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Thriving in Residential Learning Communities

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Abstract

Our research presents a multi-institutional study on the concept of thriving in Residential Learning Communities (RLCs). The study utilizes the Thriving Quotient (Schreiner, 2010c) to research how RLCs at four U.S. institutions contribute to students' academic engagement and performance, interpersonal relationships, and psychological well-being. Additionally, this study uses an institutional mapping inventory to examine how students' thriving correlates with various components of RLCs (Inkelas et al., 2008), such as RLC size, theme, faculty involvement, budget, and linked courses. The data were analyzed using factor analysis tools and blocked linear regression to identify associations between RLC characteristics and the thriving outcomes. Results indicate that particular groups of students (women, first generation students), faculty involvement, and financial resources correlated with higher thriving in RLCs. The article concludes with implications and directions for future research.

Keywords

Residential Learning Communities, Thriving, Belonging, High Impact Practice

Cover Page Footnote

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Learning Communities (LCs) have long been classified as a High Impact Educational Practice (HIP) that foster students' development (Kuh & Schneider, 2008; Brower & Inkelas, 2010). LCs take many forms, but LCs with a residential component are increasing in number and type at universities across the United States and beyond (Tinto, 2003). This study examines how one type of learning community, residential learning communities (RLCs), functions as a high impact practice. Specifically, by exploring the relationship between key RLC characteristics and student outcomes, this study seeks to understand the specific components of RLCs that most contribute to student success and how RLCs are serving different student populations.

In order to capture how RLCs function as a HIP, our work utilizes the Thriving Quotient (Schreiner, 2010c) to survey nearly 3,000 undergraduate students living in residential learning communities (RLCs) on four university campuses. Thriving is defined as being "fully engaged intellectually, socially, and emotionally in the college experience" (Schreiner, 2016, p. 136) and has not previously been examined within the context of RLCs. Schreiner's Thriving Quotient captures five key dimensions of thriving at college: (a) engaged learning, (b) academic determination, (c) positive perspective, (d) diverse citizenship, and (e) social connectedness (2010c). Each of these factors represents an element of academic, intrapersonal, or interpersonal thriving that has been empirically demonstrated to be amenable to change within students (Schreiner, 2016). In the context of RLCs, these five dimensions of thriving can reveal how RLCs promote positive educational outcomes for student participants.

Our multi-institutional study examines thriving within residential learning communities (RLCs) in four different university contexts (private and public institutions; medium and large undergraduate populations). While prior research on thriving has already focused on first-year students, our study interfaces the Thriving Quotient with an inventory of RLC characteristics, based upon the research of Inkelas et al. (2007) and Inkelas et al. (2008) in order to understand how RLCs might foster students' thriving. In the next section, we examine prior research on RLCs, their characteristics, and their role in positive student outcomes. Additionally, we review recent studies utilizing the Thriving Quotient to show the value of using this tool for RLCs.

Residential Learning Communities as High Impact Practices

Due to their positive associations with student learning and retention, some undergraduate experiences are designated "high impact." HIPs can increase students' active learning, integrative learning, and learning outside of the classroom; they can also result in gains in desired outcomes and can increase student success, persistence, retention, and satisfaction (Greenfield et al., 2013). Additionally, HIPs can facilitate meaningful interactions among faculty and

students. Participation in these practices can be life-changing for students (Kuh & Schneider, 2008). Kuh and Schneider (2008) identify a number of experiences that serve as examples of high impact practices: first year seminars, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing intensive courses, collaborative assignments, undergraduate research, diversity and global learning, e-portfolios, service learning, internships, and capstone courses/projects. This study specifically focuses on one type of learning community as a high-impact practice: residential learning communities.

According to Giesen (2015), learning communities are "high-impact instructional practices that engage people to work together toward a common goal—students working with students, faculty working with faculty within the same discipline or from different disciplines, or students working with faculty" (para. 1). Lenning and Ebbers (1999) group learning communities into four categories by primary organizational goal: (a) curricular LCs with a coordinated curriculum, (b) classroom LCs where learning activity is coordinated at the course level, (c) residential LCs where learning activities are focused on residence halls, and (d) student-type LCs with students connected by common characteristics, such as honors or first-generation student LCs. Each of these learning community types not only have shared characteristics, but also diverge—and overlap—in important ways. Although the defining characteristic of RLCs is that learning occurs in the residence halls, RLCs often include curricular, classroom, and student-type characteristics.

There has been extensive research on RLC traits and student outcomes. Brower and Inkelas (2010) explain that RLCs commonly share the following characteristics:

- participants live together on campus in a dedicated space,
- learners share an academic or co-curricular experience or both,
- learners engage in structured activities in their residence that encourage faculty and peer interaction, and
- RLCs may have a topical or academic theme.

In practice, RLCs go by many names: most commonly they are known as living-learning communities (LLCs), as well as residential colleges, residential neighborhoods, and others. For the purposes of this study, we will use the term residential learning community and its acronym, RLC, for consistency.

In addition to their many names, RLCs vary widely in structure, organization, and type. The National Study of Living-Learning Programs (NSLLP) collected information from over 600 RLCs at over 50 postsecondary institutions in the United States and with that data developed two methods to categorize residential learning communities: by thematic type and by structural and organizational characteristics (Inkelas et al., 2007; Inkelas et al., 2008). Their research divided RLCs into 17 primary thematic categories, such as civic/social leadership programs, disciplinary

programs, general academic programs, honors programs, residential colleges, umbrella program, and wellness programs. In 2008, they used structural and organizational data—such as size, faculty involvement, courses offered and cocurricular activities, program director affiliation, and financial resources—to organize the living-learning programs into three distinct structural types: (a) Small, Limited Resourced, Primarily Residential Life Emphasis, (b) Medium, Moderately Resourced, Student/Academic Affairs Combination, and (c) Large, Comprehensively Resourced, Student/Academic Affairs Collaboration. Together, these two studies show the complexity of RLC design, including themes, curricula, resources, and level of collaboration across divisions.

Collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs plays an important role in RLC efficacy, building bridges between student affairs staff, faculty involved with RLCs, and the students themselves. Research shows that faculty-student interaction, both within and outside the classroom, leads to student success (Astin, 1993; Kuh et al., 1994; Kuh & Hu, 2001; West, 2007). RLCs often include faculty programs such as Faculty-in-Residence (FIR), where a faculty member (the FIR) lives in and among students on campus (Healea et al., 2015; Sriram & McLevain, 2016), assigning living-learning community advisors to RLCs to develop an RLC curriculum and work directly with students throughout the year, and faculty affiliate programs, where faculty are assigned to residential spaces to provide or attend programs with students, advise students, or otherwise interact with students living in the RLC (Inkelas et al., 2018). Faculty involved in these programs report numerous benefits to their teaching, career development, and personal fulfillment (Golde & Pribbenow, 2000; Rhoads, 2009; Sriram, 2015).

In addition to categorizing RLCs by thematic typologies and structural and organizational characteristics, Inkelas et al. (2008) utilized NSLLP student survey data to examine student outcomes for each structural type. The student data included responses from over 23,000 students at 34 institutions. Focusing on growth in critical thinking, overall cognitive complexity, and appreciation for liberal learning, they found that participation in large collaborative programs (cluster three) predicted higher critical thinking scores. Students who participated in small residential life programs (cluster one) and large collaborative programs (cluster three) outperformed students in medium-sized combination programs (cluster two) in both overall cognitive complexity and appreciation for liberal learning scores. This indicates that the structural and organizational characteristics of residential learning communities may have a significant impact on important elements of student success at the university.

Along with benefits for faculty and student engagement, RLCs show a positive effect on student academic performance and retention. Stassen (2003) found that even nonselective RLCs with modest collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs can foster students' academic integration at similar

levels to more selective and more coordinated models. The 2018 Assessment of Collegiate Residential Environments & Outcomes (ACREO) study affirms Stassen's findings that students' interaction with academic faculty in RLCs positively contributes to students' academic persistence, noting that even non-academic faculty interaction contributes to students' career attitudes and intention to innovate (Mayhew et al., 2018).

These studies confirm that RLCs have a significant impact on student experiences: they support positive academic, social, and civic outcomes. Moreover, there are many types of RLCs distinguished by curricular connections, faculty and staff involvement, and budgetary considerations. Our study contributes to the research on learning communities as a HIP by analyzing how various RLC characteristics contribute to student thriving, as well as deepening our understanding of how RLCs impact thriving across student groups.

Thriving and Student Success

Just as LCs are viewed as a high-impact practice for student success, thriving has been linked to models of psychological well-being and models of student retention. According to Schreiner (2010c), "thriving college students not only are academically successful, they also experience a sense of community and a level of psychological well-being that contributes to their persistence to graduation and allows them to gain maximum benefit from being in college" (p. 4). Research suggests that students who thrive have a more optimistic outlook on life, including the way they view their future and the world.

The concept of thriving has emerged from research in both positive psychology and higher education. Built upon the concept of *flourishing*, which describes individuals who have high levels of "emotional, psychological, and social well-being" and resilience (Schreiner, 2013, p. 42), Schreiner differentiated thriving as specific to the college context. Based on predictors of success, Schreiner et al. (2012) asserted that thriving college students are intellectually, socially, and emotionally engaged in college. When institutions emphasize thriving, they hold greater expectations for graduates, including a "commitment to community" and "lifelong learning" (Kinzie, 2012, p. xxv).

Student success in higher education has been an important area of research for decades. Success is not limited to simple academic outcomes; it also includes items like critical thinking, academic support, sense of community, social-emotional well-being, engaged learning, a sense of belonging, motivation, and self-concept, which have all been considered a part of student success and well-being (Keyes & Haidt, 2003). Rayle and Chung (2007) studied first-year students' "mattering," or the feeling of others depending on us, being interested in us, and being concerned with our fate. They found that first-year students' feeling of

mattering and significance in their college environment is correlated with making friends and feeling supported by their college.

In another study, Schreiner (2009) administered a student satisfaction survey to 27,816 undergraduate students across four classes at 65 different institutions. Using logistic regression analysis and hierarchical multiple regression analysis, this study found that student satisfaction was a high predictor of student retention. Her team also found that creating an inviting climate on campus was most important to first year students. Finally, the results indicated that satisfaction varies by class level and GPA and that it became a more powerful predictor of retention with each rising class level.

Specific to RLCs, Schussler and Fierros (2008) examined how participation in RLCs affects first-year college students' perceptions of their academic environment, relationships with other members of the college community, and sense of belonging at the institution. Results suggest that students participating in RLCs with a common course were most likely to obtain academic support from their peers and more likely to establish a strong sense of belonging to the university. Moreover, this study indicated that a variety of RLC types should be present within one institution so that students can find different pathways for academic and social support.

Schreiner's (2010) Thriving Quotient has become an important tool for evaluating students' mattering, satisfaction, and their perceptions of academic environment, relationships, and sense of belonging. Although it had not been used to evaluate student thriving in RLCs prior to our study, the Thriving Quotient has been used to examine student outcomes for other High-Impact Practices and engaged learning experiences such as first-year orientation programs and leadership education courses. Rude et al. (2017) examined the impact of outdoor orientation experiences on student thriving and found that participating in a common outdoor orientation experience may contribute to student involvement, a greater sense of campus community, and increased thriving at college. Stephens and Beatty (2015) utilized the Thriving Quotient to study the value of leadership education courses. They found that these courses can increase engagement for first-year students, especially for at-risk students. Both studies show the usefulness of the Thriving Quotient as a tool for evaluating specific student engagement programs that connect students with HIPs.

