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Enhancing Undergraduate Education: Examining Faculty Experiences During Their First Year in a Residential College and Exploring the Implications for Student Affairs Professionals

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THIS QUALITATIVE STUDY EMPLOYED a constructivist, case study approach to explore how faculty made meaning of their experiences in a newly developed residential college at a large, land-grant research university in the Midwest. Findings revealed that faculty focused on determining how to prioritize the numerous opportunities for involvement while also working to define their unconventional roles as teaching-focused faculty at a research-extensive university. In reflecting on their first few months in the residential college, faculty discussed their appreciation of the collegiality of their peers. Finally, they described their role as collaborators with other faculty as they continued to lay the foundation for the residential college. Implications for student affairs educators and particularly academic-student affairs collaboration are discussed.

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The leading student affairs professional associations have emphasized the need for integrating all aspects of the college or university to educate and prepare the whole student (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA] & American College Personnel Association [ACPA], 2004). These associations urge administrators to envision and situate undergraduate student learning as a responsibility shared between academic and student affairs. One model of practice that exemplifies the call for shared responsibility is an academic-student affairs collaboration model, in which there are “significant interactions between student and academic affairs staff around the common purpose of enhanced student learning” (Manning, Kinzie, & Schuh, 2006, p. 124). Manning et al. argue that such a model can create a high quality learning environment with a team orientation that rewards student creativity, strengthens curricular coherence, and serves as an opportunity for student and academic affairs to share costs.

Living-learning communities are often touted as exemplary initiatives in academic-student affairs collaboration (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Pike, Schroeder, & Berry, 1997; Smith & Williams, 2007). Residential colleges are comprehensive living-learning communities (ACUHO-I, 1998) where students often live together for several years, take numerous classes together, and have structured activities in their living space that focus on academics. To encourage faculty and student interaction, residential colleges may have faculty offices in the residence halls. Also, some residential colleges confer academic degrees (Wawrzynski, Jessup-Anger, Helman, & Stolz, 2009). These communities integrate curricular and cocurricular experiences, promote faculty-student interaction, and profess education of the whole student as a primary outcome.

One difficulty that student affairs educators often encounter in academic-student affairs collaboration models like residential colleges is that their role in supporting student learning may be unclear (Manning et al., 2006). Faculty see themselves as supporting student learning first and foremost and may not understand the need for student affairs or understand the role of student affairs professionals (Golde & Pribbenow, 2000). In order for student affairs educators to partner more effectively with faculty in these environments, more research is needed to understand the faculty experience. The purpose of this study was to explore the faculty experiences in a newly established residential college. Through this qualitative study, we explored how faculty members make meaning of their experiences; the essential purpose was to identify implications for developing stronger collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs.

FACULTY IN LEARNING COMMUNITIES

In the past decade, research on faculty in living-learning communities and residential colleges has focused primarily on the reasons that faculty become involved in these communities (Golde & Pribbenow, 2000; Kennedy & Townsend, 2005; Wawrzynski et al., 2009), incentives and barriers for continuing involvement (Golde & Pribbenow; Kennedy & Townsend), and outcomes of their participation (Ellertson, 2004). Golde and Pribbenow conducted a qualitative study with 15 faculty at a large research-intensive university in the Midwest. They found that faculty became involved in living-learning communities to get to know students better, to engage in their passion for interdisciplinary and innovative pedagogy, and to satisfy a desire to replicate their own educational experiences at liberal arts colleges.

Kennedy and Townsend (2005) expanded upon Golde and Pribbenow's (2000) work, conducting interviews at three research-intensive universities with 36 faculty who were either involved in living-learning communities or had been in the past and also those who had been asked to participate in a community and declined. They found that faculty initially were drawn to living-learning communities because they liked interacting with students and wanted to develop closer relationships with them (Kennedy & Townsend). Faculty members' willingness to remain involved was dependent, in large part, upon whether they had positive experiences working with the communities.

