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Notes for this Special Issue

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Notes for this Special Issue

Abstract

Residential learning communities or living-learning communities afford integration of and collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs. The articles in this special issue address unique elements and experiences in residential learning community programs.

Keywords

Residential Learning Communities, Living-Learning Communities

The scholarship on learning communities and on residential learning communities often exists in parallel spheres, with little cross pollination of research, assessment, or strategies for implementation spanning the two spheres. Yet some of the central tenets of both learning communities and residential learning communities—such as integration of curricular and co-curricular learning (Inkelas & Soldner, 2011; Kuh, 2008; Learning Communities Association [LCA], n. d.) and focus on community building with faculty and a cohort of students (Inkelas et al., 2018; LCA, n.d.)—exist in both spheres. It is our hope that this special issue of *Learning Communities Research and Practice* appeals to learning community enthusiasts and residential learning community enthusiasts alike and begins to bring the research related to both closer together. Further, with the different foci of articles in this volume, we believe it is useful to highlight Lardner’s (2017) framework for considering learning community scholarship through three lenses, adapted from Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s (1999) concept of inquiry as stance: knowledge-for-practice (recognizing that better learning community work comes from knowledge about learning communities); knowledge-in-practice (highlighting scholarship that shares practical knowledge regarding learning communities that results from reflection of practice itself); and knowledge-of-practice (understanding practice with theory in mind).

The foundation for our work together as editors for this volume was laid when we served as co-leaders for the Elon University 2017-2019 Center for Engaged Learning Research Seminar on Residential Learning Communities as a High Impact Practice (www.CenterForEngagedLearning.org). The purpose of the seminar was to build on existing knowledge of learning communities with the goal of more fully integrating the residential aspect. Our charge was to help our 20 participants facilitate multi-institutional research projects that would illuminate what makes residential learning communities a high impact practice for students, how institutions might scale up access to them, how faculty and staff can contribute to their high-quality while balancing other job responsibilities, and how RLCs shape and are shaped by institutional culture. The seminar culminated in a conference in the summer of 2019, during which we met several other researchers and practitioners who contributed to this volume. To ensure we had wide representation from a variety of scholars and practitioners, we also issued a call for proposals.

As readers embark on this issue, we would like to ensure clarity of terms throughout the volume. Borrowing from our Elon Statement on Residential Learning Communities as a High-Impact Practice (2019) we define the following:

- *Learning Community*: Considered a High-Impact Practice, learning communities are defined by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) as curricular structures in which students co-enroll in at least two courses, sometimes focused on a common topic

(Kuh, 2008). Learning communities are often interdisciplinary, offering opportunities for integration of concepts from different disciplines. Learning communities might also incorporate co-curricular activities, such as service learning (Kuh, 2008). The Learning Communities Association describes learning communities as “represent[ing] an educational approach that involves the integration of engaged curricular and co-curricular learning and emphasizes relationship and community building among faculty or staff and a cohort of students in a rich learning environment” (LCA, n.d.).

- *Residential Learning Community/Living-Learning Community/Living-Learning Program*: Residential Learning Community (RLC), Living-Learning Community (LLC), and Living-Learning Program (LLP) are commonly used to refer to the same type of structure, and there are various definitions of these initiatives. Inkelas and Soldner (2011) define LLCs as those that “typically group students together in a residence hall, offer a shared academic experience, and provide cocurricular learning activities for student engagement with peers” (Inkelas et al., 2018, p. 1). Common features of these programs include students living in proximity to each other with intellectual and co-curricular programming.
- *High-Impact Practice*: Practices in undergraduate education that are high impact increase students’ engagement, enhance their sense of belonging, and prompt deeper, more engaged learning (see Kuh, 2008, and AAC&U, n.d.).

Authors throughout this special issue refer to the programs they studied by the various names noted above for residential learning communities, often based on the specific nomenclature of their institutions. In remaining true to our Center for Engaged Learning Research Seminar name, in our Introduction we reference all of them as residential learning communities.

Articles in this special issue address two broad themes of residential learning communities: elements and implementation of these programs, and measurement and outcomes. We include single institution studies as well as numerous multi-institutional studies, four of which were supported by the 2017-2019 Research Seminar on Residential Learning Communities as a High-Impact Practice. Authors whose work resulted from the seminar have noted this support.

