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IMPACT OF LIVING LEARNING COMMUNITIES ON UNDERSERVED MINORITY
STUDENTS AT A REGIONAL COMPREHENSIVE UNIVERSITY

BY

BRANDON L. THOMPSON

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MINORITY STUDENTS AT A REGIONAL COMPREHENSIVE UNIVERSITY

BY

BRANDON L. THOMPSON

Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Eastern Kentucky University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

2022

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my father, who taught me that I could accomplish anything and showed me how to be a loving husband and father. Dad, I miss you dearly, but I feel your presence daily.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“Greater is he that is in me, than he that is in the world.” - John 4:4. Thank you God for giving me the strength to complete this journey even when I didn’t think it was possible. To my wife Michelle, thank you for your unwavering support and encouragement throughout this process. Michelle, because of you I was able to chase my dreams without fear or guilt. Blythe and Avery, Daddy loves you; thank you for providing me the motivation to create a better future for our family. My hope is that I am able to continue to show you that you can achieve greatness. To my mom, thank you for always supporting me and being in my corner. You have made sacrifices time and time again in my life and I greatly appreciate it. Kacey, thank you for always being willing to tell me what I need to hear, not just what I want to hear; I couldn’t ask for a better big sister. Phil, from little league baseball, to summers in Door County, thank you for always being in my corner. Jarrett, my A1 since day 1, thank you for inspiring me to be my best and thank you for always having my back; you have been there for every milestone in my life and I couldn’t ask for a better best friend. To my grandmother Claudia Bennett, thank you for showing our family the value of education, none of this would have been possible without you.

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Last but certainly not least, I want to thank all the students who I have had the pleasure of serving over the course of my career. My passion is fueled by your success; thank you for allowing me to be a part of your lives.

ABSTRACT

As access to higher education for underserved minority (USM) students has consistently increased over the past 20 years, college and university campuses across the United States have observed an achievement gap between USM students and their white counterparts (Brown, 2019; Doan, 2015; Flores, Park & Baker, 2017; Pope, 2002; Ramos; 2019). This achievement gap is acute and carries significant consequences if not addressed. As campuses seek to find solutions to close this achievement gap, it is essential to identify strategies that meet the needs of USM students instead of waiting for students to adapt to higher education and campus culture (Aries, 2008; Gross, 2017).

Utilizing the theoretical framework Astin's (1984) Theory of Student Involvement, Astin's (1993) I-E-O Model and Critical Race Theory, this qualitative study explored the impact of living learning communities (LLCs) on the college success of underserved minority (USM) students at Southern Regional University. Through individual semi-structured interviews, this study provides insight into the lived experiences of five underserved minority USM students who live on campus and are members of an LLC and four USM students who live in campus housing but are not members of an LLC. The findings from this study suggest the benefits of living on campus, regardless of LLC participation and stress the importance of having a sense of belonging, establishing relationships with faculty or staff and self-efficacy.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Southern Regional University Overview

Founded in 1906, Southern Regional University (SRU) is situated in a rural community in Kentucky (Eastern Kentucky University “About ECU”, n.d.). As a four-year, public, comprehensive institution of higher education, SRU offers associate, bachelor, master and doctoral degrees to nearly 15,000 students. The university is comprised of six different colleges: College of Letters, Arts and Social Sciences, College of Business and Technology, College of Education, College of Justice and Safety, and the College of Health Sciences.

As a public postsecondary institution in the Commonwealth of Kentucky, SRU follows guidance given from the Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE) (CPE, n.d.). The Kentucky Postsecondary Education Improvement Act of 1997 established the CPE. The Governor of Kentucky appoints thirteen citizens, one faculty member and one student member to serve as council members. In addition, the CPE is run by a president that is appointed by Council membership.

Southern Regional University has gained a reputation as being school of opportunity, with a service region that spans 22 counties throughout central and eastern Kentucky (Ellis, 2005; Eastern Kentucky University, n.d.). Of the 22 counties that make up the SRU service region, 21 fall within the Appalachia region of the United States (Appalachian Regional Commission, n.d.). The Appalachian culture of SRU’s service region has a strong influence on programs and support services offered by the institution.

Classified as a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), SRU enrolls significantly more white students than other racial groups. Table 1.1 and Table 1.2 show enrollment by

Race for the Fall of 2019 and Fall of 2020 respectively. Over the course of the past two years, SRU has observed a decrease in enrollment.

Table 1 Fall 2019 Enrollment by Race

Race	Undergraduate	Graduate	Overall Total	Percentage
American Indian or Alaskan Native, Non-Hispanic	28	4	32	0.2
Asian, Non- Hispanic Only	125	35	160	0.9
Black, Non-Hispanic Only	709	134	843	5.6
Hispanic or Latino, regardless of race	452	79	531	3.6
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, Non-Hispanic	9	3	12	0.1
Nonresident Alien (Undocumented)	144	32	176	1.2
Race and Ethnicity Unknown	134	219	353	2.4
Two or More Races	392	42	434	2.9
White, Non-Hispanic Only	10,669	1,769	12,438	83.2

Table 1 adapted from “Enrollment by Gender, Race Ethnicity and Undergraduate and Graduate Levels,” by SRU Institutional Effectiveness and Research (as cited in D. Moore, personal communication, September 2020).

Table 2 Fall 2018 Enrollment by Race

Race	Undergraduate	Graduate	Overall Total	Percentage
American Indian or Alaskan Native, Non-Hispanic	30	4	32	0.2
Asian, Non- Hispanic	121	31	152	1.0
Black, Non-Hispanic	746	138	884	5.6
Hispanic or Latino, regardless of race	400	63	463	2.9
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, Non-Hispanic	9	4	13	0.1
Nonresident Alien (Undocumented)	166	40	206	1.3
Race and Ethnicity Unknown	141	181	322	2.0
Two or More Races	410	54	464	2.9

White, Non-Hispanic	11,376	1903	13,279	84.0
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Table 2 adapted from “Enrollment by Gender, Race Ethnicity and Undergraduate and Graduate Levels,” by SRU Institutional Effectiveness and Research (as cited in D. Moore, personal communication, September, 2020).

Diversity Within the SRU Service Region

African Americans only account for two percent of the population in the Appalachian counties of Kentucky (Simpson, 2020). Despite a decrease in the overall eastern Kentucky or Appalachian counties population, over the course of the past decade, racial and ethnic minority populations have increased. However, an educational achievement gap along racial lines is evident in Appalachian Kentucky. White students who come from the Appalachian region of the U.S. are two times more likely to graduate with bachelor’s degree compared to their black peers (Ockerman, 2017).

SRU Vision, Mission and Values

In 2015, SRU established a vision, mission and values that will influence the direction of the university through 2022 (Eastern Kentucky University, n.d.). The vision statement explains that “Southern Regional University will be a premier university dedicated to innovative student engagement and success, advancing Kentucky, and impacting the world.” The mission statement reads:

As a school of opportunity, Southern Regional University fosters personal growth and prepares students to contribute to the success and vitality of their communities, the Commonwealth, and the world. Southern Regional University is committed to access, equal opportunity, dignity, respect, and inclusion for all people, as integral to a learning environment in which intellectual creativity and diversity thrives (Eastern Kentucky University, n.d.).

The values that SRU has established to assist in pursuing the mission statement are as follows:

intellectual vitality, which is characterized by knowledge, scholarly inquiry, creativity, critical thinking, and curiosity, all with a global perspective;

sense of community, which is characterized by a supportive environment with strong relationships and a commitment to service, shared governance, collaboration, and unity of purpose;

cultural competency, which is characterized by equitable opportunities and treatment, mutual respect, and the inclusion and celebration of diverse peoples and ideas;

stewardship of place, by which the University enhances the intellectual capacity, economic vitality, environmental sustainability, and quality of life of the communities it serves;

accountability, which is characterized by fiscal responsibility, operational transparency, and responsiveness to the needs of internal and external stakeholders; and

excellence, which is achieved through integrity, continuous quality improvement, and a focused emphasis on the personal and professional growth of students, faculty, and staff.

Underserved Minority Student Populations

Access to higher education has increased significantly over the course of the past 20 years; this increase in access has resulted in larger numbers of minority students attending college (Brown, 2019; Doan, 2011; Pope, 2002; Ramos; 2019). Specifically,

Black and Latino students are leading the shift in college student demographics (Doan, 2011). Despite enrollment of students of color increasing fifteen percent within the past two decades, an achievement gap exists between students of color and their white peers (Flores, Park & Baker, 2017). Brown (2019) explains that black students who enrolled in a college or university in the fall of 2011 only had a 46% six-year graduation rate if they attended a public institution and a 57% six-year graduation rate if they attended a private university.

There are several factors that lead to lower retention and graduation rates for underserved minority students (USM) on college and university campuses. Underserved Minority Students may not know how to navigate their existence on a college campus. Often times USM students are called to adapt to the climate or culture of their institution, when in reality, the responsibility should fall on the institution to meet the needs of the students (Aries, 2008; Gross, 2017). In order to adapt to the needs of USM students, colleges and universities must establish high impact practices and support services that facilitate matriculation and ultimately graduation.

Living Learning Communities

Living Learning Communities (LLCs), also known as Living Learning Programs (LLPs), were originally established to incorporate academically based themes or topics along with building community amongst students who live in on-campus housing (Brower & Inkelas, 2010). Beginning in 2001, the National Study of Living-Learning Programs (NSLLP) assessed how LLPs influence academic, social, and developmental outcomes. Over the past two decades, LLPs or LLCs have been associated with several benefits that connect students socially and academically (Brower & Inkelas, 2010;

Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Zinshtevyn, 2019). Inkelas and Weisman (2003) mention three different types of involvement that students who participate in LLCs experience: involvement with academics, involvement with faculty, and involvement with their peers (as cited in Purdie & Rosser, 2011, p. 100).

Living Learning Communities can also be categorized as a high impact practice. High impact practices provide interaction between faculty and students and require an academic commitment from both parties (Kuh, 2008). Through high impact practices, students build relationships with faculty and staff and these relationships can lead to students pursuing and seeking assistance outside of the classroom (Kuh, 2008; Sidelinger, Frisby, & Heisler, 2016). High impact practices are utilized as a mechanism to build a relationship between students and the college or university they are attending.

Living Learning Communities at Southern Regional University

Southern Regional University has a total of 16 different LLCs. All 16 communities can be classified as either academic or thematic. Each community is forged through a partnership between the Housing & Residence Life department and an academic department or student life department. Each LLC faculty or staff partner signs a memorandum of understanding with SRU Housing & Residence Life, establishing learning outcomes and the terms of the partnership. To best support the LLC partners, an Associate Director for Residence Life provides on-going training for LLC partners. In addition, all LLC partners are invited to a monthly meeting to discuss current trends amongst the LLCs and to provide professional development opportunities.