As part of the larger study from which data for the current study were collected, Wawrzynski et al. (2009) examined the motivation of

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faculty to become involved in a newly developed residential college. Somewhat similar to faculty involvement in living-learning programs, we found that faculty sought involvement because of their prior experience and awareness of residential college environments. We also found that a perceived alignment between their values (of citizenship, interdisciplinary work, and teaching) and those of the residential college attracted them to the setting, as did the desire to connect their values to practice through civic engagement.

In addition to exploring why faculty get involved in living-learning communities, several of the aforementioned studies examined faculty meaning-making about incentives and barriers to their continuing involvement. Kennedy and Townsend (2005) found that, for faculty, continuing involvement rested on their experiences within the environment and on support from their academic department. Faculty who perceived positive or neutral support from their departments and had strong confidence in their capabilities to make a difference in the living-learning community environment, as well as

faculty with positive support and variable capabilities, were most likely to continue their participation with the living-learning community. Kennedy and Townsend's findings echo those of Golde and Pribbenow (2000), who noted that continuing faculty participation was determined by several factors, including the quality of relationships they built with students and other faculty, their appreciation for the experimental nature of the community, and the effect of their involvement on their teaching.

Perhaps most relevant to the current study, Golde and Pribbenow's (2000) study revealed that the collaboration between faculty and student affairs staff in living-learning communities was an important and often missing key to successful environments. They found that faculty lacked awareness of the role of student affairs at the institution. In addition, once faculty became aware of the role of student affairs, several still remained skeptical as to its value (Golde & Pribbenow).

Although some research on faculty participation in learning communities and living-learning communities is transferable to residential colleges and other models of academic-student affairs collaboration, more research is needed to understand faculty involvement in partnerships where collaboration is established and systematic. Whereas in many living-learning communities faculty may stumble upon opportunities to participate or be invited to do so by residence life staff, often in residential colleges faculty participation is an expectation from their department or college from the start. In exploring the experiences of faculty in residential college environments, the current study provides insight into their early experiences so that student affairs educators may better partner with them.

STUDY DESIGN

Methodology

We used a constructivist, instrumental case study approach to guide our research. This method suited the current study because we focused on learning the particularities of a single case (Stake, 1995), which was to understand how faculty made meaning of their early experiences in the residential college so that we could infer how student affairs professionals who seek to partner with these faculty might do so more effectively.

Consistent with a case study design, we used purposeful sampling to select the case and individuals within the case (Patton, 2002). Although Midwest University (pseudonym) has three residential colleges, we selected the newly established Arts and Humanities Residential College (AHRC) (pseudonym) as the focus of our inquiry. We believed that because all faculty in AHRC held new positions there, their perspectives might be different than they would have been if they had been involved in an established residential college and thought retrospectively on their experiences.

Context

Our study took place in the newly established AHRC at Midwest University, a large, four-year, public land-grant, research-extensive university which boasts a long history of well established residential colleges and living-learning communities. From January 2006 to the start of the fall semester in 2007, 11 full-time core faculty were hired with tenure homes in the residential college, and an additional 5 were hired in joint appointments with other colleges. Although expectations for collaboration with student affairs were not explicitly stated to faculty in the hiring

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process, candidates were sought who were especially committed to the mission of teaching and fostering student development. AHRC opened its doors in the fall of 2007, admitting its first class of 120 first-year and sophomore students.

Participants

We invited all 16 faculty from AHRC to participate in the study, 12 of whom accepted. We purposefully interviewed faculty in November or December of their first semester in the residential college because of our interest in their early experiences. The participants included four females and eight males. Seven were assistant professors (four of whom were tenure-track), and five were tenured (two associate professors and three professors). Four participants were new to the university, having come to Midwest University specifically because of their full-time appointment in the residential college. The remaining eight were already at Midwest University when the AHRC was developed and had at least a part-time appointment to the residential college (three held full-time appointments, and the remaining five held joint appointments with other departments).