In addition to evaluating student programs, the Thriving Quotient has been useful for helping researchers understand thriving outcomes for specific student groups. McIntosh (2012) analyzed the factors leading to thriving for Caucasian, African American, Asian, and Latino students. Using the Thriving Quotient, 7,956 students at 42 institutions were surveyed, and results showed that thriving can be measured consistently across ethnic groups and "transcends racial boundaries" (McIntosh, 2012, p. 124). McIntosh's results point to a psychological sense of

community as the primary predictor of thriving for undergraduate students in all ethnic groups examined. Similarly, Pérez et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative study with 21 Latino undergraduate men utilizing components of the Thriving Quotient; results suggest that thriving was dependent on their ability to translate, accrue, and use cultural wealth during college. These studies indicate that the Thriving Quotient produces valuable insight into which students thrive within certain communities and why they are thriving. Knowing that there is a diversity of findings in the area of thriving, our study aimed to provide a closer look at thriving for those living in RLCs, since many of these communities serve as a residential space for first-year students. The next sections present our research questions and methodology.

Research Questions

This study examines how students' thriving on Schreiner's five dimensions (2010c) correlates with the various components of residential learning communities. Our research questions are:

1. What types of students thrive, or do not thrive, within RLCs?
2. What are the components of RLCs that lead to student success and thriving in college?

Methodology

Participants

In this study, we surveyed 15,000 current undergraduate students living in RLCs at four institutions (average response rate 21%). Surveys were completed by approximately 3,000 students during the spring semester; the final sample was 66% female, 16% first generation, and 70% first year students (Table 1). Since this study focused on assessing thriving in residential learning communities, we chose not to survey students who do not live in RLCs. All of the RLCs that were included in the study had either a faculty member and/or a professional staff member who supervised or was connected with the learning community.

Table 1

Demographics of Respondents

Demographics		% of respondents
First Year	1797	70%
Second Year	645	25%
Third Year	94	4%
Fourth Year +	32	1%
Female	1719	67%
First Generation	424	16%
International	117	5%
Black/African American	252	10%
Latinx	222	9%
Asian/Asian American	342	13%
South Asian	163	6%
Middle Eastern	43	2%
Native American	30	1%
Other	76	3%
Total Respondents	2573	

Data Collection

We collected and used two data sets for this study: a mapping inventory of RLCs and the Thriving Quotient student survey. Each data set is described below.

Institutional Mapping Inventory

The institutional mapping inventory used the 17 program themes identified and validated by the NSLLP (Inkelas et al., 2007) and asked RLC advisors and student life professionals at four institutions to complete a comprehensive inventory of the various characteristics for each of the 87 unique RLCs at their institutions. Additionally, the mapping inventory included structural features developed from the NSLLP (Inkelas et al., 2008), as well as our own experiences working with RLCs, such as course linkages, co-curricular activities, size of RLC, faculty and staff involvement, faculty incentives, program funding, and building amenities.

(See Table 2 for the main characteristics. See Appendix A for full survey.) The structural features beyond those included in the NSLLP surveys were checked for reliability by using complementary expertise (Charmaz, 2006): each member of our team served as a local expert at their institution, double-checking the responses for internal consistency. As a group of higher education professionals, we checked the responses for face validity and again tested the constructs for content validity during the data analysis. Our intention in collecting the various RLC components was to connect students' predictors of thriving back to particular characteristics of the RLC.

- Theme or Focus
- Primary Leadership and Funding Source: Student Affairs and/or Academic Affairs
- Program Budget
- Faculty Involvement/Engagement
- Incentives for Faculty Participation
- Staff or Administrative Involvement
- Number of Students in RLC
- Student Selection Process
- Student Class year Composition
- Undergraduate and/or Graduate Student Support
- Courses Associated
- Co-Curricular Experiences
- Physical Spaces

Figure 1: Residential Learning Community Characteristics

Thriving Quotient

Data about the experiences of students living in RLCs was collected using the Thriving Quotient survey instrument (Schreiner, 2010c), assessing five areas of college life: engaged learning (EL); academic determination (AD); social connectedness (SC); diverse citizenship (DC); and positive perspective (PP). In addition to the validated Thriving Quotient instrument, the survey collected demographic information, including gender, first generation status, international status, race/ethnicity, year in school, and the RLC in which the student participated (Appendix B). With permission from Schreiner and the Thriving Quotient team, our research group distributed the IRB-approved online questionnaire to students living in residential learning communities during the spring of 2018 at four higher education institutions: two mid-sized private universities and two large public institutions. Residential learning community students were sent an email in Spring 2018 inviting them to participate in the study by completing a 20-minute online survey related to their college experience over the past year. Surveys were sent to over 12,000 RLC students at the four institutions, completed by 2,573 for an overall completion rate of 21% (USC: 15%, n=844; Rutgers: 33%, n=568; Elon: 29%, n=585; WashU: 21%, n=673).

Data Analysis

The study employed principal component analysis (PCA) to reduce and combine RLC predictor variables (Hotelling, 1933) and used blocked linear regression (Freedman, 2009) to analyze the association between demographics, RLC characteristics, and the thriving outcomes. Both of these statistical processes are described in more detail below.

Reducing Factors: Faculty Factor and Curriculum Factor

We amassed a large number of variables through the mapping inventory. Through diagnostics, we determined that some of these variables could be reliably predicted by other variables, resulting in a common statistical problem of multicollinearity. Using PCA revealed two primary underlying constructs with eigenvalues above 1 that reduced the number of factors and helped alleviate this concern (See Table 3). Girden (2001) interprets factors below eigenvalues of 1 as having fewer than one variable in it—thus those additional factors below 1 were dropped from the analysis. When combined with the Kaiser rule and scree plot analysis, this process can identify the most reliable factors remaining (Zwick & Velicer, 1986).

Table 2

Principal Components Factor Loadings—Faculty and Curriculum

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2
What is the faculty involvement in your RLC? (check all that apply) 0=none; 1=low; 2=mid; 3=high	**0.887**	-0.078
Are there incentives for faculty to participate in your RLC? (check all that apply) none=0; meal credits, etc.=1; course release, housing, etc=2	**0.884**	-0.133
Do faculty live-in your RLC? No=0, Yes=1	**0.819**	-0.166
What spaces exist within your RLC? (check all that apply) 0=basic, lounge, kitchen; 1=additional space created for group. 2=dedicated academic resources for group.	0.787	-0.171
How many students are in your RLC?	0.626	0.339
What courses are associated with your RLC? (check all that apply) None=0; loose=1; tight=2	0.105	**0.920**
What co-curricular experiences are available in your RLC? (check all that apply) Encouraged activities=0; Required activities=1	-0.053	**0.818**
Budget_per_student	-0.368	0.622
% Variance Explained	39.36%	27.78%

The first factor, which we labelled the "Faculty Factor," related to three mapping variables (presence of a live-in faculty, faculty incentives for RLC involvement, and overall faculty involvement rating). The second factor, "Curriculum Factor," related to two items regarding courses and co-curricular activities tied to the RLC. Additional items did not load either positively or negatively in relation to the two identified constructs and remained separate variables (budget, size of RLC, physical spaces).

