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Exploring Living-Learning Communities as a Venue for Men's Identity Construction.

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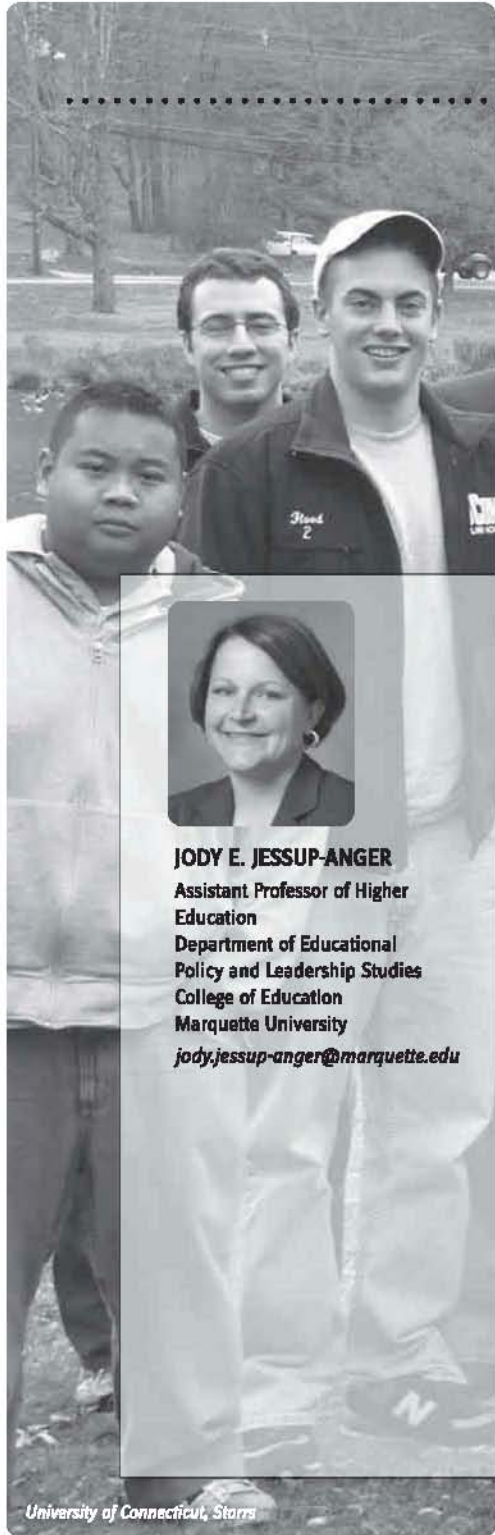
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THIS QUALITATIVE STUDY EXPLORED how male undergraduate students experienced living-learning community environments. Findings revealed that living-learning communities provided men a “safe haven” from rigid gender role expectations, offered a plethora of involvement opportunities, and fostered relationships with faculty and peers. The findings highlight the potential of living-learning communities to provide men with the support they need to reject rigid gender expectations and develop a healthy identity. Recommendations for practice are discussed.

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Over the past decade, the literature on student development has critically examined the role of gender construction in men’s identity development (Davis, 2002; Davis & Laker, 2004; Edwards & Jones, 2009). In addition, researchers have focused on the experience of college as a gendered phenomenon (Smith, Morrison, & Wolf, 1994), examining connections between masculinity, attitudes (Davis & Wagner, 2005; Harris & Struve, 2009; Schaeffer & Nelson, 1993), and behavior (Capraro, 2000; Harper, Harris, & Mmeje, 2005).

Less attention has been paid to men’s experiences in collegiate sub-environments and particularly to how men negotiate college in ways that might align their meaning-making and lived identities. In this study, we explored how men made meaning of their experiences in living-learning communities (LLCs), an ecological niche (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Renn & Arnold, 2003) that may have offered these men an alternative to the essentialized masculinity norms (Harris & Struve, 2009) found on many college and university campuses.