Procedure

Case study research uses multiple sources of data to gain an in-depth understanding of the case (Stake, 1995). For this study, we used three strategies for data collection: semi-structured interviews, observation, and document analysis. This article relies most heavily on our interviews with faculty, which focused on why they sought to join the residential college and how they made meaning of their experiences. Topics covered included faculty members' description of the residential college's environment, what they were learning from their participation, and how they believed the college would evolve.

Two researchers conducted each interview, with one serving as the interviewer and the other collecting field notes. Each participant also completed a short demographic questionnaire (i.e., academic discipline, faculty rank, and years at Midwest University), chose a

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pseudonym to assure confidentiality, and participated in a 45-90 minute semi-structured interview.

Observation was another strategy for data collection; a research team member attended and took notes during university open forum discussions regarding the development of the college. For the document analysis, we reviewed numerous reports, documents, websites, student newspaper articles, and webcasts that detailed the work related to the vision for the liberal arts and sciences at Midwest University. The insights gleaned from these materials and the observations provided a context for understanding and interpreting the interviews.

Trustworthiness

We took several steps to ensure the trustworthiness of the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We established credibility of the data collected by digitally recording and transcribing interview data verbatim, corroborating participants' responses with notes taken during the interviews and sending transcripts back to participants to verify their accuracy. In addition, to reduce the likelihood of misrepresentation, we triangulated our data through the use of multiple methods of data collection and a diverse sample, which yielded perspectives of multiple participants (Patton, 2002).

Data Analysis

We began our analysis by thoroughly reading through the transcripts and identifying any reference to faculty members' experiences within the residential college. Then we coded the transcripts and grouped the codes into categories. After developing our categories, we scanned them for themes.

FINDINGS

Our interviews with faculty revealed that, throughout their first semester teaching in the newly developed residential college, they focused on figuring out how to prioritize the numerous opportunities for involvement while also working to define their unconventional roles as teaching-focused faculty working within a residential college at a research university. They also commented frequently on the collegiality of their faculty peers. Finally, they described themselves as collaborators with other faculty in the residential college as they continued to lay its foundation.

Time: Prioritizing the Endless Opportunities and Navigating an Unconventional Role

As the first semester in the residential college came to a close, faculty reflected on their struggle to prioritize the “endless opportunities” that their affiliation with the college brought. Linda explained,

I [knew] it would be a lot of work, but I don't think I realized how much . . . I'm learning that it is hard to say no. There are so many opportunities and so many things that I can [do] that will be a real benefit to the students. . . . We have to be careful not to be overcommitted.

Other faculty echoed Linda's sentiments, describing themselves as “running ragged,” “working double time,” and “fragmented” with everything going on. Joan described herself as akin to someone who was trying to “keep all the plates balancing on sticks.”

In addition to their growing awareness of the limitless opportunities and the need to be selective with their time, faculty described

their first semester as one when they explored what it meant to be teaching-focused faculty working in a large, public research university. Their insight provided a glimpse of the pressures they faced and the opportunities to which they referred. Brian, who held both an administrative and teaching position, explained that despite working at a large research university, faculty in AHRC are expected to be excellent teachers and involved in the cocurricular life of the college. Several faculty discussed how they made meaning of this charge while also focusing on research. Nancy discussed her interpretation of her new position:

I feel right now at least, that the strong expectation is the service and the teaching components because we are trying to launch this thing brand new. There is a lot of work to be done solidifying what the expectations are, documenting them, and making sure faculty know what is expected of them. But I do know that research is still an expectation . . . I am trying to still keep that active. . . . It is really hard with the new adjustment.

The faculty described their experience during the first semester as being pulled in many different directions while they struggled to define what it meant to be residential college faculty (with the attendant expectations for quality teaching and involvement in the cocurricular aspects of the college) at a large research university.