I-E-O and Blocked Linear Regression

Our statistical model derives from Astin's (1991) well-established Input-Environment-Outcome (IEO) model which accounts for entering characteristics of students, the impact of institutional environment, and the student outcome as discrete and separate areas (See Figure 1).

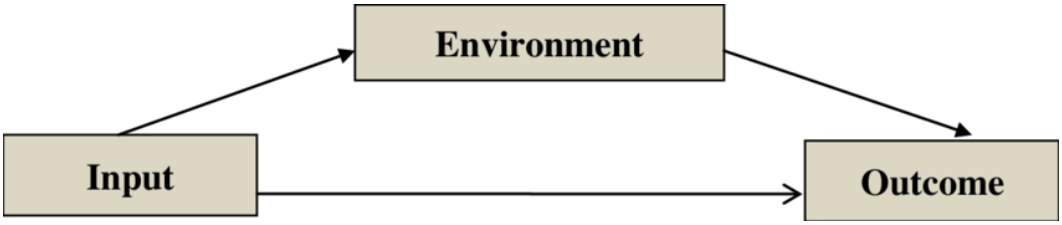
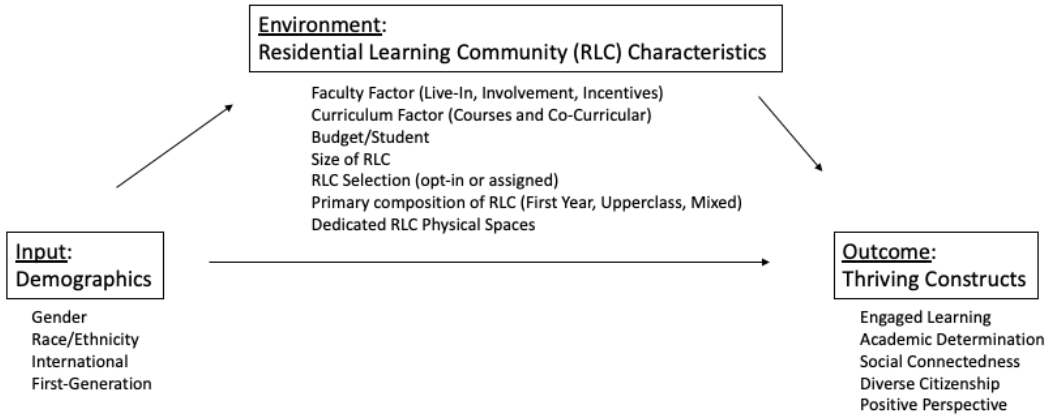


Figure 2: Astin's I-E-O Model. A visual representation of Astin's theoretical model (Astin, 1991)

This methodological frame helps identify which of the RLC factors have statistical impact while controlling for entering characteristics. For this study, the "input" consists of a block of demographic characteristics, "environment" consists of RLC characteristics, and "outcome" consists of our thriving constructs (see Figure 2). By using a blocked linear regression approach in our study, we also have the added benefit of addressing both research questions with a single statistical model.



Block 1: $Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_i + \beta_2 X_j + \beta_3 X_k + \epsilon$
Block 2: $Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_i + \beta_2 X_j + \beta_3 X_k + \beta_4 Z_i + \beta_5 Z_j + \beta_6 Z_k \ldots\ldots + \epsilon$

$Y_i \ldots Y_m$ = Thriving outcome scores (engaged learning, academic determination, social connectedness, diverse citizenship, positive perspective)
$X_i \ldots X_l$ = Student demographic predictors (gender, race, international, first generation)
$Z_i \ldots Z_o$ = RLC characteristics predictors (Faculty, curriculum, budget, size, selection, composition, space)
ϵ = error

Figure 3: RLCs and Thriving Model**.** Combining the elements of the RLC study with Astin's theoretical model.

Each thriving outcome was run as a separate regression model with six total outputs (5 thriving components and a cumulative thriving total).

Results and Discussion

The next section takes a closer look at the two research questions that are examined in this study. In the first part, we explore the different types of students that thrive (or do not thrive), and in the second part we look at the components of RLCs that lead to success and thriving. For each question, we provide the results, followed by the discussion.

Research Question 1: What types of students thrive, or do not thrive, within RLCs?

The initial block of statistical results revealed a range of correlations based on students' characteristics: gender, first generation status, international student status, race/ethnicity (Table 4). While most correlations yielded no significant statistical relationship, some correlations emerged from this block. Notably, female students correlated positively along four of the five thriving outcomes (engaged learning, academic determination, diverse citizenship, positive perspective). Moreover, first generation students correlated positively with three outcomes

(academic determination, diverse citizenship, positive perspective) and negative along one (social connectedness). The initial analysis suggests that for some ethnic subgroups, there are several negative thriving categories including the following: for Black students (academic determination), Latinx students (academic determination, positive perspective), Asian students (engaged learning, academic determination, positive perspective) and South Asian students (engaged learning, academic determination).

Table 3

Results—Demographic Variables

	Engaged Learning	Academic Determination	Social Connectedness	Diverse Citizenship	Positive Perspective	Thrive Total
Female	PLUS	PLUS		PLUS	PLUS	PLUS
First gen college student		PLUS	NEG	PLUS	PLUS	
International student	PLUS			neg		
White						
Black		neg		plus		
Latinx		NEG			neg	
Asian	NEG	NEG			NEG	NEG
South Asian	NEG	NEG				
Middle Eastern						
Native					plus	
Other				plus		

"PLUS" indicates a positive statistical correlation at the $p < .05$ level, "plus" = positive correlation at the $p < .1$ level, "NEG" = negative correlation at $p < .05$, and "neg" = negative correlation at $p < .1$ level. Empty boxes produced no statistically significant correlation.

