

# **RESIDENTIAL LEARNING COMMUNITY**

## **LEARNING COMMUNITY BACKGROUND**

From Creating Learning Communities, by Nancy S. Shapiro & Jodi H. Levine (pages 2, 36-39)

Learning Communities have arrived at a critical moment. Although they are not new (in fact, they are among the oldest and most revered models of education), they are experiencing a renaissance, particularly as they respond to the combination of internal and external pressures to better meet the needs of undergraduates and the expectations of their parents.

Learning community initiatives:

- Organizing students and faculty into smaller groups
- Encouraging integration of the curriculum
- Helping students establish academic and social support networks
- Providing a setting for students to be socialized to the expectations of college
- Bringing faculty together in more meaningful ways
- Focusing faculty and students on learning outcomes
- Providing a setting for community-based delivery of academic support programs
- Offering a critical lens for examining the first-year experience

**Residence-based Learning Communities** intentionally link the classroom-based learning community with a residential life component. In SigEp's case, the residential model of the fraternity is adapted to fit a particular curricular model, i.e. the pursuit of Balanced Man Ideals. It is up for each RLC to define its focus and develop programming accordingly each year.

Many residential-based programs draw from principles of the residential college model. Residential college programs share a common core of characteristics with learning community models: faculty commitment, students' learning from each other, and the intentional linkages between the academic and social components of the undergraduate experience.

A primary goal of resident-based education is the integration of students' living and academic environments. Educational programming in residence halls centers around the belief that not all learning occurs in the classroom. Rather, a significant amount of what students learn during college comes from their experiences of daily living, and there is natural overlap between students' academic and social learning activities.

Smith (1993) offered the following differentiation between the classical residential college model and a living learning center: "A classical residential college is characterized by one factor: faculty reside among their students." A living-learning center, on the other hand, is typically defined as student living space with intentional academic programming and services, such as in-hall tutoring, ongoing lecture series, and academic advising. It is also common for living and learning programs to feature academic courses taught in the residential facility.

According to Schroeder (1994) "Learning communities are fostered by commonality and consistency of purpose, shared values, and transcendent themes." In residence-based learning communities, the role of residence life is to create conditions that promote these values. Residence-based learning communities

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involve more than assigning students with similar majors to the same floor of a residence hall. In these learning communities, intentionally organized student cohorts enroll in specified curricular offerings and reside in dedicated living space.

Residence-based learning communities are designed to integrate diverse curricular and cocurricular experiences. For this reason, they may be the most radical of the four learning communities approaches because they challenge and require change within multiple university systems: curriculum, teaching, and housing.

When the University of Michigan launched its Pilot Program in 1962, a project described as an “experiment in the community learning”, program leaders recognized they were embarking on a bold initiative: “Few administrators in large universities tolerate wide-ranging innovative experiments designed to foster student development and academic progress at the risk of complicating already complex management procedures.”

The program functioned with the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts and the Office of University Housing and was developed in response to a small group of faculty and housing staff who had become increasingly concerned with the anonymity experienced by undergraduates, particularly freshman. The purpose of the pilot program was described as “an experimental program for freshmen predominantly that combines residential-academic experiences and that seeks to provide a structure that will enable freshmen to make a better and more productive adjustment to university life.” The hope was that by enrolling students from a particular residence in common courses, the students would continue to develop and discuss in the residence halls ideas generated in class. This Michigan program is an example of residence-based attempts to reorganize the out-of-class living and learning environment of its students. Residence hall-based learning communities programs seek to provide similar learning experiences for students.

### *Curricular Structure*

The curricular component of residence-based programs typically resembles one of the other three learning communities approaches: clusters, freshman-interested groups (FIGs), or team-taught programs. Residence-based programs include a deliberate link to residential life that goes beyond students living in shared space. Academic and cocurricular community activities are scheduled in residence, and in many instances classes meet in classrooms located in the residence halls.

These programs seek to arrange students’ curricula and living experiences in new ways. Residence-based learning communities challenge traditional curricular structures, as well as residence hall systems and organization. This approach requires levels of collaboration and cooperation that may feel new and different to all involved – residence life staff, faculty, and students – and also places more responsibility on students for shaping their living and learning experiences.

### *Faculty Role*

The faculty role varies in residence-based learning communities. Minimal involvement might be to ask faculty to attend occasional programs in the residence hall or join students for a meal in the dining center. In other programs, faculty have offices in the residence halls. The most extensive faculty commitment, the residential college model, asks faculty to be in residence.

A residence-based learning community program provides opportunities for faculty to visit and meet with students in their learning environments. Lecture series and small-group discussions provide excellent opportunities for faculty to pursue multidisciplinary issues with students outside the classroom.

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Residence life and student affairs personnel also benefit from participation in residential hall-based learning communities. Participation in the planning, implementation, and assessment phases of learning communities effectively connects residence life to the educational mission of the institution. This work is time-consuming and constant and must be inclusive, involving faculty, residence life, and students in all aspects of the planning process.

FIGs at the University of Missouri-Columbia evolved out of the collaborative efforts of academic and student affairs. Missouri's FIGs are residential learning communities, involving courses from across the freshmen curricula, that are located in more than three-quarters of the university's residence halls. Small cohorts of fifteen to twenty freshmen enroll in three sections of the same general education courses, share living space, and complete a one-credit seminar designed to integrate material from the general education courses and introduce students to university resources. The collaborative relationship between residence life and academic affairs has created opportunities for more partnerships, including the development of residential colleges.

### *Cocurricular Opportunities*

The residential component of residence-based learning communities provides ample opportunities for cocurricular activities. Community members can participate in a semester-long service project or in a series of activities related to their course objectives. Activities can also be designed to build community and assist students in their transition to college life. In residence-based programs, community members often assume responsibility for planning this aspect of their learning communities experience. Student governance is common in residence halls and provides a valuable leadership experience for learning communities students.

The Residential College at Mary Faust Hall at the University of North Carolina Greensboro (UNCG) is a two-year program involving approximately 120 students. Each semester, students are required to enroll in an interdisciplinary core course on the American experience along with one or two other residential college offerings – often seminar versions of courses available to the greater university community. Academic offerings also include opportunities for community service and independent study.

A full-time counselor is in residence, and faculty have offices in the hall. Members of the residential college participate in committees and pay student program dues. The committees sponsor extracurricular activities such as student-faculty mountain retreats, theater productions, parties, coffeehouse sessions, and dinners. Former residential college students visit for reunions. A newsletter, *Residential Collage*, keeps students, faculty former participants, and the UNCG community connected to the program.

### *Peer Leadership*

In residence-based programs, students typically exercise more authority and decision-making responsibility for their living environment and cocurricular programming than do students in residence halls without a connection to the formal curriculum. Students participate on learning communities councils or committees and work with residence hall staff to govern the living space and plan events for the community.

The residential component also means more opportunities for upper-division students, second- and third-generation learning communities participants, to be involved with new cohorts of learning communities students. Resident assistants are often assigned to a community and in some instances peer-teach the weekly seminar. Another role for upperclassmen is as tutors in residence.