Colleagues: Collegiality and Respect

Despite feeling pressures on their time and roles, faculty uniformly expressed gratitude about the energy and enthusiasm of their colleagues. Ed summed up the feelings shared by virtually all the faculty:

The bottom line is that things are going great; I think there's a huge amount of positive energy and excitement surrounding the whole endeavor. We're still trying to figure a lot of stuff out, but we haven't encountered any insurmountable problems.

Most faculty agreed with Linda's perception that "everyone is pulling in the same direction . . . is committed to this project, and shares a similar understanding of what we want to accomplish in terms of providing for students." She expressed pleasant surprise at her budding relationship with her colleagues:

I'm learning what it's like to work with a group of people who have the same goals and the same kind of ethical base and artistic interests, which I've not ever had before. . . . People certainly seem interested in what other people are doing. There has already been a lot of collaboration from people in disciplines who might not ordinarily come together.

In addition, underlying the collegial environment was an undertone of respect for the varying expertise of the AHRC faculty. Roger summed up feelings shared by Dennis and Nancy when he described feeling "pleased as punch" to be part of the group. He explained that, while he didn't necessarily see a clear direction for the future of the residential college, "it's going to be good because there are good people to work with." Nancy expanded on Roger's point, explaining,

I am happy to be here because it is so collegial. Faculty are recognized because they have a different set of expertise and we are open to pushing concepts that have been traditionally set, like the idea of writing. What is writing? How do we teach writing?

Who teaches writing? What kinds of projects do we assign students? The exciting part for me is that we are not just going to be sitting in this box and do what we have always done, but we're pushing what our traditional assumptions are about how we teach this, and what it means, and why it is valuable to students. That is what makes this exciting.

Collaboration: Building the College

Collegiality provided an important foundation for faculty as they built the residential college. Several faculty mentioned the variety of roles they played in constructing the college. Dennis explained,

What's been so much fun for me is . . . building the college and laying the bylaws. Even though meetings aren't always the most fun, the faculty are working together really well. We have some disagreements among different groups, but we talk it out in a reasonable and amiable way. There is a sense of collective and common purpose.

Other faculty expressed appreciation that, despite differing ranks and years of service at the university, they were all committed to fairness in establishing norms and procedures in the college. Everyone recognized the different kinds of pressures that non-tenured faculty might be feeling about conducting research in the teaching- and service-focused environment. Linda explained,

We were talking about senior faculty and new faculty, and who was going to teach what, and was it better for new faculty to teach two of the same preparation or should they have two different classes. It was ultimately decided that [the new faculty] should make

that decision, [and] should have first choice in what they want to teach. That was a unanimous decision on everybody's part . . . they are the ones who have to get their stuff together, and let them teach what they want to teach, and we'll teach around it. I liked my colleagues a lot more after that.

Despite the excitement about collaborating with colleagues to build the college and offer a vibrant learning environment to students, the process was not without its challenges. Some faculty described the process as "vague" and "sluggish." Brian found it difficult to "let go of processes" in order for others to shape them. Roger explained that the speed of getting things done was "10 to 15 degrees slower" than he expected. He attributed the slow pace of building the college to the dean's collaborative nature.

The dean has been insistent on [collaboration] happening, [which is] maddeningly, beastly difficult in terms of defining things. It's taken a little longer and been a little slower than relatively patient, supportive people thought it would and maybe even sometimes could stand. It was exasperating in a way, but looking back I think that, if it hadn't been this way, things would have been defined and crammed down people's throat that shouldn't have been, and the degree of student participation would have been much lower and probably the result wouldn't have been as good.

Nancy discussed the challenge of building curriculum in an interdisciplinary environment.

I would like to see more coordinated curriculum . . . it is difficult to do right now because we are still trying to figure out what these curricula are . . . the biggest challenge

is allowing faculty to teach in their specialty, which I think is very important. So, you have this tension between collaboration and coherence on the one hand, but also allowing faculty to draw from their specialty, not just because that is going to make them happy, but it is also going to keep them current in their own research fields. I would like to see us find ways to do both.