Research Question 1 Discussion: Student Characteristics

In response to our first research question, which investigates what types of students thrive or do not thrive within RLCs, we examined student demographic characteristics. Initial findings indicate that significant statistical associations with at least one of the five thriving factors emerged for three key student characteristics: gender, first generation status, and race/ethnicity categories.

Female students show a strong positive correlation with four thriving factors—Engaged Learning (EL), Academic Determination (AD), Positive Perspective (PP) and Diverse Citizenship (DC)—as well as overall thriving. This

finding affirms research by Enochs and Roland (2006) that learning communities play an important role in the social and academic adjustment for female students. Other research found that in general women experience higher levels of psychological well-being than men (Ames et al., 2014; Bowman, 2010; Enochs & Roland, 2006; Kord & Wolf-Wendel, 2009; Leontopoulou, 2006). While there seems to be a paucity of research regarding the connection between LLCs and women, our results are not surprising given that women generally self-report higher grades, study more, and have higher graduation rates than men (Almanac 2018, 2018).

Additionally, first generation students are associated positively with engaged learning, academic determination, diverse citizenship, and positive perspective, but negatively with social connectedness. Many first generation students leave college before completing their degree. Factors influencing their persistence include the lack of interaction with faculty and other students (Polinsky, 2003; Skahill, 2002). Our findings indicate that RLCs could be an effective way to increase first generation retention and graduation rates since they provide a built-in way for students to engage with faculty in meaningful ways during their first year of college. By intentionally placing first generation students in RLCs, there is the potential for interaction and engagement with peers within the community. Furthermore, the RLC may serve to integrate the academic components of college life in a more streamlined and cohesive way that enhances thriving in first generation college students.

In their nationwide study of living-learning programs, Inkelas et al. (2007) found similar benefits for first generation students, writing, "Although not usually designed with a first generation population as the target audience, most L/L programs are committed to the academic and social integration of their residents and may consequently be particularly beneficial to first generation college students" (p. 405). Their study supports our findings that first generation college students benefit from participating in RLCs, which "may act as the conduit through which the innate interests and abilities of first generation students are valued and cultivated in ways that contribute to their ultimately successful transition to college" (p. 423). These findings suggest that encouraging first generation college students to participate in RLCs may contribute to increased thriving in this population.

As a whole, Students of Color make up 35% of survey respondents, with students able to select one or multiple categories. Our data indicate that each racial/ethnic group has different relationships with thriving. Students who identify as Black show a strong positive correlation with diverse citizenship (DC). Asian students living in RLCs show a strong negative correlation for engaged learning (EL), academic determination (AD), positive perspective (PP) and overall thriving. South Asian students show a strong negative for EL, and neither Middle Eastern

nor Native students show any correlations. Students who identify as Other show a small positive correlation for DC. This breakdown of thriving by race/ethnic group and by each thriving factor reveals important data about the experiences of specific groups within RLCs. Prior research on thriving has grouped Students of Color together in contrast to White student experiences (Paredes-Collins, 2012; Rude, et al., 2017; Vetter, 2018), but our data show that specific groups of students have vastly different experiences related to thriving.

The negative thriving outcomes for Asian/Asian-American students merits further consideration. This group scored significantly lower on three dimensions of thriving (engaged learning, academic determination, and positive perspective) as well as a lower overall thriving score. It is not immediately obvious within this study why this ethnic group would score so differently from others; a survey of existing literature on Asian Pacific Islander (API) college students provides some clues to explain the mechanism that may contribute to this curious result. This includes research showing the negative impact of the model minority myth (Poon, et al., 2015; Wing, 2007), studies detailing the mental health crisis for API college students (Cress & Ikeda, 2003; Okazaki, 1997), and encounters with racism and microaggressions on campus (Wong & Halgin, 2006). Administrators and practitioners would be well-advised to pay special attention to API college students and assess how residential experiences (including RLCs) may contribute to or alleviate these negative effects. It may very well be that our institutions are unintentionally creating spaces that are of benefit to one population while having a negative impact on another. Such tradeoffs should be addressed with better and more data—especially when the students most negatively impacted are often already those from marginalized communities.

Research Question 2: What are the components of RLCs that lead to student success and thriving in college?

Adding the full set of predictor variables related to RLC characteristics completed the full statistical model which, when combined with the original demographic variables (Table 5), reveals an abundance of correlations (and meaningful non-correlations) worthy of a closer look. When the RLC predictors are added in, nearly all of the student demographic characteristics retain their original relationships to thriving (Female, First Generation, Asian) while some RLC characteristics were found to correlate with several thriving outcomes: faculty and budget. We will now turn to interpreting the meaning and implications of these findings.

Table 4

Results—Demographic and RLC Characteristics Variables.

	Engaged Learning	Academic Determination	Social Connected-ness	Diverse Citizenship	Positive Perspective	Thrive Total
Female	PLUS	PLUS		PLUS		PLUS
First gen college student	plus	PLUS	NEG	PLUS	PLUS	
International student	PLUS			neg		
White						
Black				PLUS		
Latinx						
Asian	NEG	NEG			NEG	NEG
South Asian	NEG					
Middle Eastern						
Native						
Other				plus		
Faculty Factor	PLUS	PLUS		PLUS		
Course & Co-curricular Factor						
Budget/student	PLUS		PLUS	PLUS		PLUS
# of Students in RLC				neg		
Opt-In Selection	NEG	PLUS	neg			neg
Dedicated physical space	NEG					
Primarily First Year RLC		PLUS	PLUS		PLUS	PLUS
Primarily Second/Third Year RLC	plus	PLUS			plus	PLUS

"PLUS" indicates a positive statistical correlation at the $p < .05$ level, "plus" = positive correlation at the $p < .1$ level, "NEG" = negative correlation at $p < .05$, and "neg" = negative correlation at $p < .1$ level. Empty boxes produced no statistically significant correlation.