In recent years, researchers have expressed concern about the status of men in postsecondary education, noting men’s excessive drinking (Capraro, 2000), overrepresentation in the campus judicial proceedings (Harper et al., 2005), proclivity toward committing violent crime (Hong, 2000), and lack of involvement (Hu & Kuh, 2001; Pike, Kuh, & Gonyea, 2003) as evidence that men are

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in a state of crisis. These studies suggest that one reason for this crisis is men's response to narrowly defined gender expectations. The authors call on colleges and universities to create environments that support men by encouraging broader conceptions of masculinity. In the current study, we explored whether LLCs might provide environments that offer support for men's development.

DEVELOPMENT OF GENDER IDENTITY IN COLLEGE MEN

Many researchers have turned their attention to understanding men's identity development. Davis (2002) explored how men experience gender role conflict and discovered that, despite stereotypes suggesting their desire to embrace stoicism, men found value in self-expression and sought opportunities to build relationships with women and other men. However, men negotiated an environment in which they felt fraught with worry over others' perceptions of them and their behavior, a fear of being perceived as feminine, and confusion about masculinity. The men who recognized the conflict between their identity and gender role expectations felt there was little support in navigating this environment.

Edwards and Jones (2009) advanced Davis' (2002) foundational work by examining the process of college men's gender identity development and creating a grounded theory. Like Davis, they found that men experience messages about gender expectations that are rooted in the dominant society. Men perform masculinity in response to externally defined expectations by feeling pressured to put a mask on in order to fit in. Subsequently, men experience and recognize the consequences of

wearing this disguise and then begin to transcend external gender expectations.

Davis (2002) and Edwards and Jones (2009) provide insight into the struggle that college men experience negotiating conflicts between their perceptions of society's expectations of them and their identities. These studies suggest the need for collegiate environments that offer men alternatives to narrowly defined gender roles and provide them with support to transcend external gender expectations. Living-learning communities (LLCs) can serve as a collegiate environment that both challenges and supports such gender exploration.

BENEFITS OF LIVING-LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Fitting the definition of an ecological niche, which Bronfenbrenner (1993) describes as "specified regions in the environment that

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are especially favorable or unfavorable to the development of individuals with particular personal characteristics" (p. 18), LLCs are often touted as environments that support student success (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Pike, 1999; Wawrzynski, Jessup-Anger, Helman, Stoltz, & Beaulieu, 2009). These communities consist of participants who "(1) live together on campus, (2) take part in a shared academic endeavor, (3) use resources in their residence environment designed specifically for them, and (4) have structured social activities in their residential environment that stress academics" (Inkelas, Zeller, Murphy, & Hummel, 2006, p. 11). Research on LLCs has focused primarily on the outcomes of these communities on student achievement (Pasque & Murphy, 2005; Pike, 1999; Stassen, 2003), faculty-student interaction (Inkelas & Weisman; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1981; Stassen), and social integration (Inkelas & Weisman; Pike; Stassen). Emerging

research has sought to also understand students' experiences in these communities and how their experiences might lead to some of the positive outcomes.

Using some data from the current study, Wawrzynski et al. (2009) explored students' experiences in several LLCs located within a large public research university. Despite differences in the focus of these communities, students described them as possessing cultures that promoted seamless learning, a scholarly environment, and an ethos of relatedness among faculty, staff, and peers. Because these environments seemed to provide students with a sense of safety and support, we wondered whether they might be ripe for challenging traditional notions of masculinity, which Davis (2002) and Davis and Laker (2004) deem essential for healthy gender identity development. Consequently, in this study, we examined how men in particular described their LLC experience, paying particular attention to their meaning-making as related to men's identity development literature.

METHODS

In the current study, we used a phenomenological (van Manen, 1990), constructivist approach (Broido & Manning, 2002) to explore how men made meaning of their experiences in LLCs. The constructivist perspective (Piaget, 1972) aligned with our assumption that students' meaning-making about their experiences in the LLC would be rooted in their previous experiences and perspectives as knowers. Furthermore, it supported our phenomenological methodology, as it encouraged our exploration of students' reflections on their lived experiences (van Manen).