Nancy viewed collaboration as valuable, and, although difficult, it helped her to grow "as a teacher, a person, and intellectual." She described how the process of collaboration afforded the opportunity to "come away with so much more than you ever could come up with by yourself."

In sum, as faculty finished their first semester in the residential college, they reflected on the endless opportunities afforded to them by their affiliation with the college and their need to prioritize the numerous pressures of their unconventional role as teaching-focused faculty in a research university. In addition, they expressed gratitude about the collegiality of the environment and tremendous respect for their colleagues. Finally, faculty discussed the excitement and hard work of collaboration that building the residential college brought, and they shared their perceptions of the necessity for patience, communication, and flexibility as they addressed the (sometimes competing needs) of curricular coherence and faculty specialization. Interestingly, in describing their early experiences in the residential college, no faculty discussed relationships with student affairs administrators.

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DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that the residential college environment, with its emphasis on undergraduate education, did not ameliorate the time pressures felt by faculty as they responded to the numerous opportunities that their affiliation with the college brought. This finding confirms that of Diamond (1999), who found that an institutional priority to promote better teaching does not translate to diminished pressure in other areas, particularly in research productivity. However, distinct from the faculty discussed in studies by Golde and Pribbenow (2000) and Kennedy and Townsend (2005)—faculty who considered whether or not to continue involvement in the residential college—the faculty in our study focused on how to shape the residential college in a way that made it work for them. They discussed ways to avoid burnout, ameliorate the demands on untenured faculty, and continue a focus on research despite competing pressures. In essence, faculty in our study demonstrated a sense of agency in dealing with the competing pressures because they had some power in alleviating them.

Like faculty in Golde and Pribbenow's (2000) study, faculty in this study described their relationships with their colleagues as a benefit of participating in the residential college. However, this benefit was not just a pleasant alternative to participants' relationships with the colleagues in their home department; instead, their colleagues were part of their college and therefore central to their day-to-day work as faculty. The faculty attributed the collegiality and collaboration to shared values that likely attracted the faculty to the

college in the first place. In contrast to the portrait of faculty at large research universities as being oriented toward "universalistic" values, as opposed to gazing inward toward the "particularistic" values of specific locales (Jencks & Riesman, 1968), faculty in our study clearly

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In contrast to the portrait of faculty at large research universities as being oriented toward "universalistic" values, as opposed to gazing inward toward the "particularistic" values of specific locales, faculty in our study clearly demonstrated a desire to make their mark on their surroundings, building an environment for students while at the same time cultivating relationships with cross-disciplinary colleagues.

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demonstrated a desire to make their mark on their surroundings, building an environment for students while at the same time cultivating relationships with cross-disciplinary colleagues. This finding underscores our previous work (Wawrzynski et al., 2009), which documented that faculty attracted to a residential college environment often look for an alternative to traditional faculty roles.

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It was also striking that faculty did not refer to student affairs administrators in their discussions of their early experiences, even when discussing the cocurricular life of the college. Their observations and meaning-making focused solely on what they and their faculty colleagues did to enhance the experience of students in the residential college. Similar to Golde and Pribbenow's (2000) findings, faculty in our study seemed unaware of student affairs and the role student affairs administrators could play in enhancing undergraduate education.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of our findings, there are several implications for student affairs educators who strive to partner with faculty by creating and sustaining academic-student affairs collaboration. First, be aware that faculty who opt into an established academic-student affairs partnership are likely to value the cocurricular aspect of undergraduate students' collegiate experience and will want involvement in shaping it. Whereas much of the literature about partnering with faculty assumes that they have different values than do student affairs educators, and thus will be less likely to see the benefits of

engaging students outside the classroom (e.g. Kuh, 1996; Schroeder, 1999; Whitt, 1996), faculty in our study already valued cocurricular engagement, as evidenced by their willingness to participate in it from day one. By assuming that faculty who choose to become involved in academic-student affairs collaboration do not need to be convinced of its benefit, student affairs educators will be able to approach faculty as partners in shaping the cocurriculum and can recognize what faculty will bring to the process.

