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The Relationship Between Community and Academic Achievement in Residence Halls

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education has been criticized for failing to actively engage students in teaching and learning (Blimling, & Whitt, & Associates 1999). The Student Learning Imperative (ACPA, 1994) challenges student affairs professionals to be intentional in creating conditions that enhance student learning and personal development. Recent reports such as *Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America's Research Universities* (Boyer Commission, 1998) call for greater attention to undergraduate education. *Seven Principles for Good Practice for Undergraduate Education* (Chickering & Gamson, 1987) and *Good Practice in Student Affairs: Principles to Foster Student Learning* (Blimling & Whitt, 1999) detail strategies for engaging students in active learning and encourage the collaboration necessary to accomplish more effective student learning. Although little evidence exists that simply living on campus has a consistent influence on academic achievement, it does have a net positive influence on persistence and degree attainment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Furthermore, the intentional programmatic efforts provided in residence halls can also positively influence academic achievement (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Research has consistently supported the importance of involvement in enhancing students' cognitive and affective development (Astin, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in Higher Education, 1984). Residence halls, then, can be powerful vehicles for learning when efforts are made to increase students' academic involvement and involvement with faculty and peers (Astin, 1996; Thompson, Samiratedu, & Rafter, 1993). Furthermore, peer group influence and integration into the institution are associated with academic success (Upcraft, 1986). One recent study found that students who were highly involved in their collegiate experience earned significantly higher grades than students who were minimally involved (McCluskey-Titus, 1996).

Early research on the impact of residence halls on college students found that both residence hall environments and relationships established among students could impact academic achievement (Williams & Reilley, 1972). A more recent study concluded that residence hall learning communities indirectly enhanced students' achievement and persistence by facilitating incorporation into college (Pike, Schroeder, & Berry, 1997). Zeller (1994) described learning communities as places where students collectively live and work together, making learning active instead of passive. In 1984, the *Involvement in Learning* report cited the potential benefits of learning communities including helping students feel part of a cohesive group and developing students' sense of identity. The characteristics of teamwork, cohesiveness, and sense of identity are qualities associated with a strong residence hall community (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Simply living in a residence hall does not provide a learning advantage for students. Instead, advantages relate to the nature of activities and interpersonal interactions with faculty and peers that intentionally structured residence hall environments promote (Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1996). While Bowman and Partin (1993) found no statistically significant differences in grade point averages of students living on campus versus off campus, none of the residence halls in their study had specific

programs intended to enhance students' academic achievement. Targeted programming interventions may influence academic success (Pike et al., 1997).

The purpose of this study was to discover whether there was a relationship between residence hall floors that were perceived to have strong, cohesive communities by the residents and academic success as evidenced by grades earned. If the research hypothesis was found to be true, then students living on floors with strong community environments, as measured by the community survey, should have earned better grades as demonstrated by higher floor grade point averages.

METHOD

To examine the relationship between community on residence hall floors and floor grade point average, a community survey was developed and modeled after the University Residence Environment Scale (URES) (Moos, 1979). The community survey was a 26-item Likert scale instrument (1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neutral/does not apply, 4 = disagree, 5 = strongly disagree) and was designed to provide an overall assessment of five distinct elements of community: sense of belonging (items 1, 2, 3, 8, 9); relationships (items 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 18, 20, 21, 23, 24); academics/studying (items 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17); social activities (items 4, 5, 6,

TABLE 1
COMMUNITY SURVEY ITEM MEANS

Item #		N	M	SD
20	I am happy with the friendships I have developed on this floor.	3336	4.10	0.95
18	Relations among students on this floor are generally positive.	3339	3.98	0.85
1	On this floor there is a feeling of belonging among students.	3345	3.95	1.00
23	Students borrow other students' belongings on this floor.	3337	3.92	0.89
19	Students on my floor look out for each other's safety.	3342	3.79	0.91
15	Students on this floor consider academics to be very important in college.	3332	3.72	0.88
2	Most students on this floor have a sense of loyalty toward the floor and its residents.	3346	3.69	1.01
4	Students on this floor often do something together.	3344	3.67	1.09
3	Most of the students on this floor know each other fairly well.	3344	3.65	1.08
24	Late night snacks are often shared by students on this floor.	3334	3.63	1.07
8	Students on this floor are concerned with helping and supporting one another.	3340	3.57	1.00
5	Spontaneous social activities occur among the students on this floor.	3342	3.54	1.11
14	Students on this floor work hard to get good grades.	3338	3.54	0.86
7	Students on this floor don't often spend time with one another.	3338	3.50	1.11
21	Relationships I have formed with other students on my floor have helped me to develop intellectually.	3337	3.48	1.07
9	Understanding the feelings of others is considered important by most students on this floor.	3337	3.44	1.04
10	Students on this floor are not very considerate of the feelings of others.	3327	3.44	1.10
25	Social events in this hall are attended by students on this floor.	3335	3.36	1.01
12	Students on this floor rarely study.	3343	3.35	1.01
11	Students on this floor seem to be striving for the highest grades.	3336	3.34	0.95
22	There are often intellectual conversations among students on this floor.	3338	3.29	1.06
16	Students on this floor tend to study for long periods of time.	3336	3.09	0.98
6	Few students on this floor participate in floor activities or meetings.	3339	3.08	1.11
13	On this floor, academics are secondary to most social activities.	3336	3.03	1.03
26	Students on this floor have participated in community service sponsored by the floor or hall.	3275	2.83	1.08
17	Study groups are organized by students on this floor.	3335	2.63	1.10