All SRU students who live on-campus have the opportunity to participate in an LLC. When students apply for on-campus housing, they can choose to complete an

application to participate in an LLC. Although students can only be placed in one LLC, they have the ability to apply for any they may be interested in. The Associate Director of Residence Life has the responsibility of coordinating the selection of LLC participants in conjunction with the LLC academic or staff partner.

Table 3 2020-2021 Living Learning Communities

Living Learning Communities	Residence Hall Placement
1st Year Scholars	Carman Hall
Aviation	West Hall
Criminalistics	West Hall
First Generation	New Village
First Responders	Fleming Hall
Future Army Officers	New Village
Golf Management	Fleming Hall
Health Pursuits	West Hall
Honors Academic Academy	Haywood Hall and Fleming Hall
Passion for Sign (ASL)	Bennett Commons
Recreation and Adventure	New Village
Second Year Experience	Smith Hall
Teachers and Scholars	New Village
TRIO Programs	Bennett Commons
Wired	Bennett Commons
Student Success	Goodlatt Hall

Theoretical Framework

Theory of Student Involvement

There are various factors that lead to matriculation and ultimately graduation from a college or university. Astin (1999) found it is not solely a student's entry attributes that determine their success, it is equally important that the student has an experience at their institution that cultivates a sense of belonging and engagement with both faculty and staff. The combination of a student's inputs (demographics, background and previous experiences), their environment (experiences on a college campus), and outcomes (knowledge, beliefs and values after a student graduates from college) form the I-E-O model (Astin & Antonio, 2012). The college or university residence hall is one environment on a college campus Astin (1975) indicated impacts student outcomes (as cited in Astin, p. 523, 1999).

The I-E-O model was one of the first college impact models and aligns with Astin's (1984) Theory of Student Involvement (Strayhorn, 2008). The Theory of Student Involvement explains how students who are involved in their academic experience are more likely to persist. Astin (1984) further explains that involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy students are willing to devote to their academic experience (as cited in Astin, 1999, p. 518). According to Astin (1999) highly involved students interact with faculty members and other students on a frequent basis.

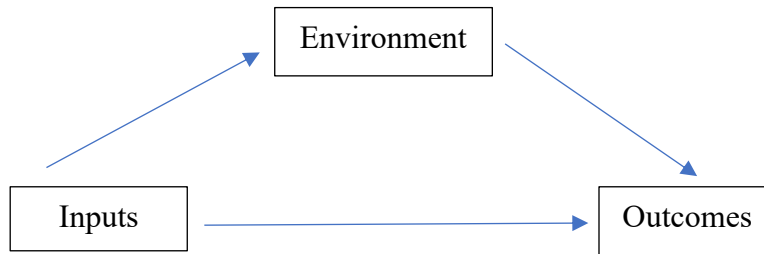


Figure 1 Input-Environment-Outcomes (I-E-O) Model

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) began as a movement and started once the Civil Rights Era of the 1960's ended (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Today, CRT theorists believe that racism exists, but is difficult to correct, due to white elite and working-class individuals reaping the benefits from racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; George, J., 2001). In the construct of education, CRT promotes the analysis of policy and procedures as well as curriculum (Price, 2020). It is through the lens and application of CRT educational practitioners and policy makers are called to deconstruct oppressive policies and practices that may exist on college campuses.

Problem Statement

Underserved Minority Students have a lower sense of belonging than their white peers on college campuses (Johnson, 2020). According to Gummadam, Pittman and Ioffe (2016) students who do not have a strong sense of belonging are more likely to have difficulty adjusting to college, creating barriers for matriculation. While significant empirical research has been conducted on high impact practices, such as LLCs, and their impact on student success, it is not known how an LLC may impact college success for the subpopulation of USM students. With a rapidly growing number of undergraduate

college students identifying as a USM, it is essential to understand how LLCs can impact their experience.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of Underserved Minority Students (USM) who participate in a Living Learning Community (LLC) at Southern Regional University and USM students who do not participate in an LLC. This study describes participant experiences in the areas of sense of belonging, interaction with faculty and staff, and self-efficacy. Participant experiences play an essential role in persistence on a college campus. Bauman et al. (2019) explains that retention for USM students goes far beyond the ability to achieve in the classroom.

Living Learning Communities exist at SRU to connect students with peers who have similar interest and assist in the matriculation and graduation of students (SRU Housing & Residence Life, n.d.). With the increase of USM students enrolled at SRU, it is important to understand the experiences USM students have in their residential facility. To date, little research has been conducted on the lived experiences of USM students and their participation in LLCs.

Research Questions

1. How do Living Learning Communities impact sense of belonging and connectedness for Underserved Minority Students?
2. How do Living Learning Communities assist in developing relationships with faculty and staff for Underserved Minority Students?
3. How does participation in a Living Learning Community impact self-efficacy for Underserved Minority Students?

Rationale for Study

To appropriately explore the aforementioned research questions, a qualitative research design was utilized. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011) qualitative researchers utilize a variety of empirical strategies including interviews to describe moments and meaning for individuals (as cited in Johnson, Adkins, & Chauvin, 2020, p. 138). Specifically, a phenomenological approach allowed the primary researcher to gain understanding and knowledge about the lived experiences of participants (Starks & Trinidad, 2007).

Participants were intentionally selected based on identifying as a USM student who lives on campus, through a process also known as purposive sampling (Johnson et al., 2020). Given the nature of the research questions, participants were asked to participate in semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews provide a flexible interview protocol in which follow-up questions can be asked, providing researchers the ability to further explore the thoughts of participants (DeJonckheere, Vaughn, 2019). The themes identified from the individual interviews assisted in explaining how participation in LLCs may or may not impact factors that lead to college success for USM students.

Significance of Study

As numbers of USM students on college campuses increase, it is imperative that the psychological, social, and cultural factors that influence matriculation are given attention in addition to academic achievement (Bauman et al., 2019; Green & Wright, 2017; Ramos, 2019). College and university campuses must find ways to adapt the campus culture and climate to accommodate the needs of the ever-changing student demographics (Gross, 2017). Doan (2015) calls on Predominantly White Institutions to

not only rely on grade point average and retention rates, but to also gather qualitative data on the experiences of USM students. More specifically, it is imperative that attention is given to psychological, social and cultural factors that influence matriculation.

Living in a residence hall provides an opportunity for students to form relationships with peers, faculty and staff all while building an affinity for their institution (Astin, 1999). Previous research has also gone to show that students who participate in LLCs have increased levels of involvement and commitment to their academics (Brower & Inkelas, 2010). Although previous research has demonstrated the success of LLCs, majority of this research is quantitative in nature, focusing on GPAs, credit hours earned and retention rates. Further, limited research exists on the impact of LLCs for subpopulations, specifically USM students. Understanding the connection between participation or non-participation in LLCs for USM students and their sense of belonging, faculty and staff interaction and self-efficacy will help shape practices at SRU in the future.

This study carries implications for other institutions of higher education seeking clarification on strategies to best support USM students. Although by design, the focus of qualitative research is not generalizability (Leung, 2015), the methods of this study can be replicated at different institutions to best understand how LLCs impact USM students on that particular campus. The results of this present study as well as future research can begin to illustrate the impact that LLCs play in college student success for USM students.

Nature of the Study

The experience a USM student has on a college campus impacts their overall output (Astin, 1985; Astin, 1999; Bauman et al., 2019; Green & Wright, 2017; Ramos,

2019). Through the utilization of a phenomenological approach in qualitative research design, researchers can gain understanding into the behavior of certain groups (Keegan, 2009). In the present study, exploration of the lived experiences of USM students was best accomplished through individual semi-structured interviews. Utilizing semi-structured interviews provided the opportunity for flexibility when interviewing participants, allowing the participant to delve deeper into their personal experiences (Firmin, Warner, Rose, Johnson & Firmin, 2012; Orcher, 2014).

The target population for this research was USM students who lived in residence halls on the SRU campus. A purposive sample of five USM students who participated in LLCs and four USM students who lived on campus but did not participate in LLCs was utilized. Each participant met with the primary researcher for 45 to 60 minutes for their individual semi-structured interview. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the primary researcher.

Definition of Terms

Living Learning Community (LLC) – Cohort of students who live in residence halls together and are grouped based on a common interest or academic program.

College Success – Refers to the combination of sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and faculty and staff interaction.

High Impact Practice – Strategies, techniques and practices utilized to influence student engagement with the goal of matriculation.

Underserved Minority Students (USM) – Traditionally referred to as underrepresented minority student. This is a demographic of the student body that do not represent the white majority.

Assumptions, Limitations and Delimitations

Assumptions

This study was based in several assumptions regarding participants, theoretical framework, and data analysis. It was assumed that participants were credible, providing truthful and complete responses about their lived experiences during the semi-structured interviews. In addition, the participants were assumed to be representative of the USM population at SRU. Both Critical Race Theory and the IEO model were utilized as theoretical frameworks for this study; it is believed that both theories are sound and effectively provide context for the college success of USM students.

Limitations

Similar to other qualitative studies, the results of the research are not generalizable. The population for this study was limited to USM students at SRU who live on-campus. The sub-set of the sample who participant in LLCs will have different experiences based on the LLC they belong to.

A second limitation deals with the timing of the proposed research. Beginning in March of 2020, the world began to experience the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic has had a significant impact on enrollment at SRU, the number of students who live on-campus and participation in LLCs. Several students who lived on-campus during the 2020-2021 academic year at SRU were not assigned a roommate due to COVID-19 response protocols; this change in living structure may have impacted the experience of those students.

Finally, the participants themselves cause limitations. The level of comfort participants may feel speaking with a former university administrator who served as the

researcher for this study. Through working to establish and build rapport, the researcher attempted to create a space in which participants could express their thoughts and opinions openly.

Delimitations

The population of the research was limited to USM students at SRU to gain better insight into how this growing population is impacted by participation in LLCs. To ensure participants identify as a USM, purposive sampling was utilized. To allow the researcher to understand the lived experiences of participants, individual, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were utilized for data collection, instead of utilizing surveys or focus groups, where there may not be a level of comfort amongst participants.

Both the IEO model and CRT were utilized as a theoretical framework for this research. The IEO model provides insight into student experiences and the impact a college campus has on success. While this model does account for certain inputs or entry attributes it is important to understand CRT and the complexities that exist for USM students on a college campus.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

College and University Residence Halls

History of College and University Housing

From their inception in the 17th century, colleges in the United States relied on an on-campus living experience for students (Cowley, 1934; Ebbers, Marks & Stoner, 1973; Martin, 2019). The model of housing students on a college campus was adopted from Oxford and Cambridge but was not common at other European institutions (Bauer-Wolf, 2019). Several early colleges and universities in the United States were rooted in the protestant denomination and often established in rural locations making residence halls, then known as dormitories a necessity (Martin, 2019). The word dormitory derives from the root word dormant, meaning to sleep (Blimling, 2014).