Theoretical Framework

We used feminist positionality theory (Alcoff, 1988) to frame the study. Feminist positionality theory acknowledges that social identities (e.g., gender, race, sexual orientation) exist within a constantly changing context; however, it posits that meaning can be constructed from a particular context. Thus, the concept of being male as positionality may illustrate how men frame and interpret their values from the vantage point of their LLC environment, rather than assuming an essentialized notion of their identity development as college men (Alcoff). Furthermore, the theory aligns with a constructivist methodology, as it acknowledges the importance of previous experience and perspectives.

Setting

The data used in the analysis were part of two broader studies exploring 45 students' experiences in eight different LLCs at two Midwestern universities: a large public land-grant university and a mid-sized private Catholic university. Our analysis in the current paper is limited to men's perspectives in the five communities that had male participants in the sample.

Participants

Participants in the study were 12 male students from five LLCs located within two universities (see Table 1). We used a convenience sample to identify participants, soliciting volunteers by attending their classes or via email. All but two students self-identified as Caucasian; one student self-identified as Indian, and another opted not to include information on race or ethnicity.

Table 1

Participants in the Study

Pseudonym	Age	Class	LLC Focus	University
John	19	Sophomore	Social Justice	Catholic
Preston	19	Sophomore	Social Justice	Catholic
Robert	19	Sophomore	Social Justice	Catholic
Adam	20	Junior	Honors	Land-Grant
Lance	19	Junior	Honors	Land-Grant
Paul	18	Freshman	Honors	Land-Grant
Mark	19	Sophomore	Social Science	Land-Grant
Kyle	22	Senior	Environmental Science	Land-Grant
Jack	20	Junior	Arts	Land-Grant
Rich	20	Junior	Arts	Land-Grant
Roy	22	Senior	Arts	Land-Grant
Whitaker	21	Senior	Arts	Land-Grant

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Data Collection

After obtaining Institutional Research Board approval and informing students of their rights as research participants, we conducted focus groups and semi-structured interviews. We collected the data from the public land-grant university during the fall of 2006 in six single-session focus groups lasting 50 to 75 minutes. Questions included "Tell us what it is like to be a member of your living-learning community" and "How has being a member of your living-learning community impacted your experiences in college?" We collected the data from the private Catholic university during the fall of 2010 and spring of 2011 in two semi-structured interviews, with each interview lasting 30 to 70 minutes. Questions focused on students' in-class experiences and cocurricular activities, relationships with peers, and outcomes associated with participation in the community.

Establishing Trustworthiness

Several steps were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility of the data collected was achieved through audio-recording and transcribing data verbatim, corroborating participants' responses with interview notes, and sending synopses back to participants to verify their accuracy. Dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba) of the data were achieved through a prolonged discussion regarding the interpretation of the data by members of the research team. Transferability of findings was achieved by including thick description (Lincoln & Guba) of the results so that readers can identify similarities and differences in the LLCs on their own campuses.

Our findings revealed that LLCs provided men a "safe haven" from rigid gender role expectations, offered a plethora of involvement opportunities, and fostered relationships with faculty and peers.

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Limitations

Despite our focus on men and masculinity in this manuscript, our data collection did not explicitly emphasize men's meaning-making about masculinity. This lack of emphasis allowed our themes to emerge more organically, without forcing men to reflect on their experiences as men. However, had we focused more acutely on men's experiences with masculinity, we may have gained additional insights about the impact of these communities on men's identity development. Furthermore, the LLCs represented in the study include arts, social justice, environmental science, honors, and social sciences communities, all of which might attract students who reject rigid gender roles. Had we included communities that might attract men adhering to traditional gender roles (such as an engineering or criminal justice community) we may have found contrasting viewpoints.

Analysis

As we began to analyze our data, we found it important to be aware of our own backgrounds and experiences and how they might inform or bias our interpretation. Although none of us

is currently working in residence life, all of us have done so formerly. Furthermore, the first author is former director of a women's center and is often aware of tacit gender assumptions in day-to-day interactions. We discussed our assumptions as we analyzed the data.

