisingly, formal residential life programming was not as impactful or perhaps not utilized by participants. Finally, participants' tight-knit campus community contributed to relationships building and strengthening through physical campus design and opportunities for student involvement.

Defining Meaningful Relationships

Consistent with existing literature on relationships, all 12 participants differentiated between relationships and meaningful relationships. Andrew used the analogy of currency to demonstrate how people in his life hold different levels of value:

When you think about how you spend your time and who you choose to invest in... people have currency and value. And so if you only have \$1 you can choose. Do I want 100 pennies in my life, do I want four quarters in my life, or do I want some combination of nickels,

dimes, quarters?

Kimberly, Evelyn, Brianna, and Haylie similarly discussed how people have entered into their lives to serve different purposes and therefore bring different value. Surface level friendships, “while not earth-shattering,” according to Brianna, were still valuable connections that fostered community for these participants.

In defining what made relationships meaningful, several participants mentioned mutuality as a condition. Jessica explained, “it takes both people to have that feeling...it’s someone who is going to be there for you but doesn’t have to be.” Evelyn and Lauren both explained that meaningful friendships don’t just happen but need “concerted effort” from both parties to thrive. Three participants used the phrase “ride or die” to define their meaningful friendships. Kimberly defined “ride or die” as someone who is “not always going to say yes to your ideas or tell you that you’re wonderful all of the time...if you mess up they’re going to say, yeah you messed up but I’m going to help you fix it and I’m here for you.” Based on this definition, accountability and support are pillars of meaningful relationships.

Physical and/or emotional presence during critical life moments was another condition of meaningful relationships. Ana defined these meaningful friends as the “bridesmaids in my wedding...the godmothers to my future kids.” Kimberly recalled a tough breakup and the people who immediately responded: “Where are you? I’ll get a pint of ice cream...I’m coming over.” Katie discussed supporting her most meaningful relationship through the difficult decision of leaving a doctoral program. The participants also discussed the institutional influences on developing friendships.

Residence Halls: Physical Spaces to Strengthen Friendships

For all participants, their college residence halls served as important places where meaningful relationships could form and grow. Specifical-

ly, participants discussed the physical layout of their individual rooms and hall common rooms as critical to strengthening relationships. Ingrid discussed the importance of having both private and public space in the residence halls: “I could go in my room and get things done but also be able to go to that common space and hang with friends...I think that really helped friendships grow...being able to step away when you need to.” Katie further explained that in her apartment style suite, she had more space to build community. She recalled, “we would have karaoke nights and we had an oven and could bake cookies...having that space to have people over allowed us to bond.” Other participants talked in depth about their common room fireplaces, pool tables, video game consoles, and kitchens as important spaces to spend time and deepen existing friendships. Ana became closer with her sorority sisters by utilizing these physical spaces:

(My residence hall) has that gorgeous fireplace living room down there...And we would just go and do homework and just literally have all night study sessions until 6am or until it was time to go to class and we would go up to the apartment and you know make way too much coffee...I mean I really love those memories studying and not studying, you know, just talking in the common area there with the fireplace. Then I just, I always felt so lucky to be in such a beautiful environment all the time.

Residence halls also served as environments in which participants’ fondest memories of college were made. Jessica met her closest friend when he joined her in watching a popular television show in a common room. She reflected: “We began watching the show every Thursday in our dorm. We actually kept it up until we graduated and beyond that...I even made my best woman speech at his wedding about it, which was really special.” Similarly, Ana recalled her frequent dorm room dance parties and noted that her friends still laugh about those memories years later. Aaron, a former col-

legiate athlete, explained that his fondest college memories included sharing dorm space with his teammates and mentoring younger athletes on the team. These small moments that were shared in the residence halls actually turned into long-lasting memories for participants.

Potential barriers to building and strengthening relationships in the residence halls existed for participants, including gender separation restrictions. Evelyn, who identifies as a woman, reflected on having few men friendships in college. Those she did have were significantly weaker than her women friendships and she noted that she never had the opportunity to live with men on campus due to restrictions. Ana, another woman participant, explained that all of her shared spaces and activities in college were shared with other women. The policy of separating campus housing by gender seemed to have long term impact for participants' relationship development and may be an area of policy assessment for student affairs professionals.