7, 24, 25); and intellectual development (items 21, 22). Demographic data including age, gender, ethnicity, classification, semesters lived on campus, number of credits taken, and number of hours spent studying also were collected. Finally, the composite grade point average for each floor surveyed was determined from university databases on each campus.

Residence hall students from five large public universities were surveyed during late fall semester 1999 or early spring semester 2000. Following written directions, resident assistants (RAs) distributed surveys to undergraduate residents in every other odd-numbered room on their floors. Surveys were returned directly to RAs. Some campuses offered small incentives (e.g., a free soda) to encourage resident participation in the study. To determine if a relationship existed between the five aspects of floor community and grade point average, a Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used. A correlation of $p \leq .01$ was considered significant.

RESULTS

A total of 25,367 students lived in undergraduate residence halls on the five campuses. Of this total, 46% were male and 54% were female. The majority of these students (64%) were first-year students, and 36% were upper-class students.

Of the 5,869 surveys distributed, 3,417 surveys were usable for a return rate of 58.2%. The sample was 62% female, 38% male, 4% Asian/Asian American, 14% Black/African American, 3% Latino/Hispanic American, 3% Multi-ethnic/Racial, 76% White/Caucasian, 43% age 18 or younger, 32% age 19, 25% age 20 or older, 57% first-year students, 24% sophomores, 19% juniors and seniors. Percentages are based on responses that included demographic data and may not equal 100% due to rounding.

Table 1 shows the mean score and standard deviation for each survey item. Items in the table are shown in descending order of the mean score. Fourteen items were at or above a score of 3.5 indicating agreement with the items.

Composite Correlations

Table 2 details all composite correlations among the five community survey categories. The strength of these correlations is impacted by the fact that six items from the community survey were assigned to two of the five categories.

There are strong positive correlations between sense of belonging and relationships (.911), social activities and relationships (.862), and sense of belonging and social activities (.744). The relationships among sense of

TABLE 2
COMPOSITE CORRELATIONS AMONG FIVE ASPECTS OF COMMUNITY

		Sense of Belonging	Academics & Studying	Intellectual Development	Social Activities	Relationships
Academics & Studying	Corr.	.415(*)				
	Sig.	.000				
	N	431				
Intellectual Development	Corr.	.610(*)	.456(*)			
	Sig.	.000	.000			
	N	431	431			
Social Activities	Corr.	.744(*)	.279(*)	.560(*)		
	Sig.	.000	.000	.000		
	N	431	431	431		
Relationships	Corr.	.911(*)	.412(*)	.689(*)	.862(*)	
	Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	
	N	431	431	431	431	
Fall 99 GPA	Corr.	0.035	.312(*)	-0.007	-0.002	0.044
	Sig.	.469	.000	.886	.973	.367
	N	431	431	431	431	431

*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

belonging, relationships, and social activities seems obvious because, in general, housing professionals seek to promote intentional community building activities and values (Blimling & Miltenberger, 1990).

Moderate positive relationships exist between relationships and intellectual development (.689), sense of belonging and intellectual development (.610), social activities and intellectual development (.560), and academics and studying and intellectual development (.456). (Please note: The intellectual development category only has 2 items contributing to the score. Further, the categories relationships and intellectual development share 1 survey item, which has a strong impact on the correlation.) The moderate positive relationship that intellectual development has with all of the other categories is encouraging. More fostering and stimulation of intellectual discussions in college and university housing could have an impact on these categorical relationships.

Positive relationships, albeit weak, also exist between relationships and academics and studying (.412), sense of belonging and academics and studying (.415), and social activities and academics and studying (.279). One explanation for the weak correlation between these categories may be that students do not perceive a direct relationship between community activities and relationship building with their academic pursuits. Therefore, the impact on floor residents' academic pursuits, as a group, is more indirect in nature.