Second, be mindful of the likelihood that in academic-student affairs collaboration, student affairs educators may need to do most of the reaching out to faculty and in addition may feel a diminished sense of autonomy in shaping students' cocurricular experiences. Because of their close proximity to one another and their collegial relationships, faculty described an excitement and willingness to work together to shape the residential college. Their belief that "everyone was pulling in the same direction" likely allowed them to brainstorm activities with other faculty and collaborate with them. Given that participants enjoyed positive relationships with their colleagues, these faculty may be less inclined to reach out to student affairs educators than would a lone faculty member who desires a connection to students.

Manning et al. (2006) found that student affairs educators who engaged in these partnerships often assumed a greater burden of responsibility for the partnership than did faculty and that it took some negotiating to ensure that each group saw themselves as equal partners in the process. Given the reality of academic-student affairs collaboration, housing and residence life staff should not be shy about

professing their expertise in social and educational programming in residence halls, staffing, and facility and emergency management, all of which are likely needed in residential colleges; however, it should also be expected that student affairs educators will take a supporting role in the design and implementation of the structure of the college and the curriculum. As illustrated by the failure of faculty in our study to mention student affairs, residence life and housing staff may need to educate faculty about the potential role that student affairs can play in support of the curriculum.

The final implication for student affairs practitioners who wish to partner more effectively with faculty in academic-student affairs collaboration is to spend time learning about

... to partner more effectively with faculty, it is vital that student affairs educators understand the learning outcomes of the subject matter and position themselves to advance those outcomes. Residence life and housing staff might invite faculty or the dean of the residential college into residence life training to talk about the curriculum and how they envision students learning in the residence halls.

the academic outcomes of the area in which they will be working. Similar to the faculty in Golde and Pribbenow's (2000) study, the faculty we interviewed focused on providing a holistic learning experience centered on academics. Therefore, to partner more effectively with faculty, it is vital that student affairs educators understand the learning outcomes of the subject matter and position themselves to advance those outcomes. Residence life and housing staff might invite faculty or the dean of the residential college into residence life training to talk about the curriculum and how they envision students learning in the residence halls. In addition, residence life or housing staff might consider asking to be included in faculty meetings to learn more about the discussions that are taking place regarding the curriculum.

CONCLUSION

Academic-student affairs collaboration offers an innovative model of practice that will keep student affairs relevant. However, to partner more effectively with academic affairs, student affairs educators may need to challenge some of their assumptions about faculty lives and interests. It is our hope that the current study sheds light on how faculty in a residential college made meaning of their early experiences. Although our study provides some insight into faculty roles in an academic-student affairs collaboration model, more research is needed to understand faculty meaning-making over time. Furthermore, additional research is warranted on other types of academic-student affairs collaboration models in other areas of the educational institution.

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Discussion Questions

1. The authors advance the importance of collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs, but not all housing and residence life (HRL) staff members understand the value of these collaborations to their work. How can you promote this principle with others in HRL on your campus?
2. The principles of collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs remain central to the student affairs profession, whether or not a campus has residential colleges. In what ways do you currently collaborate with academic affairs to enhance undergraduate education? What might you do to enhance these efforts or develop new partnerships?
3. From the descriptions of the findings of this study and the participants' own words, it is possible to discern differences between the work experiences of faculty in this residential college when compared to their work outside of a residential college. Based on your interpretation of this information, what are those differences and how might they influence the willingness of faculty members to collaborate with student affairs staff?
4. This study examined the experiences of faculty in a new residential college. How might you apply the findings of this study to an established residential college or other collaborative effort?
5. Faculty members who participated in this study did not discuss partnerships with student affairs staff in relation to their work within this residential college. What does this suggest to you about their awareness of how such collaborations might enhance faculty efforts? How might you use this information to advance partnerships that enhance undergraduate learning?

*Discussion questions developed by Denise Davidson, Journal Board reviewer,
Bloomsburg University*