The first two authors used a constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to analyze the data and draw themes. After reading through and coding each transcript independently, we discussed our coding and developed a common coding scheme through negotiation regarding the meaning of the text. We then discussed how our codes translated into themes and checked whether our independent coding was reflective of these themes. We also discussed how the themes related to the literature. After the themes were identified, we reviewed the transcripts to determine whether the emergent themes were reflected. The third author served as our inquiry auditor, reading our emergent themes and commenting about whether they represented the transcripts accurately. Based on the inquiry audit, the first theme was changed to reflect an environment that passively tolerated flexible gender roles as opposed to one where students actively eschewed rigid roles.

RESULTS

During our focus group and interview sessions, we heard very little indicating that men felt boxed in by gender roles. Our findings revealed that LLCs provided men a "safe haven" from rigid gender role expectations, offered a plethora of involvement opportunities, and fostered relationships with faculty and peers.

A Safe Haven Where Men Could Be Themselves

In describing their LLC participation, these men did not appear to experience the rigid gender roles discussed by men in other studies, including pressures to drink, fear of being perceived as feminine, and a sense of challenge without support (Davis, 2002; Edwards & Jones, 2009; Harris & Struve, 2009). Six participants talked about their communities as being safe havens where they could be themselves among like-minded peers. One participant, Jack, described the peers in his arts community as "creative" and "personable," and he stressed the importance of community members being "social." Robert, who lived in the social justice community, explained the differences he perceived between his interactions with peers in the community and outside of it.

One of the things I enjoy about the [social justice community] is that people are very passionate about their social issues, and there's a lot of conversation you engage in that maybe you wouldn't engage in with your friends outside. Normally if I'm eating lunch with my [non-social justice community] friends, I don't bring up poverty. So I feel, in [the social justice community] we get a little more philosophical and a little more theological than with other friends.

Mark echoed Robert's sentiment, explaining that "people here [in the social science community] read the *New York Times*, [and] I know quite a few people who subscribe to *Time*, or *U.S. News and World Report*, or *Foreign Affairs*. They seem to have a better sense of what's going on in the world."

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In addition to enabling the men to identify and interact with like-minded peers, the environments afforded several of them the opportunity to imagine a less rigid career path. Roy explained,

Being in [the arts community] has taken me out of my original mindset of "I have to get a job that will get me money, so I need to have this major to do that thing." Now, it's more like, "yeah, I can do that," but along the way I don't have to suffer. I can actually do things that make me happy, like theater. I can direct a play, I can act in a play. . . . It actually helped me reduce my overall level of anxiety. If I had never found [the arts community], I don't know where I would be right now . . . I don't know whether I would have just moved back home and tried to find a job there.

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Our discussions with men in LLCs provided a stark contrast to the portrait of the disengaged male that is depicted in much of the literature about men's engagement.

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John also discussed rethinking his plans. He had always planned on attending medical school, but as a result of his interactions with floor mates in the social justice community who had "taken time out already and . . . worked on political campaigns or went and taught underprivileged children" he was "thinking more that I might want to serve some sort of underprivileged or rural community." It was

clear from the interview that peer interactions helped him to reimagine his future.

The final way in which the men described their communities as affording them the space to be themselves was in their behavior in the LLC as compared to their behavior elsewhere on campus. Jack explained how living in the arts community made him a more responsible person. He joked that if he had lived in one of the traditional residence halls, he would "probably have liver failure by now" because of his perception that the environment promoted drinking. Lance, who lived on an honors floor, echoed this sentiment, explaining that while he and his peers have a good time in their residence hall, "most people are considerate, and if [people] are studying, you are not going to have brouhaha in the middle of the hall and ruin other people's lives." John recounted with disdain a story of one of his non-LLC friends spending an entire day playing a video game in John's room. He described the behavior as "lazy" and "lame" and expressed appreciation that LLC members found better ways to spend their time.