The only relationship in any of the five categories with the composite fall 1999 GPA was a weak positive correlation with academics and studying (.312). Even though this correlation is a weak one, it may be the most interesting result. The simple fact that students' *perceptions* related to academic achievement and study habits on their floors are correlated positively with the actual floor GPA demonstrates that students have a grasp of their peers' level of dedication to academics and studying. The observation, or merely the perception, of an increase or decrease in the amount of studying and time spent on academic pursuits by peers on one's floor may have an impact on an individual student's effort and time devoted to academic tasks. College and university housing programs may be able to be intentional in their efforts to promote this perception through programming related to intellectual pursuits and academic achievement.

DISCUSSION

A number of factors influence the development and maintenance of positive floor communities within campus residence halls. Described here are suggestions for enhancing the relationship between community development and academic achievement, promoting community development through intentional programming, and implications for staff selection and training.

Academics and Community

The composite data from all five universities suggest that there is a significant relationship between academics/studying and the other four aspects of community measured in this study, as well as a significant relationship between intellectual development and the other four aspects of community. Although students do not strongly agree that their floor peers study frequently or for long periods of time, nonetheless they perceive that "students on this floor work hard to get good grades." Nearly half of the respondents reported studying 10 or fewer hours per week, and 75% reported studying 15 hours or less. There is a general perception that students "work hard" and that academics are "very important," however, the self-reported data indicate that most students do not study a lot. There may be a disconnect between values students hold regarding the importance of academic achievement and actual effort expended in studying. Another explanation may be that because two-thirds of the respondents are first-year students, they may not yet know what personal effort is required to be academically successful in college. In either case, it may be valuable for residence hall staff to: (a) initiate meaningful discussions at floor meetings to help students understand what is required for academic success in college, (b) create opportunities for organized floor study groups or other academically related activities, and,(c) challenge students regarding their values related to academic achievement versus individual or community behaviors that may hinder academic success. Faculty members, as well, can be instrumental in helping shape a culture that emphasizes community and academic achievement. Strategies include: (a) faculty-in-residence programs that actively involve faculty in the floor or hall community, (b) workshops or programs offered within the residence hall environment by faculty on topics such as study

skills or exam preparation, and (c) developing a faculty liaison program where one or two faculty members serve as informal advisors, encourage academic achievement, and participate in activities of the community. What matters in these sorts of structured programs is the quality of the interactions between the faculty and the students. Merely coming together is not enough. There must be intentional opportunities for meaningful dialogue and for making connections with each other.

Programming Expectations and Emphasis

The five universities included in this study use a variety of programming models and have varying expectations or requirements for the numbers and types of RA sponsored floor programs. In some of the institutions surveyed, RA programming requirements included specific areas of focus such as diversity, social activities, or academic enhancement. Some requirements were more specific on special interest floors and were geared to the "theme" of the floor. The similarity is that in each of the five universities, intentional efforts were directed to providing programs at the floor level to build strong floor communities. Because the mean scores were high for all five aspects of community at all five universities, one implication of this research may be that the particular programming model or requirements of RAs at a specific institution are of less importance than other factors, such as a general emphasis on programming which aims to promote the development of strong, positive communities on each floor.

Staff Selection and Staff Training

These findings also have implications for staff selection and training. If one important aspect of the RA role is to promote community building among residents at the floor level, it follows that RAs need to be selected using criteria that assess their potential for encouraging living-learning environments that help floor members make connections, build relationships, and provide opportunities for residents' involvement in creating and sustaining the community. If residence life departments value community building, training for professional and paraprofessional staff should be designed to focus on developing the skills and sensitivities to do so effectively. It may include opportunities for RAs to define community, identify

its elements, and intentionally relate floor interventions to these elements. More specifically, learning experiences for staff members could be developed which focus on the following: (a) establishing healthy, caring, and interdependent interpersonal relationships; (b) using technology to promote further discussions among floor members and involvement in activities; (c) collaborating with faculty in programming efforts and maintaining their involvement in building a floor culture that supports academic achievement; (d) engaging in community service activities to help build stronger communities; and (e) promoting study groups to assist students in their academic success and their feeling of belonging on the floor.

Future Research

Nearly two-thirds of the respondents in this study were first-year students who completed the survey part way through their first year living in residence halls. Future research that examines the perceptions of first-year students versus upper-class students may reveal interesting differences in how floor community is perceived. Returning students have a sense of what the residence hall community is like, while many first-year students have never previously lived in a community setting. Further, the adjustment issues which first-year students face are different than challenges faced by upper-class students, and may influence their involvement behavior in the floor community. Upper-class students may feel greater independence and may be less likely to engage in floor community activities. Upper-class students may also more fully understand what effort is required to be successful academically, something new students have yet to learn.

Future research also could examine differences in community between floors that are designated as "special interest floors" compared to floors that are not defined as such. Preliminary examination of the data at one of the five universities in this study found that students living on special interest floors perceived the floor community to be stronger in all five aspects of community.

CONCLUSION

The Student Learning Imperative (ACPA, 1994) urges student affairs professionals to create intentional conditions that enhance student learning and development. Identifying factors,