Research Question 2 Discussion: RLC Components

Our second research question focused on examining the link between RLC characteristics and student thriving—and the results suggest that the three key areas meriting further discussion are faculty, budget, and student characteristics. We discuss these primary study findings below.

Faculty

Our results indicate that faculty presence in RLCs relates to increased thriving in three areas: Engaged Learning (EL), Academic Determination (AD), and Diverse Citizenship (DC). These factors, which indicate positive thriving results, relate to the degree to which students actively participate in their learning endeavors through focused attention, mindfulness, determination, and confidence about their studies and their learning, and, furthermore, the degree to which they connect what they are studying with their own lives. Faculty play a key role in these learning endeavors; in fact, the more engaged students are in the classroom, the more likely students are to interact with faculty outside of the classroom (Schreiner, 2010a). Additionally, these students have a desire to make a difference in the community around them and have high curiosity and openness to learning from the lived experiences of people around them.

Existing literature claims that faculty-student interactions are associated with many positive student outcomes, such as persistence, intellectual development, and student engagement (Cox & Orehovac, 2007; Ku & Hu, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). However, studies related to faculty-student interaction tend to focus on such interactions within the traditional classrooms rather than RLCs. Therefore, our finding that faculty involvement in RLCs may have a substantive impact on key student outcomes in residential environments offers an additional consideration for institutional leaders and expands the current literature on faculty involvement. This finding seems to affirm a recent study suggesting faculty participation with undergraduates is a key element to RLC success (Inkelas et al., 2018).

This finding is even more notable since there was no significant impact found in the Curriculum Factor (Table 5) with any of the thriving outcomes. This factor represented the degree to which linked courses and required co-curricular activities (not necessarily led by faculty) were present in the RLC. One interpretation is that the impact faculty have on students in the RLC context occurs quite independently of whether faculty are teaching courses to students or not. Considering how many RLCs invest significant time, energy, and money into developing, sustaining, and overseeing courses and curriculum, one question is whether there is ample research to support a strategy to engage students towards thriving primarily through RLC-linked coursework and required activities. Our study results indicate that focusing resources on a variety of pathways for faculty involvement—such as creating live-in faculty homes, developing faculty affiliate programs for RLCs, and promoting faculty attendance at RLC social and academic events—may have more impact than focusing only on courses and requiring co-curricular participation.

At the inception of these programs, as practitioners consider design elements of RLCs that lead to positive thriving outcomes, determining the most effective way to involve faculty is a key question to consider. Involving faculty in teaching

residentially-linked courses can be a complicated process with additional considerations (the number of courses, release time, support of the tenure and promotion process, rank, course approval processes, etc.). Our study does not show a positive correlation with thriving for residentially-linked courses; rather, thriving emerges through the engagement of faculty in the overall RLC program, with continued faculty presence. This finding encourages practitioners to think about the involvement of faculty in different ways other than the traditional classroom relationship of instructor to students. Faculty engagement programs in RLCs that may have more lasting impact include promoting informal and formal conversations between faculty and students about major, career, and life questions, as well as faculty involvement in dinners, advising, workshops, and social gatherings.

Financial Resources

In the initial mapping inventory, RLC staff were asked to provide the total program budget amount and how it is typically used (e.g. community dinners, meetings, trips, etc). Our analysis indicates that higher expenditures per student correlate with higher levels of thriving along three factors: Engaged Learning (EL), Social Connectedness (SC) and Diverse Citizenship (DC). This is notable given that, within the model, we have already accounted for the other major factors such as size, faculty involvement, physical space, and curriculum. In other words, even when considering all of the other important components, RLCs with higher levels of per-person program funding have students with greater levels of thriving when it comes to focus in learning, connecting with others, and being open to difference. This affirms research by Inkelas et al. (2008) indicating that within the wide variation of RLC budgets, larger RLCs with larger budgets show more positive student outcomes than smaller RLCs with smaller budgets. Intuitively, this outcome makes sense when you consider that RLCs, in general, require additional human and financial investment over traditional residence halls and lead to a myriad of positive outcomes confirmed in many prior studies (Inkelas et al., 2007; Stassen, 2003). Our research supports the expected result that additional financial investment in RLCs towards programming for students (e.g., community building, exposure to resources) yields key benefits to students.

Results Summary

Our initial exploratory findings reveal both positive and negative correlations to thriving factors across particular student characteristics and RLC components. For student characteristics, there were important implications for which students seem more (females, first generation) or less (Asian, South Asian) likely to thrive in RLCs. In analyzing and mapping various characteristics of RLCs across four

institutions with the thriving factors, thriving was strongly associated with the involvement of faculty and higher allocation of program budgets.

Additionally, there were a range of RLC characteristics that would be worth exploring in a future analysis. These characteristics—such as the student selection process into the RLC; faculty; and demographics, such as gender, race, and first-generation status—may impact student thriving outcomes.

Limitations and Future Research

One of the areas we did not fully address is related to RLC composition based on class year. Due to radically different structures of RLCs at the four contrasting institutions in this area (e.g., one campus has nearly all first year RLCs while another campus consists entirely of mixed-year RLCs), the overall interpretation of findings was challenging. While it does appear that there is an increase in thriving scores for students at RLCs comprised primarily of one class year, more institution types should be added in the future to substantiate this initial finding. This also opens the possibility to examine more RLC characteristics, such as RLC type (e.g., math theme, community service) and source of RLC administrative support (academic affairs vs. student affairs), that could yield fresh insights into the connection between RLCs and student thriving.

While certain student demographics, including first generation status and females, reported higher levels of thriving, the thriving results were mixed for international students in our study. Since international students made up a small percentage of our sample and the results on thriving were mixed, we recommend further study of how RLCs influence this important population.