Alternative to the Portrait of the Disengaged Male

Our discussions with men in LLCs provided a stark contrast to the portrait of the disengaged male that is depicted in much of the literature about men's engagement (Hu & Kuh, 2001; Pike et al., 2003). Virtually all the men discussed how their communities promoted cocurricular involvement in everything from social activities to community service. Several men mentioned that a lack of involvement during their first year in college caused them to seek out an LLC to foster their involvement

The students in the social justice community, who joined as sophomores, talked about how the community broadened their social network and introduced them to like-minded individuals whom they had not yet encountered in college. John credited his participation in the community for improving his interpersonal skills, giving him more confidence in meeting new people and dealing with the issues that arise when living in a community.

during their sophomore year. Others speculated that were it not for their LLC, they would not be involved in community service activities, clubs, or social events, nor would they be as inclined to attend guest lectures.

Furthermore, the men discussed how they created involvement opportunities for others. Rich explained how students in the arts community took charge of creating involvement opportunities and notifying their peers: "Here, we bombard people's mailboxes with every opportunity on campus. . . . And students never complain about there being a lack of activities for things that they are interested in." Preston,

from the social justice community, also discussed student involvement, explaining that in addition to the community service that was coordinated through the service-learning office, students were charged with organizing other service opportunities for their floor. Through these activities, their understanding of social justice issues was broadened.

Avenue for Relationship Building

All the men we interviewed discussed their community's role in helping to foster meaningful relationships. For some, the community provided the opportunity to connect with peers as they began college. They used phrases like "ice breaker" and "family" to describe their interactions with peers in their community. Jack recounted how much easier it was for him to "knock on doors" because the other students were in the same LLC. Several students also discussed a tacit expectation that they should work at building relationships with their peers by leaving their doors open and interacting socially. The students in the social justice community, who joined as sophomores, talked about how the community broadened their social network and introduced them to like-minded individuals whom they had not yet encountered in college. John credited his participation in the community for improving his interpersonal skills, giving him more confidence in meeting new people and dealing with the issues that arise when living in a community.

The LLCs also provided opportunities to connect meaningfully with faculty and others who might support students' future goals. Mark recounted a relationship he developed with a professor during his first semester on campus and remarked that he continued to

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stop in to talk with the professor. Kyle shared a similar story, explaining that he worked for a professor he met through his LLC and that the professor had helped him to network with other faculty and ultimately to clarify some of his career plans. Whitaker also discussed how the connections he made through the LLC helped him imagine a future:

These wonderful people—musicians, writers, people into all sorts of things—come in from all over the United States and talk about what they've done. That really says "you can succeed." Everybody always says, "liberal arts ain't [sic] going to get you anywhere . . ." and [their message] says, "you can go out and succeed as a writer, artist, playwright, or musician." I think that's really valuable, especially for those who are like, "oh, my parents wanted me to be a doctor and now I am acting."

DISCUSSION

As evidenced by our findings, ecological niches (Renn & Arnold, 2003) such as living-learning communities may provide men a safe haven from the gender constraints felt elsewhere on campus. It was clear from our interviews and focus groups that the men appreciated the opportunity to surround themselves with like-minded peers. The communities enabled men to be themselves and helped them identify others with similar interests, perhaps providing the support that Davis (2002) argues is critical to ameliorate the sense of challenge they feel in their development as men. However, we did not find evidence that the communities put "gender on the radar screen for men" (p. 518), which Davis suggests is essential to men's development. Without recognizing how the safe

harbor they experienced in their LLCs may have enabled them to resist rigid gender roles, the men may not gain the skills necessary to replicate these environments in the future.

The findings also suggest that college and university administrators and faculty can create environments to foster men's engagement. The men in our study were highly involved, with some helping to encourage their peers' involvement and others joining their community after feeling disappointed in their own involvement during their first year in college. The findings support the assertion of Harper et al. (2005) that men may engage in behaviors that will win the approval of their peers but offer an alternative to the illegal or rule-violating behaviors that often land men in campus judicial proceedings. In essence, LLCs serve as one of the programmatic interventions that will help to redefine traditional male behaviors (Harper et al.).