Dormitories between the 17th and 18th century were homogenous in nature, housing elite white men with similar backgrounds (Blimling, 2014; Martin, 2019; Yanni, 2019). During this time, an adversarial relationship existed between faculty and students with faculty members often being viewed as paternalistic figures enforcing policy. The social and behavioral challenges that students posed in the residence halls led to faculty desiring to focus solely on teaching, calling to question the benefit of the residential component of American colleges (Blimling, 2014; Connelly, 2014).

As colleges and universities moved into the 19th century the debate over academic and personal development continued. In 1852 the University of Michigan decided to close a residence hall and convert it into academic spaces (Blimling, 2010; Blimling, 2014). As colleges embraced impersonal relationships with students, investments in student housing diminished and dormitories on several campuses within the United States

became almost unlivable by the 1900s. Without suitable living options, as the number of students enrolled on college campuses increased, they were forced to live in attics, basements, the homes of faculty, or even the president's house in some instances (Blimling, 2010).

At the turn of the 20th century, colleges began adjusting to the needs of students both personally as well as academically through the emergence of the Student Affairs profession (Long, 2012). Beginning in the 1920s, staff were hired to support students in the areas of job placement, health services and academic records. College administrators began to assume a *in loco parentis*, translated as “in lieu of parents” role (Blimling, 2014; Long, 2012). In addition to administrative support came funding to enhance and build new residential housing facilities for students (Blimling, 2014). The financing for student housing construction did not follow the same model across college campuses. Certain institutions were able to benefit from state funds such as those in the Commonwealth of Virginia, where the state board of education allotted one million dollars for the construction of dormitories; while others such as the University of Minnesota turned to selling bonds to build new residential facilities.

In the early 1930s a shift was made in how the purpose of dormitories was defined (Blimling, 2014; Connelly, 2014). Colleges attempted to make campuses “home” for students. As access to college began to improve for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, campuses started developing more affordable, cooperative housing.

As college campuses navigated an everchanging landscape throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the way colleges engaged with students shifted as *in locos parentis* was

abandoned, giving students freedom that was not experienced previously (Connelly, 2014; Long, 2012). The passing of the Higher Education defense act of 1963 provided institutions with low interest government backed loans to construct residence halls (Connelly, 2014). During this time, campuses created several new residence halls, often opting to build high-rise facilities that housed several hundred students.

For the past few decades, access to college has continued to increase (Brown, 2019), which has resulted in continued development of residence halls (Ellet, Stipeck, & Perez, 2020). Attention has been directed towards building facilities that have amenities that students desire such as personal temperature control and private bedrooms (Gose, 1998). In addition to the expectation for improved and intentional physical spaces, students also have a need for additional support from university staff and administrators within their residence halls.

Residence Life

As colleges and universities adapted to the needs of students in the 21st century, additional attention was given to programs and services offered within residence halls. Several structures for student support that are around today, were first implemented in the 1970s (Connelly, 2014). Theorists such as Tinto (1975) brought to light the importance that both social and academic integration play in student retention and persistence (as cited in Brooks, 2010, p. 10). Naturally, residence halls that housed hundreds of students became an ideal location for social integration and student involvement. Students who live on campus have been found to have increased GPAs, higher retention rates, and a greater sense of belonging and connection to an institution (Astin, 1999; Ellet, Stipeck, & Perez, 2020). Further, Rinn (2004) shared how prior research indicates living in a

residence hall generally supports positive social adjustment and participation in co-curricular activities.

The area of student affairs or student engagement that directly deals with residence halls is typically known as Residence Life or Residence Education (Ellet et al., 2020). Residence Life departments are comprised of both professional staff members and student staff members. Professional staff members can be divided into three categories: upper-management, middle management, and entry-level staff members (Horvath & Stack, 2013 as cited in Ellet et al., 2020, p. 73). Entry level staff members typically both live and work within a residential facility and are responsible for the overall management of the facility (Conn, 2022). Students who live in today's residence halls receive support from entry level and student staff in the areas of safety, alcohol use, multiculturalism, community development and academic support.

In recent years, residential living has continued to evolve and change. Residence halls that were once single-gendered are now co-ed. Buildings are equipped with the latest technology and intentionally designed to foster community development and interpersonal engagement (Conn, 2022; Rinn, 2004).

Living Learning Communities

History of Living Learning Communities

The origins of Living Learning Communities (LLCs) can be traced back to the residential experience of England's Oxford and Cambridge residential college (Blimling, 2015 as cited in Inkelas, Jessup-Anger, Benajamin, & Wawrzynski, 2018, p. 4). Students within the residential colleges of Oxford and Cambridge had a university experience in which they lived, ate, and studied with faculty in addition to their peers. Upon its

inception in the 17th century, founders of higher education in the United States leaned into the influence of British culture and utilized a residential college model (Chaddock, 2008 as cited in Fink & Inkelas, 2015, p. 5). This model for higher education centered around spiritual and moral development as well as faculty engagement was utilized by Yale, Harvard, Princeton and William and Mary (Fink & Inkelas, 2015; Ryan, 1995 as cited in Stevens, Jr., 2000). At the turn of the 19th century, colleges who once utilized the models from Cambridge and Oxford were beginning to shift due to questions surrounding the value of academic and residential life integration as well as increased enrollment and the need for additional housing (Chaddock, 2008 as cited in Fink & Inkelas, 2015, p. 6).

A second iteration of LLCs took form in the United States at the University of Wisconsin with Alexander Meiklejohn's Experimental College in 1927 (Arensdorf & Naylor-Tincknell; Brower & Inkelas, 2010). Meiklejohn created the Experimental College after serving as both Dean at Brown University and President at Amherst College (Price, 2005; Fink & Inkelas, 2015). The Experimental College was focused on an integrative learning process in which first and second year students shared a common curriculum (Fink & Inkelas, 2015; Talburt & Boyles, 2005). Smith (2001) explains how the purpose behind the Experimental College was to establish community and create congruency between a living and learning environment (as cited in Stassen, 2003, p. 582). Through the creation of clustered courses, shared residence halls, and the creation of clubs, the Experimental College defied higher educational norms (Inkelas & Fink, 2015; Meiklejohn, 1930). Although the Experimental College only lasted five years, it is often credited as the foundation for the present model of LLCs (Inkelas & Fink, 2015; Love, 2012; Stassen, 2003).

The establishment and conclusion of the Experimental College led to several different versions of LLCs being created across the United States. During the 1950s and 1960s LLCs continued to expand in the United States, as campuses attempted to respond to the post World War II educational demands (Inkelas & Fink, 2015; Love, 2012). In 1965, a former student of Alexander Meiklejohn, Joseph Tussman, created a learning community at the University of California at Berkeley (Fink & Inkelas, 2015; Love, 2012). Similar to Meiklejohn (1930), Tussman established a two-year integrated curriculum for underclass students dedicated to assisting students in becoming democratic citizens. Tussman, a critic of higher education believed that undergraduate student learning was in direct conflict with research production (Fink & Inkelas, 2015; Love, 2012). The Tussman community existed from 1965 until its conclusion in 1969.

Although college and universities continued to expand their LLC offerings throughout the late 20th century, there was limited research about their effectiveness. Lack of information on the effectiveness and efficacy of LLCs lead to the creation of the National Study of Living-Learning Programs (NSLLP) in 2001 (Brower & Inkelas, 2010). Funded in partnership by the National Science Foundation, the Association of College and University Housing Officer International, Students Affairs Administrators in Higher Education and College Student Educators International, the NSLLP was designed to conduct research on student academic, social and developmental outcomes associated with LLCs. The NSLLP administers both a cross-sectional and longitudinal survey annually to LLC students at multiple institutions.

Design of Living Learning Communities

Over the course of the past several decades, universities have shifted from traditional dorms where students would just sleep to at night to residence halls that are intentionally designed and created to foster student success (Inkelas et al., 2018; Whitchner-skinner, Dees, & Watkins, 2017). Today, residence halls commonly house LLCs for first year and returning students. Living Learning Communities can exist in several different formats, depending on the needs of the college or university campus. Despite the differences that may exist in LLC design, at the core, LLCs aim to integrate both the academic and residential experience (Arendsdorf & Naylor-Tincknell, 2015; Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Gebauer, Wade, Muller, Kramer, & Leary, 2020; Inkelas et al., 2018).

In a 2007 study, the NSLLP identified seventeen categorical themes for LLCs at college and universities:

Civic and social leadership

Disciplinary

Fine and creative arts

General academic

Honors

Sophomores only

Cultural

Leisure

Political Interest

Residential College

Research

Upper division (juniors and seniors only)

Reserve Officers' Training Corps

Five-year transition

Umbrella (many themes under one banner, such as foreign-language halls)

Wellness or health

Women

(Brower & Inkelas, 2010).

The 2007 NSLLP data collection revealed that over 50 percent of LLCs did not include any form of academic coursework; furthermore, 23% of the LLCs included no faculty participation (Brower & Inkelas, 2010). Faculty participation is essential to the success of LLCs, as the strongest LLC design incorporates a steady presence from both student affairs staff and academic affairs faculty (Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Inkelas et al., 2018; Mach, Gordon, Tearney, & McClinton, 2018).

According to Jaffee (2007), not every faculty member is meant to work with a learning community, and those who are must be prepared and trained in techniques that will aid in the success of the students. The sustainability of LLCs is also hindered by limited faculty and staff to champion the initiative (Inkelas et al., 2018). The strength of an LLC is often tied to the faculty or staff partner, however natural turnover in their rolls can lead to an LLC failing.

Creating an LLC is based on institutional culture, funding, and administrative policies. There are two main challenges that exist when considering LLC design: finding supportive faculty and staff to facilitate the LLC and creating a sustainable program. Brower and Dettinger (1998) identified the importance of LLCs having strong identities,

attracting participants through a clear mission or goals. These missions, however, should not provide a perception of elitism or exclusion. In addition to having a clearly defined identity, Brower and Dettinger (1998) expressed the importance of having the necessary resources to support each member of the LLC. In addition, as colleges and universities strive to create the best LLCs for their respective campus it is imperative to establish an assessment or feedback plan (Henck & Jones, 2009).

Benefits of Living Learning Communities

Students who reside in residence halls on college and university campuses are known to benefit from positive outcomes in the areas of grade point average (GPA), number of credit hours earned and sense of belonging (Pascarella, Terenzini, & Blimling, 1994; Stoner, 2018). Kuh (2008) describes learning communities as high impact practices that establish relationships between faculty and students and require a commitment towards academic success from both parties. The high impact practice benefits of LLCs are in addition to the positive outcomes that are already associated with living on campus.