Only one participant, Mario, actively engaged in official residential life duties by serving as a residential advisor. Ironically, he did so because it would allow him a single room and he "didn't particularly enjoy living with another person." Almost all other participants spoke about formal residential life programming and RAs in a neutral or negative way. Lauren mentioned that if an event was sponsored by residential life, it was seen as "uncool." Aaron recalled power struggles between students and their RAs and saw them as "the people giving us a hard time and trying to catch us with a case of beer." Six participants did not remember their RAs or attending residential life programming at all. While residential life was clearly crucial for participants to form and strengthen their relationships, this was often not due to formal residential life programming.

Tight-Knit Campus Community

Participants indicated that their campus community and institutional environment contribut-

ed to their long term, meaningful relationships. Some participants discussed the physical layout of campus as a factor. Brianna described a "small, walkable campus where you could easily traverse completely freely" and "walking paths that intersected where you were constantly running into people" which created "small moments" that over time turned into something more meaningful. Several participants discussed that the small size of campus allowed students to easily walk from one side to the other without hassle. Evelyn and Lauren said that the small campus size meant that it was easy to spend time with friends who lived in different residence halls or to travel from the library to the cafeteria back to the residence halls with ease. The design of the campus in the form of these buildings, walkways, and travel time facilitated and deepened relationships for participants.

Participants also expressed that their campus environment allowed for maximum student involvement, which led to them to make deeper relationships across student organizations. All participants were involved in one or more student organizations, including Greek Life, athletics, and student government. This idea of "balance" between academics and multiple involvement responsibilities seemed to be a norm among participants. For Jessica, her involvement on campus allowed her to "engage with everyone at the school" and fostered her overall sense of community. Similarly, Haylie mentioned the feeling of being "completely plugged in" which contributed to her sense of belongingness. While participants certainly had autonomy in engaging in and developing relationships through their student organizations, the campus environment allowed them the flexibility to do so. Aaron described the ease of "taking part in every aspect of the school" and "getting the best that campus had to offer" without difficulty.

All participants expressed undoubtedly that they felt a strong sense of belongingness on campus. Mario, who initially struggled with the transition into college, said that his sense of belong-

ingness developed as soon as he started getting involved on campus and remained through the entirety of his college experience. Others described an innate sense of community that was shared across campus. Jessica described a “sense of protection” that all students felt for each other and that it allowed her relationships to develop based on security:

I think also the campus is a unique environment where even if people aren't the same...there is general respect and protection we all feel for each other...It was so clear to me and I love that so much felt so safe... I think that is the reason why it was the best place for me and why those friendships are now so special because they were so meaningful and deep early on.

Aaron called this a “collective identity.” Andrew also described a tight knit community in which “you didn't know everyone, but you felt like you did” and that this always allowed him to feel safe. These findings suggest that the collective students who existed on campus also contributed to participants' abilities to form and strengthen relationships.

Discussion

Though residential life can have profound impacts on a student's experience at college, our research indicated that residential life programming efforts did not promote consistent peer-to-peer interactions (Goodman, 2017) among the research participants within this study. Instead, our participants' experiences within this study showed that residence hall environments themselves influenced students' sense of belonging (Duran et al., 2020) and ability to engage in out-of-class learning (Foste, 2021). Thus, consistent with Strange and Banning's (2015) campus ecology model, the residence halls within this study provided the space for students to live and learn with peers and that itself contributed to the development of thoughtful relationships. Therefore, many discoveries within

this study reaffirm the existing research supporting the positive student outcomes resulting from residential life at colleges and universities.

However, a particularly interesting finding was that the majority of interviewees within this study connected the idea of *residential hall environment* with the physical layout of their residence hall and credited the layout plan and/or floor plan of their dormitory with their ability to create meaningful on-campus relationships with peers. Moreover, many research participants steered the interview discussion beyond their residence hall and credited the physical layout of the residential college campus with having the most impact on their ability to create on-campus relationships (Strange & Banning, 2015).

Therefore, an unanticipated discovery of this study was the revelation that the residential life staff did not have an overwhelming direct effect on the development of meaningful and long-term relationships among students in residence halls. However, the findings of this study indicated that the school's identity as a *residential* college may be a significant institutional characteristic toward promoting meaningful, long-term relationships among undergraduate students. Additionally, a balance between “public, semi-private and private space” (Strange & Banning, 2015, p. 174) in the residence halls, suite style rooms for example, allowed students to build relationships in common spaces and have options for privacy.