Finally, the men in our study overwhelmingly appreciated the importance of their LLC in nurturing relationships with peers, faculty, and others who support their future. These findings suggest that these environments help men develop meaningful relationships that may afford them the opportunity to forgo or cast off the "mask of masculinity" that Edwards and Jones (2009) claim men use to deal with narrowly defined gender expectations. Furthermore, the environments may assuage men's worry about others' perceptions about their communication with other men (Davis, 2002), enabling them to develop a more authentic sense of gender identity and genuine relationships with others.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of our findings, there are several recommendations for student affairs educators inside and outside residence life, who strive to create environments where men thrive. First, upon their arrival, male students should be offered opportunities to connect with others in their residence hall through identifiable commonalities such as a passion for the arts, social justice, or environmentalism. The men in our study discussed how the affiliation with their LLC made it easier to build relationships. Although existing research illustrates that the more comprehensive an LLC is, the greater the gains for students (Wawrzynski & Jessup-Anger, 2010), even a themed community with no academic course attached to it may help men develop meaningful relationships.

Second, existing communities should be widely advertised, with an explicit message that these communities provide an alternative to the “traditional college experience.” The men in our study and in other studies (see Davis, 2002; Edwards & Jones, 2009) believed that being in college meant following narrow notions of masculinity and engaging in high-risk behavior. Whether they acknowledged it or not, LLC participation was a way for the men in our study to mediate such expectations. By acknowledging and advertising LLCs as ecological niches that counter the dominant culture, postsecondary institutions may attract and retain students who can challenge the toxic culture that results from narrowly defined gender expectations.

Finally, in addition to providing environments that challenge dominant gender expectations, faculty and student affairs educators

in LLCs should heed Davis’ (2002) advice to help students put gender on their radar screen. The men in our study did not explicitly connect healthy gender expectations to their belief that the LLC offered them something different than the traditional residence hall experience. By not being able to identify and discuss the safe harbor as a gendered phenomenon, they may not gain the skills necessary to replicate these environments upon leaving their communities. Perhaps the most effective way to ensure that these men develop an understanding of gender role socialization is to educate and train resident assistants and others working in the halls to have meaningful conversations about gender. By engaging men in peer discussions about the limitations of rigid gender roles (and how their LLC environments might offer an alternative reality), these men may become more aware of how to select growth-enhancing environments in the future.

CONCLUSION

As college and university administrators seek to address growing concerns about the status of men in postsecondary education, they should consider the potential of ecological niches like living-learning communities. Although the collegiate culture in its entirety might be difficult to influence, these smaller enclaves can provide men with much needed relief from dominant gender expectations that encourage them to drink excessively, break rules, and disengage. By broadening gender expectations, men can begin to explore questions about what it means to be a man with more honesty and support, ultimately enabling them to develop a more authentic identity.

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Discussion Questions

1. The authors credit the LLC with providing men a safe haven from the gender constraints felt elsewhere on campus. To what extent does their decision to participate in an LLC suggest that these men are different from other male students and therefore may experience a different path in their identity development?
2. Design a follow-up study that would further test this study's findings.
3. What key components should be included in an LLC to facilitate the positive outcomes described by the participants in this study?
4. The authors recommend that resident assistants receive training so they can engage residents in meaningful conversations about gender. How should that training be designed, and what should be included?
5. There has been a steady decline in the enrollment of male students in higher education in recent years, and males have been identified as less engaged than are their female counterparts. Why do you think males are less likely to enroll in college? When males do enroll, why might they be less engaged?
6. Research suggests that peers are a significant factor in students' academic achievement and success (Astin, *What Matters in College*, 1993). With this in mind, how might single-gender learning communities impact students with low levels of confidence in their academic abilities?
7. Peer groups tend to promote homogeneity and thus discourage heterogeneity. From a student development perspective, how might the peer influence impact the student's experience and student learning?
8. How might institutional type and size impact male identity construction?

*Discussion questions developed by
Pam Schreiber, University of Washington, and Diane "Daisy" Waryold, Appalachian State University*