The establishment of the NSLLP in 2001 created an opportunity for what was once anecdotal information on the benefits of LLCs to become empirically researched data. In January 2003, the NSLLP conducted a pilot study utilizing a survey instrument designed to measure college environments and student outcomes associated with LLCs (Inkelas, Vogt, Longerbeam, Owen, & Johnson, 2006). The survey was conducted across four institutions and included a total of 5,437 undergraduate participants who lived in residence halls (2,449 LLC participants; 2,988 non-LLC participants). Inkelas et al. (2006) highlighted the following findings from the 2003 NSLLP pilot study:

LLC participants were statistically more likely to discuss both academic/career and social cultural issues with peers

LLC participants were more likely to go beyond basic interactions with faculty and developed mentoring relationships

LLC participants had significantly more positive perceptions of their residence hall climate

LLCs are effective in facilitating positive residence hall environments and that the positive perceptions spread to observations about the overall campus climate

LLC participants had higher critical thinking/analysis ability, application of knowledge ability, and an enjoyment of challenging intellectual pursuits

Both academic and personal benefits have continuously been linked to LLCs.

Students who participate in LLCs are more likely to matriculate through graduation than their non-LLC peers (Pascarella et al., 1994). These benefits exist regardless of college entry attributes such as ACT or SAT scores, high school GPA, and amount of financial aid received, (Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Pascarella et al., 1994).

The NSLLP states participation in LLCs provides three different types of involvement for students: involvement with academics, involvement with faculty, and involvement with peers (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003). This involvement can lead to gains in critical thinking, academic success, utilization of campus resources and a sense of belonging and support (Astin, 1999; Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Stier, 2014). Academically, LLC participation has been associated with higher GPAs,

number of credit hours earned, and higher retention rates (Mach et al., 2018; Wilson, Bjerke, & Martin, 2018; Zinshteyn, 2019).

Mach et al. (2018) sought to determine benefits associated with one LLC at a large Midwestern land-grant institution. This mixed method study consisted of collecting quantitative data (GPA, retention rates, race, gender, and first-generation status) and qualitative data (focus groups). The data revealed students who participated in the LLC had higher retention rates than non-participants; additionally, LLC participants experienced positive gains with personal growth and development.

Students who participate in LLCs are more likely to have a positive influence on their connections with faculty and peers. Aresndorf and Naylor-Tincknell (2016) conducted a qualitative study on student LLC experiences at one university, utilizing a phenomenological approach. Two different focus groups were utilized for data collection; the first, students who were LLC participants ($N=25$) and the second, non-LLC participants ($N=17$). Each focus group was asked ten similar questions about their experiences in the LLC or at the university. Aresndorf and Naylor-Tincknell (2016) found that study skills, connections to peers and connections to faculty were stronger for the LLC participants. Although both groups of students felt good study habits and relationships with faculty members were important, the LLC participants built a support system with peers and formed study groups and developed deeper, more meaningful relationships with faculty.

Living Learning Communities for Underserved Student Populations

In recent years, colleges and universities have started to utilize LLCs for supporting USM students. Living Learning Community participation was one of the

strategies utilized by the University of Minnesota-Rochester (UMR) to close the achievement gap between underserved minority students (USM) and their white counterparts (Zinshteyn, 2019). In a study that examined the outcomes associated with LLCs, Gilbert (2004) found that students of color who participated in LLCs, were more likely to have desired social integration outcomes than students of color who did not participate in LLCs.

The connection to faculty and peers that LLCs can provide to USM students is paramount. The development of quantitative skills and analytical thinking for African American college students is linked to positive interactions with faculty and peers (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Haagedorn, 1999). In a study conducted at a small, private institution, Person (1996) found that fewer than 50 percent of African American students felt comfortable with faculty on their campus. LLCs can be utilized to provide opportunities for USM students to build deeper, more meaningful relationships with faculty.

In 2016, the University of Connecticut created the Scholars House LLC in response to the struggles African American males faced on the large college campus (Desroches, 2016; Brown, 2016). Although any male on the University of Connecticut campus can apply to participate in the LLC, Scholars House was designed to provide support to African American male students, who at the time had a 54 percent six-year graduation rate, compared to white males who had a six-year graduation rate of 80 percent (New, 2006). In 2020, the first cohort of the Scholars House LLC graduated; several participants attributed their academic and personal success to participation in the program (Reitz, 2020).

Over the course of the past few years, institutions such as the University of San Francisco, University of Iowa, Minnesota State University- Mankato have established LLCs geared towards supporting USM students (Minnesota State University Mankato, 2021; University of Iowa, 2021; University of San Francisco, 2021). In 2020, the Student Success LLC was created at Southern Regional University as residential component to the Student Success program (Freshman Academy, 2021). Student Success promotes the retention of all students but has a focus on supporting minority students. Students in the Student Success LLC receive a grant that covers the cost of their housing. In addition, students receive additional support from faculty, staff, and student mentors.

SRU LLCs

Living Learning Communities at Southern Regional University were first established in the early 2000s (Barnes, 2019). During this first iteration, LLCs were primarily utilized to connect students through programming. The university relied on faculty and staff volunteers to help assist in implementing programs for LLC participants. Without additional compensation or reduced duties in other areas, faculty and staff did not have high levels of commitment or involvement, which led to challenges.

Beginning in 2016, LLCs shifted format, requiring a level of commitment from both the Housing & Residence Life department, as well as the associated academic or student life campus partner (Barnes, 2019). In addition, academic colleges and campus partners began hiring individuals to serve as coordinators for LLCs or officially added LLC responsibilities into job descriptions. The terms of commitment from both parties were outlined in a Memorandums of Understanding (MOU). Currently, LLCs have

measurable learning outcomes that are met in partnership between Housing & Residence Life and academic units or student life offices.

Table 2.1

2020-2021 Living Learning Communities

LLC Name	LLC Description
Student Success	For students accepted into the Freshman Academy program, looking to make connections with faculty and staff outside of the classroom.
Passion for Sign (ASL)	For students who are an ASL native signer, plan to be a Passion for Sign and Interpreter Education (ASLIE) major or are fluent in ASL and who want to engage themselves in ASL and Deaf culture.
Future Army Officers	For students participating in the ROTC program at SRU and who want to develop as leaders within a close-knit community.
Teachers and Scholars	For students majoring in Education, who want to take advantage of research, development, and educational leadership opportunities. Students will receive advice on becoming educators, while participating in fun activities with other community members.
First Generation	For students who are the first in their family to attend college and who want to live with others exploring what it means to be a successful college student.
Aviation	For students majoring in aviation and who want to connect with students, faculty, staff, and professionals in the aviation industry.
Criminalistics	For students majoring in the forensic sciences and who want to engage in multiple opportunities to interact and

	connect with forensic science faculty, staff, and professionals.
Health Pursuits	For students accepted into the College of Health Sciences who want to build connections with faculty and explore professional development experiences.
Honors Academic Academy	For students accepted into the honors program who want to live and learn together in a tight knit community and engage through monthly Honors Hours and a variety of social events based on student interests.
First Responders	For students majoring in justice studies and safety, security and emergency management who want to live with other students in their major and enhance their college experience through unique and fun events.
TRIO Programs	For students in the NOVA program, this community aims to enhance the student experience with additional resources and a peer mentor who helps guide students through their college experience.
Recreation and Adventure	For students who enjoy engaging in the outdoors and want to live with other students interested in exploring the beautiful landscapes of the Commonwealth and joining Campus Rec experiences.
Golf Management	For students majoring in professional golf management who want to live with others in the program and connect with faculty, staff and golf professionals.
1st Year Scholars	For incoming Success First students who want to take advantage of leadership opportunities as soon as they step foot on SRU's campus.
Second Year Experience	For second-year or transfer students who want to continue their success as college

students and have unique opportunities to connect with faculty and staff in their interest areas.

The LLCs at SRU are rooted in the principles of Astin (1984) Input, Environment, Outcome (I-E-O) model. Through the combination of academic support, social integration and teaching life skills, LLCs provide a necessary support network for students to succeed (Barnes, 2019). The success of the LLCs is evaluated by both Housing & Residence Life and academic partners through student satisfaction surveys and through academic metrics.

Underserved Minority Student Populations

Increased access to higher Education has led to increases in the enrollment of underserved minority (USM) student populations. Over the past two decades, colleges and universities increased their USM populations by more than 15 percent (Brown, 2019). The result is USM students making up more than 45 percent of the total undergraduate population on higher Education campuses. Despite the gains in enrollment, students of color have lower levels of degree attainment due to barriers that exist on college campuses (Carter, 2006; Flores, Park, & Baker, 2017; Ramos, 2019). In an effort to remove barriers, it is essential for college and university leadership to create support structures that foster positive outcomes both academically and personally for USM students (Aries, 2008; Gross, 2017).

To further understand differences that exist between minority students and White students in regard to experiencing discrimination and barriers to academic success, Stevens, Liu and Chen (2018) conducted a quantitative study utilizing data from the

American Health Association's National College Health Assessment (ACHA-NCHA). The sample consisted of 69,722 undergraduate students from 108 different institutions who were asked questions about their experiences with discrimination. Stevens et al. (2018) found that Black, Latino, Asian, and Multiracial students were two to four times more likely to experience discrimination than White students. Of the students who reported discrimination, nearly 25 percent stated their academics were negatively impacted based on their experience.

Campus Involvement for USM Students

For decades, Tinto's (1973) Theory of Student Integration was utilized to explain how students will need to separate from their existing culture and assimilate to the culture of the college campus they are on (as cited in Nicoletti, 2019, p. 58). The application of this theoretical framework is difficult for USM students. Underrepresented minority students need to have the ability and opportunity to join ethnic or cultural student organizations that provide opportunities for the expression and exploration of their racial and social identities (Harper & Quaye, 2007). The benefits of ethnic and racial organizations were examined by Bowman, Park, and Denson (2015). The study revealed that participation in ethnic and racial student organizations led to increased levels of cross-racial interaction both during and after college. The findings of Bowman et al. (2015) directly contradicts critics who believe ethnic and racial student organizations further isolate students on college campuses.

Student organizations often serve as connections points for USM students. Participation in student organizations can positively influence a student's academic achievement and sense of belonging on a college campus (Doan, 2015; Green & Wright,

2017; Fink & Hummel, 2015; Knifsent, 2020). In a quantitative study conducted in the Western region of the United States at a large comprehensive university, Knifsent (2020) found that USM students who are highly involved in the campus community reported a stronger sense of belonging than their non-involved peers. Lack of involvement and connection can lead to USM students experiencing high levels of alienation at a predominantly white institution (PWI) and decrease their likelihood to persist (Fur & Elling, 2002; Rolison, 1986).