The residential college within this study provided research participants with a variety of physical spaces and places on-campus that offered opportunities for students to live, learn, work and play in close proximity to one another (Felten & Lambert, 2020). Moreover, the residential college environment enabled students with a variety of “opportunities for support and engagement during their college experience” (Strange & Banning, 2015, p. 230). Several interviewees within this study indicated that the physical campus layout was the primary factor in allowing them to create dynamic and meaningful relationships with

their peers, especially regarding those relationships that provided students with a strong sense of belonging (Jessup-Anger, 2012).

Therefore, one of the most significant aspects of the residential college layout within this study was physical proximity; the notion of *proximity* emerged as an important feature for creating intentional residential college environments. The residential college focused on creating an environment based on close physical “proximity, which improved the chances that students would cross paths with other people, thus increasing the likelihood for spontaneous interaction” (Strange & Banning, 2015, p. 42), which was fundamental to the creation and development of student relationships among the research participants interviewed within this study.

Implications

In light of the findings of this study, the following implications for practice and recommendations for future research are offered.

Implications for Practice

Implications for residential life professionals in practice include considering identity in residence halls. Participants felt that separating men and women in living spaces hindered the development of friendships across lines of gender. The trend of separation by gender also assumes heteronormativity. Professionals might consider asking students about their comfort in living in gender inclusive halls or rooms when facilitating living assignments. Additionally, professionals should create space in residence halls in which students can gather and natural relationships can form, including common spaces and suite style living arrangements. If possible, campuses should aim to recreate the feeling of a close-knit campus in the residence halls themselves. This would be especially important in large institutions where a close-knit campus environment may not naturally form. Learning communities based on shared in-

terests or identities could be one way to achieve this (Smith, 2018). A final implication in practice from this study would be to re-evaluate the effectiveness of formal residential life events and programming. Our findings suggest that relationships were able to build and grow as a result of the physical spaces and environments that allowed them to do so as opposed to RA sponsored events and programming. Campuses should assess the effectiveness of these programs and be open to changing them to meet the needs of their populations.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

A limitation of this study is that participants were recruited from one educational institution. Future research would need to be conducted at other campuses to further validate findings for a wider population, as residential life and campus environments can be unique to each campus. Additionally, future research should continue this investigation regarding the ways in which students are able to create meaningful relationships on-campus, specifically focusing on the level of awareness among residential life departments on the effects of residence hall layout plans and/or floor plans. Special consideration could be given to the creation and maintenance of meaningful relationships in wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, as physical space and interaction are limited, which could have implications for students. This research is also limited by the study’s data collection method, in which data was collected from participants who decided to self-enroll in the study (self-selection bias).

Conclusion

The capacity for students to develop and maintain meaningful relationships in college and beyond is a critical outcome of a higher education experience. This study provides scholarly research regarding the environmental factors that impact college students’ ability to create meaningful re-

relationships on-campus that sustain beyond their undergraduate experience. As a result of this qualitative study, researchers and practitioners within the field of higher education are equipped with the following fact: physical proximity of spaces and places on-campus was vital to students' ability to create and develop meaningful on-campus relationships that extended beyond college graduation. With this knowledge, college campuses can design spaces that connect people and foster life-long relationship building.

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Table 1**Participant Demographics**

Pseudonym	Age	Racial Identity	Gender Identity	Sexual Identity	Years Living on Campus
Mario	27	Asian	Man	Heterosexual	4
Andrew	38	White	Man	Homosexual	2
Aaron	28	White	Man	Heterosexual	2
Haylie	25	Asian, Black	Woman	Heterosexual	4
Jessica	27	Black	Woman	Heterosexual	2
Ana	36	Latinx	Woman	Heterosexual	4
Evelyn	27	White	Woman	Heterosexual	2
Brianna	30	White	Woman	Heterosexual	4
Lauren	30	White	Woman	Heterosexual	4
Ingrid	26	White	Woman	Heterosexual	4
Kimberly	27	White	Woman, Cisgender	Heterosexual	2
Katie	25	White	Woman, Cisgender	Heterosexual	4