Four articles in this special issue highlight elements and implementation of residential learning communities that can inform practice. Justin Fair, Dan Burkett, Dawn Smith-Sherwood, Sondra Dennison, and Li Teng’s *An Enhanced Approach to Living and Learning Together at IUP: Living-Learning Community Certificate from the Field* details the development of living-learning community certificate programs at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. The authors report on the process their Living-Learning Executive Team used to create four-semester certificate

programs, slated to begin in Fall 2020, that aim to increase recruitment and retention while offering students a credential after two years. Sense of belonging is a critical component of retention, and The Gemstone Honors Program's Gems Camp at the University of Maryland succeeds in enhancing sense of belonging, as described by Maureen Bowers, Leah Kreimer Tobin, Jessica Lee, Kristan Cilente Skendall, and Frank Coale in *Increasing Campus Sense of Belonging through LLC Participation: To Gems Camp We Go*. The authors explain the benefits of the Gems Camp orientation program, an optional experience that is an element of the Gemstone Honors Program living-learning community at their institution. Special programming is also the focus of *Living in the Explore House: A Major and Career Exploration-Focused Residential Learning Community for Undecided Students* by Jayne K. Sommers, Lucy Reile, Grant Henry, and Jennifer Thomas. Their article highlights a residential learning community for undecided students, centered on academic and career exploration at The University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. Finally, showcasing residential learning communities at multiple institutions in *Different Ways of Fostering Integrative Learning in Residential Learning Communities: Integration Comes in Various Shapes and Sizes*, Richie Gebauer, Mary Ellen Wade, Tina Muller, Samantha Kramer, Margaret Leary, and John Sopper focus on the ways intentional integration of curricular and co-curricular activities in residential learning communities affect integrative learning.

Once these programs are crafted and implemented, understanding the outcomes experienced is critical. Thus, the second group of authors in this special issue provides ways to measure outcomes and share information about the outcomes themselves. For example, Justin Leibowitz, Charity Lovitt, and Craig Seager's article, *Development and Validation of a Survey to Assess Belonging, Academic Engagement, and Self-Efficacy in STEM Residential Learning Communities*, reports on their development of a survey to measure academic engagement, self-efficacy, and sense of belonging for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) students in residential learning communities at three universities. Further, several articles and authors in this special issue report on such outcomes as student thriving, deeper life interactions, and student engagement. Because residential learning communities are not a new initiative and questions have arisen about their role in the success of today's students, Sarah Hurtado, Robert Gonyea, Polly Graham, and Kevin Fosnacht's *The Relationship Between Residential Learning Communities and Student Engagement* illuminates findings from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) to answer questions about access, support, student engagement and learning related to residential learning communities. The authors conclude that these residential programs continue to contribute to student success. However, simply living together is not enough for student learning and success, as highlighted in *Priming the Pump: Residential Learning Community Effects on Engagement with Diversity*

and Participation in High-Impact Practices by Amy Wolaver and Kelly Finely, who reinforced the need for an academic component to residential learning communities. Laura Dahl, Antonio Duran, Zach Hooten, Christopher Stipeck, Ethan Youngerman, and Matthew Mayhew reinforce this idea through their exploration of the outcome differences between residential learning communities that include common courses in which students in the program enroll as compared to those residential learning communities that do not include common courses. In *Investigating the Influence of Residential Learning Communities on Student Experiences*, the authors note important outcomes regarding student interactions with peers and faculty. Findings regarding the impact of faculty involvement on students in residential learning communities are one discovery reported by Jennifer Eidum, Lara Lomicka, Warren Chiang, Ghada Endick, and Jill Stratton in *Thriving in Residential Learning Communities*, research centered on the concept of student thriving using the Thriving Quotient (Schreiner, 2010). The authors also found that different student populations tend to thrive in residential learning communities and specific elements of residential learning communities may lead to that thriving. Similarly, *Student Demographics and Experiences of Deeper Life Interactions within Residential Learning Communities*, by Rishi Sriram, Cliff Haynes, Susan Weintraub, Joseph Cheatle, Christopher Marquart, and Joseph Murray, reports that while some student populations have Deeper Life Interactions with peers and faculty through their residential learning community experiences, students of color and first generation students are less satisfied with these interactions with peers. The authors offer recommendations based on their multi-institutional study of Deeper Life Interactions in residential learning communities.

We hope you enjoy reading the work featured in this special issue. For readers involved in residential learning communities, we trust it may inspire you to reflect on implementation of your communities, adding facets to deepen learning or reimagining aspects to tighten coherence. Returning to Lardner's (2017) framework, we hope it also encourages you to identify aspects of your communities that others would benefit from knowing more about and to contemplate how you might contribute to the scholarship-for, scholarship-in, and scholarship-of the field of residential learning communities. For all readers, this special issue is a reminder that the integration of living and learning, when done intentionally and with a plan, creates many outcomes we hope students gain in a residential environment—deeper meaning, deeper learning, and deeper engagement. Furthermore, this special issue illustrates the promise of transferability of residential learning community research to other learning community contexts, whether residential or not. Recently learning community practitioners and researchers from various learning community-centered organizations whose efforts contributed to advocacy of and/or research about learning communities have begun an ongoing dialogue to explore the current state and future direction of learning communities. These learning community-

focused organizations include the Washington Center for Improving Undergraduate Education, the Learning Community Association (LCA), the ACUHO-I Academic Initiatives Conference, The National Learning Community Consortium (NLCC), the Residential College Society (RCS), the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), and the National Resource Center on the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (NRC). If you are interested in learning community research and practice, we hope you will engage with one of these organizations or with the larger collective.

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