Mentorship

Faculty and staff mentors on university campuses have the opportunity and ability to provide academic and personal development for USM students (Ramos, 2019). Representation of faculty and staff of color is important when developing mentor/mentee relationships for USM students. Furthermore, the culture and climate of a college campus is positively influenced through representation of diverse faculty and staff, resulting in a comfortable and trusting environment for USM students (Doan, 2015; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1998).

While several benefits exist for USM students participating in mentor/mentee relationships with faculty and staff of color, it is not the only determining factor for a successful pairing. Hernandez, Estrada, Woodcok, and Schultz (2017) set out to determine how the race and gender of mentors influenced the perception of quality in a mentor/mentee relationship for USM students. A purposeful sample of 253 African American students that self-reported having a faculty member serve as a mentor was utilized for this study. Hernandez et al., (2017) found that race and gender of mentors did not have a statistically significant impact on a USM student's perception of their

mentor/mentee relationship. It was actually the depth of the interpersonal relationship developed between the mentor and mentee carried the largest impact on the perception of the pairing.

Hurd, Albright, Wittrup, Negrete, and Billgsley (2017) utilized a quantitative study to measure the impact of natural mentors. For the purpose of the study, natural mentors were defined as non-parental adults who students could utilize for support. A sample of 340 USM college students at a PWI in the Southeastern region of the U.S. were issued an electronic survey. The survey asked questions that covered the areas of self-worth, depressive symptoms, anxiety symptoms, and extraversion. Hurd et al. (2017) found that students who utilized natural mentors experienced positive impacts on their psychological well-being.

When implemented correctly, mentorship pairings will result in USM students experiencing higher levels of academic success and increased levels of career attainment (Allen, Knobloch, & Esters, 2019; Hernandez et al., 2017). Training programs and professional development opportunities must be developed for faculty and staff to prepare them for mentoring USM students (Allen et al., 2019). Allen et al. (2019) conducted a quantitative study on the effectiveness of mentor training programs and workshops. The sample for the study consisted of 316 faculty, staff and post-doc students. The findings indicate mentor trainings and workshops are necessary to equip mentors with competencies that are useful in engaging students.

Self-Efficacy

Underserved minority students who have higher levels of self-efficacy are more likely to persist in college (Pajares & Miller, 1994; Phinney & Haas, 2003). Further, in

his book *African American Men in College*, Cuyjet (2006) explains how self-esteem and self-efficacy are linked to academic resilience. Unfortunately, USM students are often met with negative stereotypes about academic achievement and degree attainment (Osborne, 1999; Steele, 1997). According to Harper (2006), negative stereotypes can lead to students experiencing internalized racism, creating a belief that they cannot achieve at high levels in college. Achievement for USM students goes beyond academic ability and incorporates psychological, social and cultural factors (Bauman, et al., 2017).

Students must first have higher levels of self-efficacy and believe they have the ability to achieve and be successful on a college campus. The relationship between self-efficacy and coping skills has been explored in a number of empirical studies. Phinney and Haas (2003) surveyed 30 USM students at an urban commuter university in southern California. Students who had higher levels of self-efficacy were found to be able to cope more when faced with stress. In addition, students with increased self-efficacy had higher levels of commitment to their academic success. This finding affirmed Pajares and Miller (1994) who found a correlation between self-efficacy and academic achievement.

People of color in the US tend to have lower levels of self-efficacy than White individuals (Hughes & Demo, 1989). The work of Hughes and Demo (1989) stresses the importance of finding ways to increase the self-efficacy of USM students on college campuses. Faculty and staff have the opportunity and ability to reaffirm and support the academic achievement of USM students instead of allowing negative stereotypes to manifest (Harper, 2007; Harrington, 2002).

Peer Influence

Peer influence and support is an essential component to academic and personal success for students (Astin, 1993; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012). This peer support is found both inside and outside of the classroom. Newby-Fraser and Schlebusch (1997) explain that students who either do not have or perceive they do not have support are more likely to experience stress and lower levels of academic achievement. Utilizing data from the National survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), Dumford, Ribera, & Miller (2019) found living in a residence hall with a roommate positively impacts a sense of belonging. Although Dumford et al. (2019) did have a variety of racial groups represented in their sample, future research based on different racial subgroups was encouraged.

Harper (2006) conducted a qualitative study with high achieving African American male undergraduate students. The sample consisted of 32 African American male undergraduate students from six large public research institutions in the Midwest. Through individual semi-structured interviews, it was found support from peers to be fundamental in the achievement of African American males. Each participant in the study also mentioned that a significant portion of their peer support came from organizations and activities geared towards Black students.

Peer influence can also result in negative lasting impacts for students (Dumford et al., 2019; Harper, 2006). Students who do not feel supported in their academic endeavors may struggle to matriculate through graduation. Phinney and Haas (2003) share the narrative of Ana, a Mexican American student, who had family or friends who did not understand or support her educational goals. In one particular situation, Ana was pressured to spend time with family and friends instead of studying for a midterm exam.

Similarly, African American males are taught at an early age to devalue education by peers or images on television (Harper, 2006).

Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging is a foundational component to success for undergraduate college students (Hausman, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 2007; Museus, Saelua, & Yi, 2018; Patterson, Wolf, Taylor, Maguin & BlackDeer, 2021; Zosel, 2018). Students who do not have a sense of belonging are more likely to have difficulty adjusting to college and may experience a lower level of self-worth (Gummadam, Pittman, & Ioffe, 2016). It is essential for students to develop a sense of belonging within their first year at a college or university to increase the likelihood they will persist into their second year (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012). The climate of a college campus has a significant impact on sense of belonging for USM students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003; Santos, Ortiz, Morales, & Rosales, 2007). When asked, minority students report more negative perceptions of campus climate and higher levels of discrimination than their White counterparts (Reid & Radhakrishnan; Stevens et al., 2018).

Data from the National Survey of Hispanic Students was utilized by Hurtado and Carter (1997) to further understand sense of belonging for Latino college students. A total of 272 Latino college students (58.1 percent female and 41.9 percent male) across 127 different college campuses responded to the survey. Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that sense of belonging for Latino students was associated with maintaining positive interactions inside and outside of the campus community. Furthermore, it was found that hostile racial campus climates can have a negative impact on belonging.

Despite the United States having over 560 federally recognized tribal nations, Indigenous People or Native Americans only make-up 1 percent of the bachelor's degrees conferred annually by colleges and universities (Strayhorn, Fei, Dorime-Williams, & Williams, 2016). Strayhorn et. al. (2016) utilized data from the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ), a 191 item multi-institutional survey, designed to measure the quality and quantity of student involvement and use of facilities. The study sample consisted of 144 Indigenous undergraduate students, 65 percent female and 35 percent male. Forty percent of the participants were first-year students, 18 percent sophomore, 21 percent junior and 22 percent senior.

Strayhorn et al. (2016) developed three distinct conclusions from data analysis. Majority of the participants felt low levels of support from the institution in which they were enrolled. This finding carries a significant impact on a student's decision to matriculate. Second, interactions with peers and faculty were found to positively influence a sense of belonging. While interactions with peers were desired frequently inside and outside of the classroom, faculty interactions were perceived more beneficial inside the classroom. Lastly, students who earned higher grades felt a stronger sense of belonging than their peers who experienced academic difficulty.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Underserved Minority Students (USM) who participate in a Living Learning Community (LLC) at Southern Regional University and USM students who do not participate in an LLC. This study will describe participant experiences in the areas of sense of belonging, interaction with faculty and staff, and self-efficacy. The aforementioned participant experiences play an essential role in persistence on a college campus. Bauman et al. (2019) explains that retention for USM students goes far beyond the ability to achieve in the classroom.

Living Learning Communities exist at SRU to connect students with peers who have similar interest and assist in the matriculation and graduation of students (SRU Housing & Residence Life, n.d.). With the increase of USM students enrolled at SRU, it is important to understand the experiences USM students have in their residential facility. To date, little research has been conducted on the lived experiences of USM students and their participation or non-participation in LLCs.

Theoretical Framework

Astin's Theory of Student Involvement

The origins of the Theory of Student Involvement are rooted in research from the 1970s regarding college dropouts (Astin, 1985). Students who dropped out of college were known to have characteristics or factors associated with a lack of involvement, while students who persisted were classified as highly involved. In its creation, Astin's (1984) Theory of Student Involvement possessed five postulates:

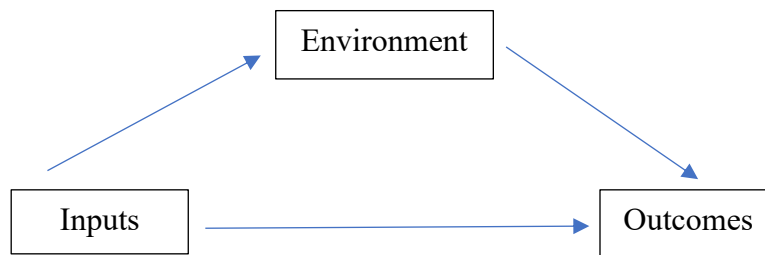
1. Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects. The objects may be highly generalized (the student experience) or highly specific (preparing for a chemistry examination).
2. Regardless of its object, involvement occurs along a continuum; that is, different students manifest different degrees of involvement in a given object, and the same student manifests different degrees of involvement in different objects at different times.
3. Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features. The extent of a student's involvement in academic work, for instance, can be measured quantitatively (how many hours the student spends studying) and qualitatively (whether the student reviews and comprehends reading assignments or simply stares at the textbook and daydreams).
4. The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program.
5. The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement (as cited in Astin, 1999, p. 519)

Although all forms of campus involvement promote positive outcomes, Astin (1984) explains the benefits of six forms of involvement: place of residence, honors programs, academic involvement, student-faculty interaction, athletic involvement, and student government involvement (as cited in Astin, 1999, p. 524-525). Astin (1993) revised these

areas of involvement to include: place of residence, peer involvement, financial aid, and courses taken (as cited in Stier, 2014).

Astin's I-E-O Model

A student's past also known as entry attributes are not the only determining factor in their persistence in college. Astin (1999) explains that it is equally important for students to have a campus community that manifests engagement and a sense of belonging. To accurately explain the impact that a student's entry attributes, and the campus climate have on desired student outcomes, Astin (1993) developed the I-E-O impact model (as cited in Stier, 2014, p. 35; Strayhorn, 2008). The I-E-O model ensures that university administrators, faculty and staff have a role in creating an environment that fosters student success (Kelly, 1996; Stier, 2014). Based on the I-E-O model, a student's inputs and the campus environment lead to the outcomes the student will experience.