Our project builds on the existing literature showing the educational benefits of RLCs for students. Because of the positive benefits of RLCs on student persistence, retention, and satisfaction, our research design intentionally excluded students residing outside of residential learning communities. Future studies could examine how thriving happens (or not) with students who do not reside in RLCs to better situate findings and to make a stronger case for the RLC's unique contribution to thriving outcomes. For example, the very positive thriving outcomes related to women are, within the limitations of this study, not attributable to RLC impact alone, since we did not survey non-RLC women. It could be possible that women thrive more than men across the four institutions, regardless of residential arrangement.

While we did not specifically ask about the demographics of the faculty leadership of the RLCs, it would be compelling to understand more about the impact of a faculty member's gender, race, and/or academic discipline on specific populations. For instance, does the gender or race of the faculty member play a role in the levels of thriving among females and/or racial groups? Looking deeper at the impact of identity, background, and academic commitments of the faculty members

could provide key insights into how institutions can improve RLC outcomes and better select and recruit the highest impact faculty members.

The thriving construct itself has been studied at length by Schreiner and her team (Schreiner, 2010a, b, c; 2016; Schreiner et al., 2012), and they have developed a baseline of thriving scores over multiple years, high numbers of students, and at varying types of institutions. It was not within the scope of this project to make comparisons with "national" or "cohort" average scores, but future studies could incorporate such contrasts to add to the current literature on thriving.

Conclusion

Our multi-institutional study on the concept of thriving in Residential Learning Communities (RLCs) indicates that faculty involvement, financial resources, and particular groups of students (women, first generation students) positively correlate with higher thriving within RLCs. Our analysis confirms that faculty involvement matters for students' well-being, especially related to three characteristics of thriving: engaged learning, academic determination, and diverse citizenship. Somewhat surprisingly, our data also indicate that having faculty teach a class for an RLC is not more significant than other types of involvement: simply having faculty connected to a residential learning community can yield more positive outcomes for students' learning. This finding supports research by Cox and Orehovec (2007), who claim that nearly every type of interaction between faculty members and students has a positive effect in the community. Moreover, the combination of faculty presence, faculty incentives, and faculty involvement in RLCs indicates that institutional support for a wide range of faculty involvement pathways correlates with positive learning outcomes for students. Successful examples of this involvement can include creating book clubs for students and faculty, regularly attending dining and conversation events (such as language tables), hosting a speaker or film series with discussion, leading service projects or study abroad trips with students, and even joining pickup basketball games (Rhoads, 2009).

As colleges and universities are faced with increased pressures to deliver concrete educational outcomes during times of limited resources, the determination of which programs and initiatives will receive funding and resources will become increasingly important. For those institutions that have chosen to allocate resources for both staffing and programming in RLCs, the ability to demonstrate the impact of the RLC experience among their students is critical. Budgets reflect university priorities and, based on our research, there seems to be evidence that indicates that investing in the RLC experience is an investment toward increased thriving among certain demographics. Future research is warranted to explore RLC components in more detail to identify how budget, staffing, courses, and models impact thriving.

Finally, female students and first generation college students in our study showed higher levels of thriving than other groups. This result is not surprising, given that there are growing numbers of these student populations at higher education institutions (Wood, 2017). Other groups (Asians, Asian-American) yielded lower levels of thriving than expected and could benefit from further study. Regardless of student characteristics, higher degrees of thriving seemed to be linked with the involvement of faculty and higher allocation of financial resources.

Through this study, we have found that RLCs differ significantly and that it is often up to the individual institutions to navigate the best path that allows its students to thrive. As campuses struggle to meet their needs and as some of their populations continue to rise, creating a sense of community and belonging through RLCs can offer opportunities for students to truly thrive at college. As Schreiner (2010c) indicates, as students thrive, they learn how to be more outward-focused and engage with the world through healthy interpersonal relationships and service to their communities. As we have seen in this study, budgets and faculty engagement certainly matter as they contribute to positive levels of thriving. Based on our data, we encourage institutions to think closely about both the financial support offered to RLCs and the level of faculty engagement in their RLCs so that they can foster increased levels of thriving and contribute to the success of their students and programs. Given the increased expectations students and families have of universities, it is especially important to invest in programs that offer a holistic education that focuses on all aspects of a student's life and academic development. Residential learning communities unite the many aspects of students' university experience and, as we have shown in our research, can create a pathway toward higher levels of student success and thriving.

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Appendix A

Institutional Mapping Inventory for Residential Learning Communities (RLC)

This information is being collected as part of a multi-institutional study on residential learning communities (RLC) and their impact on a student's ability to thrive. For the purposes of this study, we are examining RLCs broadly as groups of students with shared residential and academic experiences. The concept of thriving is a construct within positive psychology and is being measured using the 'Thriving Quotient' instrument by Dr. Laurie Schreiner (2010).

Please complete the questions below to the best of your ability as they relate to your specific RLC. This survey will be utilized to collect information regarding RLC types across institutions and to develop a participant list for a follow-up survey on thriving.

* Required

Your Name *

Your Email Address

Institution Name *

RLC Name *

RLC website link (if possible)

Which of the following best describes the focus of your RLC? Please choose only one. *

- Civic and Social Leadership Programs (e.g. leadership programs, service-learning, civic engagement)
- Disciplinary Programs (e.g. business, journalism, health sciences)
- Fine and Creative Arts Programs
- General Academic Programs (focused on academic support or excellence but not a disciplinary theme)
- Honors Programs
- Cultural Programs (e.g. language-based, international, or multicultural programs)
- Leisure Programs (programs with or without academic content)
- Umbrella Programs (programs that house several distinct communities not specific to a theme)
- Political Interest Programs (engages students in domestic political issues)
- Residential Colleges

- Research Programs
- ROTC Program
- Sophomore Programs
- Transition Programs (programs that focus on career exploration, first-year students, or transfer students)
- Upper-Division Programs
- Wellness Programs (programs that focus on general wellness, spirituality, or healthy living)
- Women's Programs

Where is the primary administrative RLC leadership housed? (Check all that apply) *

- Student Affairs
- Academic Affairs
- Other

What unit provides the primary RLC funding? (Check all that apply) *

- Student Affairs
- Academic Affairs
- Other

What is your RLC program budget? What is included in this budget (community dinners, meetings, etc)? If there are other expenses related to your RLC, please specify. *