*Figure 2 Input-Environment-Outcomes (I-E-O) Model
Figure 2 created by author*

Table 4 Characteristics of I-E-O Model

Inputs	Environment	Outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demographics • High school achievement • Pre-college assessment of importance of college involvement and perceptions of self-confidence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic major • Peer interactions • Faculty interactions • Co-curricular involvement • Study group interactions • Use of residence hall resources • Perceptions of residence hall climate • Diverse interactions • Mentoring experience • Academic and social influences on participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic and social transition to college • Perceptions of intellectual abilities and growth • Perceptions of self-confidence • Appreciation of diversity • Sense of civic engagement • Matriculation • Sense of Belonging • Drop-out risk

Table 4 adapted from Astin (1993) Input-Environment-Output model (as cited in NSLLP, 2007, p. 12).

In a longitudinal quantitative study, Kelly (1996) utilized Astin’s (1993) I-E-O model to examine the persistence of cadets at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy. The sample consisted of 619 cadets most of whom were first-time college students. Majority of the cadets had similar entry attributes, with 90 percent of them graduating in the top 20th percentile of their high school classes. Kelly (1996) found a connection between inputs, involvement measures and the persistence of the cadets, affirming the I-E-O model. In addition, cadets who performed well academically and were integrated socially, were more likely to persist.

Critical Race Theory

The concept of a college Education in its origin in the United States, was reserved for wealthy, White individuals (Anderson, 1988). Despite being met with opposition, African Americans have long put value on literacy and Education. Hall and Rowan (2000) explain that racism and oppression are embedded in higher Education policies and practices. These institutionalized barriers to success that USM students face, can be examined through a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens.

With origins traced back to the 1970s, CRT was created by legal scholars who observed the momentum of the civil rights movement coming to an end (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; George, 2021). There were several key figures behind the establishment of CRT: Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, Kimberle Crenshaw, Angela Harris, Charles Larence, Mari Matsuda, and Patricia Williams. In addition, African American, Latino, Indian scholars all fall under the CRT umbrella.

Delgado and Stefancic (2001) outline several tenets in regard to CRT. First, racism is ordinary, and common, making it difficult to address. The second tenet states interest convergence exists with racism, advancing the material interest of privileged White people and the physical needs of the less privileged. The interest convergence phenomena makes ending racism difficult. Third, race is a social construct, created for manipulation and is not objective or inherent. Critical Race Theory is constantly evolving, George (2021) cites the work of Khiahrah Bridges and explains how CRT rejects popular understandings about racism and recognizes the lived experiences of people of color.

In a qualitative exploration of college access and choice for African American students in the California higher education system, Comeaux, Chapman and Contreras

(2020) utilized CRT as a theoretical framework. The state of California has a three-tier system for higher education, the University of California system (selects top one eighth of California high school seniors), the California State University system (selects top one third of California high school seniors) and the California Community College system (Kerr, 1994 as cited in Comeaux et al., 2021, p. 414). A purposeful sample of 74 high achieving African American students admitted into the University of California (UC) system but elected to attend a non-University of California system institution was utilized by researchers. Through individual interviews, Comeaux et al. (2020) explored why high achieving African American students chose to enroll in a post-secondary institution outside of the UC system and what role race and racism played in college access and choice.

Comeaux et al. (2020) found that despite the students being highly qualified, more than 33 percent of the participants were only admitted into lower ranked UC system campuses. In particular, one student had above a 4.0 GPA and was admitted to Harvard, but not to UC Berkley. Another student was their high school valedictorian and denied admission to UC Berkley and UC Los Angeles but was granted admission to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Campus climate surrounding race and availability to financial aid also played into the decision of students to select another institution outside of the UC system. When applying CRT, flaws to the admissions process, financial aid process and campus climate are exposed.

Research Questions

According to Creswell (2012), qualitative research is utilized to describe a phenomenon of investigation. For this study, a qualitative research design was used to

address the research questions listed below. Specifically, the researcher conducted semi-structured individual interviews in this phenomenological approach.

1. How do Living Learning Communities impact sense of belonging and connectedness for Underserved Minority Students?
2. How do Living Learning Communities assist in developing relationships with faculty and staff for Underserved Minority Students?
3. How does participation in a Living Learning Community impact self-efficacy for Underserved Minority Students?

Research Methodology

Qualitative research explains a phenomenon or provides insight into the viewpoint or perspective of a participant (Creswell, 2012; Hammarber, Kirkman, & de Lacey, 2015). In this study, qualitative methods were utilized to explore the lived experiences of USM students who live in a residence hall and participant in an LLC and USM students who live on campus and do not participate in an LLC. Although qualitative research comes with limitations such as lack of generalizability and limited ability to be replicated, it is extremely effective in providing a depth of understanding into a small group of people (Francisco, Butterfos, & Capwell, 2001). Qualitative methods allowed participants to express thoughts and feelings in their own language and make meaning of their experiences. According to Stahl & King (2020), qualitative methodology is the most appropriate method to gather data that is narrated and tied to the human experience.

Research Design

The goal of this study was to explore the lived experiences of a small number of underserved minority students and what impact participating in an LLC may have had.

To complete this goal most appropriately, a phenomenological design was utilized by the researcher. Using phenomenological design, the researcher was able to gain insight into how LLCs impact sense of belonging, self-efficacy and faculty and staff interactions for USM students.

Within phenomenology, the most common method of data collection is conducting interviews (Wimpenny & Gass, 2000). Phenomenological interviews can range from unstructured to highly structured and tend to be filled with open-ended questions (Sofaer, 1999). Semi-structured interviews provide a desired balance of rigor and relationships for data collection (Dejonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). In this study, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with USM students that lived in residence halls and participated in an LLC and USM students that lived in residence halls but did not participate in an LLC. Semi-structured interviews engage participants and allow space for reciprocity between the researcher and participant (Galleta, 2013). This engagement critical for understanding the perceptions and lived experience of a participant.

The purpose of descriptive-based phenomenology is “to describe, understand and clarify human experiences” (Sousa, 2014, p. 214). Through in-depth individual, semi-structured interviews, the researcher was able to gain further insight into the experiences of USM students at SRU. Each individual interview was recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Participants were sent a copy of their transcription and asked to confirm their statements and were also asked if there was anything else they wanted to add. Through this process, the researcher was able to ensure that viewpoints of the participants are accurately captured. The transcriptions were then coded and themes emergent themes

were identified. The themes from interviews assisted in explaining the experiences that USM students living on campus have at SRU.

Population and Sample Selection

This study took place at Southern Regional University, a mid-sized, regional comprehensive university. Southern Regional University (SRU) is located in Richmond, KY, a rural community with a population of 33,533 (City of Richmond, 2021). Over the past few years, SRU has observed a decrease in overall enrollment after reaching an all-time higher enrollment of 16,881 students in 2016 (Barnes, 2019; Institutional Effectiveness and Research, 2019 as cited in D. Moore, personal communication, September, 2020). Despite decreases in overall enrollment, the institution has observed an increase in the percentage of Underserved Minority Students (USM) enrolled. The fall 2019 enrollment of students was 14,979 of which 12,622 were undergraduate students (Institutional Effectiveness and Research, 2019 as cited in D. Moore, personal communication, September, 2020). The demographical breakdown by race was 83.2 percent White, 5.6 percent Black, 3.6 percent Latino, 2.9 percent Two or More Races, 2.4 percent Race Unknown, 1.2 percent Undocumented, .9 percent Asian, .2 percent Indigenous or Alaskan Native, .1 percent Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.

A purposive sample of USM undergraduate students who live on-campus and participate in an LLC and USM undergraduate students who live on-campus and do not participate in an LLC at SRU was utilized for this study. Andrade (2021) describes purposive sampling as a sample that has predefined characteristics that are applicable to a study. The list of eligible participants was generated by the Housing department at the study site. From this list, participants were selected for the proposed research. Consistent

with the findings of Gues and Namey (2020), who determined that 80 percent of themes with a homogenous sample are captured in the first six to seven interview and 95 percent saturation occurs within twelve interviews, the proposed research utilized nine participant interviews.

Participants were required to complete a digital informed consent form prior the data collection. The consent form provided a full description of all research procedures including the 60 to 90-minute time frame for interviews and confidentiality. Given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic participants were interviewed virtually through video conferencing software.

Sources of Data

Qualitative interviews provide an opportunity to study an individual's lived experience (Brinkmann, 2013). Individual semi-structured interviews were the primary source of data collection in this qualitative study. The researcher utilized open-ended questions during the interviews, allowing the participants to have a role in guiding the conversation; the full interview protocol can be reviewed in Appendix A. To elicit truthful and complete responses, the researcher established a level of rapport with the participants. A secondary source of data collection were the field notes that will be collected during the course of the 60 to 90-minute interviews. According to Phillippi and Laurderdale (2018), field notes are useful in assisting the researcher in remembering certain aspects of the interview.

In qualitative research, the researcher is an important component to the data collection process (Finlay, 2002; Wimpenny & Gass, 2000). Given the impact that a researcher can have on data collection, it is important for the researcher to engage in self-

reflection about their feelings, perceptions and actions, a process known as reflexivity. Utilizing reflexivity acknowledges the researcher's subjective role and increases the amount of transparency (Darawsheh, 2014; Palaganas, Sanchez, Molintas & Caricativo, 2017).

Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability in qualitative research has been a continuous debate for several years. Maxwell (1992) explains if qualitative studies cannot produce valid results, they cannot be considered reliable. Additionally, validity is necessary to remove doubt and support conclusions drawn by researchers (Guion, 2002). Lincoln and Guba (1985) outlined four criteria in qualitative research that lead to trustworthiness or rigor of the study: credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and authenticity (as cited in Connelly, 2016, p. 435).

The researcher in this study utilized several processes to address validity. After the completion of interviews, transcriptions were sent back to participants to assess for accuracy in a process that Creswell (2017) refers to as member checking. Data triangulation, an effective strategy in improving both validity and reliability within a study, was also utilized (Golsfshanie, 2003; Guion, 2002; Stahl & King, 2020). Finally, thoroughly documented methods and descriptive field notes allow for the study to be applied to future research.

Data Collection and Management

Prior to the collection of data, participants were asked to complete a digital informed consent form. Data collection for this phenomenological study came from individual semi-structured interviews as well as field notes gathered by the researcher.

Two semi-structured open-ended interview protocols were created and utilized for this study; one for LLC participants and one for non-LLC participants. Follow-up questions were asked based on responses from the participants. Given, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted through a video conferencing software.

To start each interview, the researcher explained the purpose behind the research and explained the importance of the participant's role in the research process. In addition, the researcher built with the participant at the beginning of the interview to establish a level of trust. Building rapport is one of the most important components of an interview and should be established within the first five minutes (Keegan, 2009). Rapport was developed through using a normal tone and volume that matched that of the participants, authenticity, and cultural identity (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Keagan, 2009; Sandoval, & Adams, 2001). The researcher in this study is an African American male and through identity alone, may have brought a sense of comfort to the USM students being interviewed.

Once interviews concluded, the process outlined by Creswell (2017) was followed for managing qualitative data: transcription of interviews, organization of data based on research questions, identification of conceptual themes, coding of data into central themes to interpret the findings. The researcher added one additional step to Creswell (2017), known as member checking. Member checking is the process of providing the interview transcript to participants to review to provide feedback or validation (Goldblatt, Karnieli-Miller, & Neumann-Thomas, 2017). The member check stage was completed after transcriptions of individual interviews were completed.

Anonymity for participants and the institutional host sight were of the utmost importance prior to, during and after the completion of this study. Each participant was furnished with a pseudonym when reporting data from field notes and individual interviews. In addition, each LLC that participants were affiliated with was also given a pseudonym. The researcher always utilized pseudonyms when referring to this study. Notes, recordings and transcripts from interviews were stored on a flash drive, locked in the researcher's desk, on a password protected cloud-based server and on a password protected computer that can only be accessed by the researcher.

Ethical Considerations

This research involved USM minority students, which is a population known to have lower levels of trust in an institution based on perception of campus racial climate (Hall & Rowan, 2000; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). The researcher in this study identifies as a USM, which may have helped in establishing trust with the participants. It was essential for the primary researcher to be mindful about participants discussing their experiences as the conversation itself may have caused them to relive painful or traumatic memories (Richards & Schwartz, 2002; Stahlke, 2018).

In qualitative research, the participants are the experts on their experience (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Despite participants being the expert in the interview, the researcher always holds a certain level of authority over them (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Peters, 2017; Richards & Schwartz, 2002). In this study, the researcher also formerly served as an administrator in the Housing department, which may have influenced the responses provided by participants. In an effort to reduce the perceived authority the researcher held, participants were ensured that responses provided during

the interview will in no way impact their status as an on-campus resident or LLC participant.

In accordance with research guidelines at SRU, this study went through Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for research on a human subject. All study participants were required to complete an electronic informed consent, which can be found in Appendix B. The informed consent will explain the study in detail, including the data collection process. Participant names were only utilized when communicating with participants prior to the interview, during the interview and during the member checking process. During the data management phase of this study, participants were assigned a pseudonym to maintain anonymity and privacy. All data and information related to the study was stored securely on a flash drive that will be kept in a locked drawer, on a password protected cloud server and on a computer that is password protected.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations

There were several limitations identified within this study. With a qualitative research design, the findings were not generalizable (Maxwell, 1992). Additionally, all participants were from the same post-secondary institution. The application process for LLCs was also a limitation. In order for students to be assigned to an LLC, they first had to apply and be accepted. Some LLCs required students to be high achieving and are only granted access to the LLC based on their entry attributes. The population for this study is limited to USM students at SRU who live on-campus. Additionally, participants who participated in LLCs had different experiences based on the LLC they belonged to.

The timing of data collection was an additional limitation. Beginning in March of 2020, the world began to experience the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic has had a significant impact on enrollment at SRU, the number of students who live on-campus and participation in LLCs. Several students who lived on-campus during the 2020-2021 academic year at SRU were not assigned a roommate due to COVID-19 response protocols; this change in living structure may have impacted the experience of those students.

Finally, the participants themselves caused limitations. Participants may have not felt comfortable speaking with a former university administrator who also served as the researcher for this study. Through working to establish and build rapport, the researcher attempted to create a space in which participants could express their thoughts and opinions openly.

Delimitations

The population of research is limited to USM students at SRU to gain better insight into how this growing population is impacted by participation in LLCs. To ensure participants identified as a USM, purposive sampling was utilized. To allow the researcher to understand the lived experiences of participant's individual, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions was utilized for data collection instead of utilizing surveys or focus groups where there may have not been a level of comfort amongst participants.

Both the IEO model and CRT are utilized as theoretical frameworks for this research. The IEO model provides insight into student experiences and the impact a college campus has on success. While this model does account for certain inputs or entry

attributes it is important to understand how it intersects with CRT and the complexities that exist for USM students on a college campus.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

This phenomenological qualitative study was conducted to provide insight into the lived experiences of underserved minority (USM) students that live on campus at Southern Regional University (SRU). Further the study sought to examine perceptions of how participation in an LLC may shape that experience. Chapter four explains data collection and provides background on all nine participants. Finally, this chapter identifies emergent themes and additional findings.

Research Questions

The primary research questions that guided this qualitative study were:

1. How do Living Learning Communities impact sense of belonging and connectedness for Underserved Minority Students?
2. How do Living Learning Communities assist in developing relationships with faculty and staff for Underserved Minority Students?
3. How does participation in a Living Learning Community impact self-efficacy for Underserved Minority Students?

Data Collection Procedures

Each participant in this study identified as an underserved minority (USM) student who lived on campus at Southern Regional University and was enrolled in classes at the time of the interview. The housing department at Southern Regional University provided a list of eligible participants to the researcher. A total of 449 eligible participants were identified, 51 who participated in an LLC and 398 who did not participate in an LLC. Each eligible participant received a recruitment email, requesting participation in the research.

Once participants confirmed their interest in participating in the study, the researcher sent them an electronic informed consent document. Participants were able to schedule their individual interview after the completion of the informed consent document. Given the COVID-19 global pandemic, participants were asked to complete their interviews virtually, utilizing a video conferencing platform.

All subjects in this study participated in semi-structured interviews that lasted from 45-60 minutes. After the conclusion of each interview, the researcher transcribed the interview and the transcript was sent to the participant to verify accuracy, in a process known as member checking (Creswell, 2018). After the accuracy of all transcripts was confirmed, the researcher identified themes based on common experiences and perceptions from the participants.

Background of Participants

This qualitative study utilized a purposive sample of undergraduate USM students who lived in campus housing at SRU. The sample consisted of students who participated in LLCs and students who did not participate in LLCs. All participants provided their formal consent to participate in the research. Participants in this study were provided a pseudonym to protect their identity and provide confidentiality. Table 4.1 provides the demographics of all nine participants.

Table 5 Background of Participants

Participant	Gender	Classification	LLC Participation
P1	F	Freshman	Yes
P2	F	Sophomore	Yes
P3	M	Freshman	No
P4	M	Freshman	Yes
P5	M	Freshman	No
P6	M	Senior	Yes

P7	M	Senior	No
P8	M	Junior	Yes
P9	M	Freshman	No

Participant One (P1) was a second semester in-state freshman from a rural area in the northeast region of the state. P1 applied and decided to attend Southern Regional University (SRU) last minute. Although P1 aspired to leave Kentucky after high school, she was content with her decision to attend SRU. This decision was made due to the amount of financial aid she was provided and SRU having an art therapy concentration in psychology. Participant One lives in one of the newest residence halls on the SRU campus and was a member of the Honors Academic Academy LLC. When asked why she decided to participate in an LLC, P1 remarked:

Um, honestly, it was because it gave me a better chance of getting into Fleming Hall. Because when I first toured here, I was like oh my gosh this is so nice, and I saw some of the other dorms and I was like whoa, that's like really tiny. And even though I mean like, I had a chance of living in the other Honor's Academic Academy, because they split the LLC between Haywood and Fleming.

Participant two (P2) was a sophomore and former member of the Student Success LLC. Originally, from a large city in the midwestern region of the United States, P2 is an out of state student. P2 decided to attend SRU based on a desire to pursue a bachelor's degree in Family Consumer Science education and because SRU was located outside of P2's home state. P2 was raised by her grandmother following the death of both of her parents and expressed the significance of attending college for her family.

I'm the first grandchild to go to college and everything and my grandma said, "you gonna have to finish" so I gotta finish. I think it's because my grandma

wants to live with me after college. According to her I'm just gonna make it for the whole family. I'm going to make it out the hood for us. I had to graduate high school, I have to graduate college and according to her I'm going to be a doctor.

Participant three (P3) was in his second semester at SRU, majoring in business and is an out of state student. P3 wanted to move away from home for college but has had to learn to navigate being a minority student in his transition to SRU.

Okay, so for me it was, I just didn't really want to be in Virginia. So, it was just like what I noticed with people that's older than me is that they go to college in Virginia, and they'll come back home a lot. Sometimes maybe even quit college. So, I wanted to at least go far enough to where I can't really go home like every day. It does get kind of awkward here though. It's barely any minority students here, so it feels like sometimes you don't really fit in. It's not like people make the vibe weird, because the people here are really great; that goes for teachers, students and all that. But there are barely any minority students here so it's just kind of awkward.

Participant four (P4) is a second semester Freshman and an in-state student who calls a major metropolitan area home. P4 is a member of the Future Army Officers LLC and is pursuing a degree in forensic psychology. Although his experiences in the LLC and the forensic psychology academic program were vastly different, P4 found them mutually beneficial.

Well, the Army is kind of like a way to get my foot in the door, because like, I've always wanted to be a soldier and everything. And then also I feel like it can kind of help me rise from the bottom of being dirt broke to you know kind of middle

ground and it'll pay for my education and everything. And it also teaches me discipline and other skills I couldn't learn anywhere else. And then after that I just want to learn forensic psychology so I can move into like changing the criminal justice system and like the prison system.

Participant five (P5) was a second semester freshman majoring in Healthcare Services. In addition to being a student, P5 is on the SRU football team. P5 is originally from Africa and has lived in the United States for over fifteen years and is an in-state student. Family is extremely important to P5 and proximity to home heavily influenced his decision to attend SRU.

I'm very close with my family. I've got four siblings. I have one older brother and two younger brothers and one younger sister. I go home every Sunday for like a little bit and then I come back here.

Participant six (P6) is senior Criminal Justice major who is originally from out of state, but now considers the state SRU is located in home. P6 moved around a lot as a child and has also lived abroad due to his mother's career in the Army. Although he is not currently in an LLC, P6 is a former member of Future Army Officers. At the time of this study, P6 was in his last semester at SRU and defined college success as:

Actually, getting out there and experiencing student life, especially being active on campus. I don't think you'll really get to experience college success if you're just swamped with homework in your room. I would say getting out there and using the college resources and getting into groups with students, and actually getting yourself involved. And it's not just about you getting that bachelor's degree, I would say I think it's getting that experience.

Participant seven (P7) was a senior, in-state student from a major metropolitan area, in his last semester at SRU. Majoring in Communication Studies, P7 hoped to pursue a career in higher education, more specifically student affairs. In his time at SRU, P7 never participated in an LLC. When asked about his experience at SRU, Participant 7 remarked:

Um, it's definitely been inconsistent; I guess I would say. I'm not just even talking about the element of like COVID-19. In general, I would say it's still just been inconsistent like I have a year where it's like I feel like I'm doing amazing, like the coursework is just great. And then I have another year where it's just like, it's a lot. It's a lot of work, you know, but overall, I'd say my college experience has been inconsistent, but also amazing.