Are there incentives for faculty to participate in your RLC? (Check all that apply) *

- No incentives
- Course release
- Additional pay (stipend or other)
- Connection to promotion and tenure
- Meal credits
- Other incentives (parking pass, office space, summer pay, etc)

How many students are in your RLC? *

How are students selected for your RLC? (Check all that apply) *

- Random assignment
- Required participation for major/program/college
- Housing lottery system
- RLC-specific application
- RLC-specific application and interview
- Other

What types of undergraduate or graduate students (in addition to Resident Assistants) provide support to the RLC? (check all that apply) *

- No additional student leaders
- Live-in RLC peer mentor(s)
- Live-out RLC peer mentor(s)
- Live-in graduate student(s)
- Live-out graduate student(s)
- Other

What is the faculty involvement in your RLC? (Check all that apply) *

- No faculty involvement
- Live-in faculty
- Live-out faculty affiliate/principal involved regularly
- Teach a course with RLC students
- Serve as an academic advisor for RLC students
- Serve as a mentor or resource for RLC students
- Collaborate in RLC design/structure with Student Affairs/Residence Life
- Recruit or select RLC students
- Collaborate or oversee syllabus development
- Collaborate, attend, or plan co-curricular programming

What is the staff or administrator involvement in your RLC? (Check all that apply) *

- No staff involvement
- Live-in staff
- Live-out staff involved regularly
- Teach a course with RLC students
- Serve as an academic advisor for RLC students
- Serve as a mentor or resource for RLC students
- Collaborate in RLC design/structure with Academic Affairs/faculty
- Recruit or select RLC students
- Collaborate or oversee syllabus development
- Collaborate, attend, or plan co-curricular programming

What is the student composition of your RLC?

- Exclusively first-year students
- Primarily first-year students
- Primarily sophomore students
- Primarily junior students
- Primarily senior students
- Mixed years

What courses are associated with your RLC? (Check all that apply) *

- No credit-bearing course connection to the RLC
- Credit-bearing course(s) in which all RLC students are exclusively enrolled (course with only RLC students)
- Credit-bearing course(s) in which a portion of RLC students are exclusively enrolled (course with only RLC students)
- Credit-bearing course(s) in which RLC students are co-enrolled (some RLC students enrolled in a larger course with non-RLC students)

What co-curricular experiences are available in your RLC? (Check all that apply) *

- Set activities that RLC members are required to attend (e.g. discussions, dinners, service projects, films)
- Set activities that RLC members are encouraged to attend (e.g. discussions, dinners, service projects, films)
- Set non credit-bearing courses that RLC members are required to attend
- Certificates, distinctions, awards, or special transcript available upon participation in the RLC
- Participation in an RLC that helps advance major, minor, or other academic requirements or co-curricular requirements

What spaces exist within your RLC? (Check all that apply) *

- Faculty office
- Staff office
- Academic advising office
- Computer lab
- Community kitchen
- Community lounge space
- Classroom or seminar space
- Study space
- Dining facility
- Collaborative or maker space
- Other

Appendix B

Survey Questions (Excluding the Thriving Quotient ™ survey questions)

Thank you for agreeing to complete this survey on student success. This survey will take about 15-20 minutes to complete. By submitting the completed survey electronically, you are granting us permission to use your results in our research study. No individual information will ever be reported or released from this survey; only the researchers will see individual data and only grouped data will ever be reported.

Are you 18 or older? Yes____ No_____

Which college or university are you enrolled in?

Which residential community are you part of?

Thriving Quotient Questions here—please see https://www.thrivingincollege.org/

Finally, please tell us a little about yourself. Your answers will be grouped with those of other students to help us understand our students better. No individual information will be reported for any reason.

Are you the first in your immediate family to attend college? ___ yes ___ no

Gender: ___ female ___ male ___ transgender _____ other

Sexual Orientation: _____Heterosexual/Straight _____Gay _____Lesbian _____Bisexual _____Queer _____Other

Age: 18-20 __ 21-23 __ 24-26 __ 27-30 __ over 30

Class Level: ___ First-year __ Sophomore __ Junior __ Senior __ Other

Did you transfer into this institution? __ yes __ no

What is the HIGHEST degree you intend to pursue in your lifetime?
__ none __ bachelor's __ teaching credential __ master's degree
__ doctorate __ medical or law degree __ other graduate degree (specify)

Do you have paid employment during the school year? __ no __ on campus __ off campus __ both on and off campus

Collecting information about race and ethnicity assists colleges to understand the varying needs of students on campus. How do you identify your racial or ethnic family background?
__African-American / Black
__American Indian / Alaskan Native
__Asian-American/Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
__Middle Eastern / Arab American
__Caucasian / White
__Latino / Hispanic
__Multiethnic
__Other (specify:___)
__Prefer not to respond

Are you an international student? __ yes __ no

When you decided to enroll in this institution, was it your first choice? __yes __no

Are you a member of an intercollegiate athletic team on this campus? __yes __ no

Considering the financial aid you've received and the money you and your family have, how much difficulty have you had so far in paying for your school expenses?
__ no difficulty
__ a little difficulty
__ some difficulty
__ a fair amount of difficulty
__ great difficulty

We are interested in what helps students thrive in college. Thriving is defined as getting the most out of your college experience, so that you are intellectually, socially, and psychologically engaged and enjoying the college experience. Given that definition, to what extent do you think you are THRIVING as a college student this semester?
__ not even surviving
__ barely surviving
__ surviving
__ somewhat thriving
__ thriving most of the time
__ consistently thriving

What has happened this semester that has led to your perception of whether you are thriving or not?

Who in your residential community (insert specific community name) do you feel most connected to? (faculty, staff, RA, peer mentor, etc.) and why?

Briefly describe the most important relationships within your residential community (roommate, advisor, professor, staff, peers).

Briefly describe the activities, if any, that you participate in in your residential community (dinner, class, events).

What has been the best experience you've had in your residential community? Please describe.

What are five words that describe your residential learning community?

What else would you like us to know about your experiences in your residential community?