Participant eight (P8) is an in-state Junior Marketing major with a concentration in Professional Golf Management. The SRU campus is only a forty-minute drive from P8's hometown, a mid-size metropolitan area. During his sophomore year, P8 was a member of the Golf Management LLC. Participant eight did a great job explaining why he joined the Golf Management LLC during his sophomore year.

I just thought it would be better for me in case I was struggling with me my classes to that I could just go next door and knock on one of my peers' doors and, you know, ask for help on an assignment. I just thought, I really want to be part of that community and, you know, start getting to know people on a deeper level.

Participant nine (P9) is a freshman in his second semester at SRU, who recently still deciding whether to pursue a degree in Broadcast Electronic Media or Sports Management. P9 is an in-state student from a small town in the southeastern part of the

state, about an hour from the SRU campus. Although P9 is not far from home, he has struggled with the adjustment to SRU.

So far, it's had its ups and downs, I mean I haven't really got into a lot of social like aspects of college. I feel like I like this school, but I don't know the social aspect. I really expected it to be more, I guess, diverse and open. But I guess this is where location plays into it technically, I mean it's a small rural place. So, I feel like there isn't a whole lot of culture or diversity.

Data Analysis

Adhering to the Creswell (2017) method for managing qualitative data, the researcher transcribed all semi-structured interviews. To ensure accuracy of the transcriptions, the researcher added an additional step of member checking (Goldblatt, Karnieli-Miller, & Neumann Thomas, 2017). The data was then organized based on research questions, conceptual themes were identified, and finally conceptual themes were coded into central themes.

Through the data analysis of all nine participant interviews, the researcher gained insight into the lived experiences of USM students and the impact of LLCs on their experience. The narratives of each participant contributed to the three central themes that emerged from this phenomenological study: 1) finances influencing decision making, 2) sense of belonging, and 3) transitioning from high school to college. The central themes were consistent amongst all participants and provide insight into their experiences.

Emergent Themes

Individual interviews with a total of nine participants, five who were currently members of, or were previously members of an LLC and four who have never

participated in an LLC, revealed several similarities. Each central theme that was identified by the researcher, had additional subthemes that continued to emerge through further data analysis.

Theme 1: Finances Influencing Decision Making

The cost of higher education is rapidly increasing, leaving students seeking for solutions to fund their education. Despite rising costs, federal grant aid decreased by thirty-two percent between the 2010-2011 and 2020-2021 academic years (College Board, 2021). The combination of increasing costs and limited federal grant aid has led to one in five US households carrying student loan debt (Kakar, Daniels Jr., & Petrovska, 2019). Underserved minority students have been disproportionately impacted by the burden of financing education (Kakar, Daniels Jr., & Petrovska, 2019; Mishory, Huelsman, & Kahn, 2019).

Participants in this study were not immune to financial struggles and openly shared how the cost of education influenced their decisions.

P1 had dreams of attending college out of state, but shared,

I really wanted to get out of Kentucky, cause I didn't really like where I grew up. So, I was always like, I'm gonna get out for college. SRU was definitely my last choice, but they gave me the most money, even though I still have to pay some of my bill. I also wouldn't have been able to keep my KEES (Kentucky Educational Excellence Scholarship) money if I didn't stay.

P4 also explained that “low tuition cost” was one of the main reasons he chose to attend SRU. He later went on to say that the only reason he wouldn’t complete his college degree would be financial.

Not only did finances influence the decision to attend SRU, but finances also played a role in subsequent decision making for P2.

I personally come from like a lower income kind of situation. Both my parents passed, and my grandparents raised me, so whatever money that my grandma had to help me out, that’s just what she had. So, I had to stop shopping at like the fancy stores and everything because when I have a job, I can shop where I want to, but once you go to college, I tell so many people it’s not just about studying and doing work because you have to figure out where to even eat if the cafeteria is closed. How are you going to put gas in your car? And you have your phone bill, how are you gonna pay that?

Financial Implications for LLCs

Three of the five participants who were in LLCs mentioned financial benefits that existed because of their participation. Further, the same three students stated finances as motivation to join their respective LLC. Specifically, when asked why she joined the LLC, P2 remarked, “Well, to be honest with you, the free housing. I like free!” P2 was a member of the Student Success, which came with free housing similar to Future Army officers that P6 was formally in and P4 was in at the time of this study. P4 felt that participating in the Future Army officers LLC had implications for his future stating:

I've always wanted to be like a soldier and everything. And then also feel like it can kind of help me rise from the bottoms from like being dirt broke to be in you know kind of middle ground and it'll pay for my education and everything.

Not every LLC had financial benefits such as Future Army Officers and Students Success. P8 explained how he was not able to participate in an LLC in his first year at SRU due to the LLC associated with his major being housed in a more expensive residence hall.

So, freshman year I lived in Goodlatt Hall. I didn't need like some swanky, super high class, dorm just to sleep. And so, I lived in Goodlatt my first year, that was great, and it was cheap. I didn't really have it in the financials, at that time, either to live in the Golf Management LLC. And so, throughout freshman year, I met all of the guys who were in the LLC and, you know, just seemed like they're just having so much fun you know, they would tell me stories in class about how they played ping pong till two or three in the morning, played pool and would just eat together. And I would still go eat with them but when it was time to go to my dorm in Goodlatt, it was just not the same. So, it just made me feel kind of out of the loop, I guess, and I saw how much fun they were having in that tight close-knit community. I saw a lot more community, being built there inside the LLC and I wanted to be a part of that sophomore year. And so, I was able to kind of think through my standard of living, and get you know a little bit more square footage. And then I found it in the financials to go ahead and just live and Fleming Hall. I just thought it would be better for me in case I was struggling with me my classes to that I could just go next door and knock on one of my

peers' doors and, you know, ask for help on an assignment. I just thought, I really want to be part of that community and, you know, start getting to know people on a deeper level.

Theme 2: Sense of Belonging

Persistence of undergraduate students is directly tied to belonging (Hausman, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 2007; Museus, Saelua, & Yi, 2018; Patterson, et al., 2021; Zosel, 2018). The importance of feeling connected to SRU and having a sense of belonging was discussed through participants interviews. P8 explained the impact of getting to know other people:

If you're by yourself and you're struggling alone it's hard to actually reach out and get what you need; you know a lot of people don't get out there and put themselves out there if they're by themselves. When you are with other people, I think it's a lot easier.

P7 shared:

SRU has this whole like week, I think they call it the SRU experience week or something now. It was called something different when I first came here, but basically our entire class would go onto the football field and they'll throw events for the new freshmen. And the host was like hey just like, pick up your phone and take a picture with somebody random.

Peer Groups

One of the significant benefits associated with LLCs, is the natural connection to peers through living and learning together (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003). In this study, P1,

P2, P4 and P6 all provided narratives that expressed the role participating in an LLC had on developing a peer group. Specifically, P8 explained:

It's just so easy to just strike up a conversation with your neighbor, and they're in the same major and you get to know them, you know, not just professionally, but like just as friends.

Similar to P8, P4 discussed the benefits of living with a member of the LLC.

My roommate kind of made it pretty easy for me because, well most of my closer friends are like Black or Hispanic but I feel like living in the LLC and then having him, a person of color as a roommate was really coincidental but made it pretty easy to transition. I think also just having people who are learning like the same thing as you.

Although the non-LLC participants in this study did not have a natural peer group established for them, they commonly expressed finding a peer group early in their time at SRU. P5 was a member of the football team and stated:

I think I developed a little football friend group with the freshman class here. I also meet people in my class, and I go to the library to do homework. I meet people at the library as well and at the dining hall.

P7 discussed how he initially found his first friend soon after he arrived on the campus:

SRU has this whole like week, I think they call it the SRU experience week or something now. It was called something different when I first came here, but basically our entire class would go onto the football field and they'll throw events for the new freshmen. And the host was like hey just like, pick up your phone and

take a picture with somebody random and I did with somebody completely random.

In his second semester, P3 recognized the need to establish a peer group and turned to a campus office to find community.

I was more of the type the first semester to just stay to myself, or whatever, I really only hung out with my girlfriend, but now it's just like I do try to talk to people more. There is something that goes down in the Inclusion office, it's called barbershop talk which just like they get black men on campus around to go in there, hang out and talk and to all that. It's a great experience.

Comfortability at SRU

During both the 2018 and 2019 academic years, SRU saw an increase the USM population; this increase brought URM enrollment to nearly seventeen percent (SRU Institutional Effectiveness and Research, 2020 as cited in D. Moore, personal communication, September, 2020). Despite this increase in enrollment, there are still concerns regarding campus climate that were expressed by participants. P7 explained, "Here at SRU, there is a lot of separation between like minorities and what not." When describing his experience on the SRU campus, P4 said:

I mean it's been alright, like, I mean, I like it and the people are pretty cool, but like, you can tell there's like political differences there usually between us. Yeah so, it's kind of good. But it's not like as comfortable as you wish it would be.

P2 felt that despite having some representation on the SRU campus, she had thoughts of a lack of appreciation for USM students.

I don't know it's just sometimes I do feel like another number here and we have the CEIGE building and everything. We have a bunch of black history stuff going on, but I feel like outside of that we're not really like, I guess celebrated.

P3 shared:

So far, like my experience has been good. It does get like kind of awkward.

Sometimes you know like, it's barely any minority students here, so it feels like sometimes you don't really fit in. But other than that, it's not like people make the vibe weird, because the people here are really great.

Despite recognizing a general lack of representation at SRU, not one participant felt as if they were treated unfairly or were unable to interact with their white counterparts. Cross-racial interactions are beneficial and lead to an increased sense of belonging for USM students (Carey, Stephens, Townsend, & Hamedani, 2022; Culver, Perez, Kitchen & Cole, 2022). P8 felt passionately about students from different backgrounds learning from each other.

I think it's super important to celebrate each other's backgrounds and to rejoice in each other's diversity. And for me it was not hard because I've always grown up with White parent's; I was adopted actually. But I think it's to super important to be exposed to differences and learn how to interact with one another.

Campus Involvement

As Astin (1999) observed, it is not solely the student's entry attributes that determine whether a student will be successful on a college campus. P6 explained how campus involvement was a component of his definition of college success.

In my own words, college success is actually getting out there and experiencing, you know student life, especially like being active on campus. I don't think you'll really get to experience college success if you're just, you know swamped with homework in your room doing studies. I would say getting out there and using the college resources and getting into groups with students and actually getting yourself involved. It's not just about getting the bachelor's degree; I would say I think it's getting that experience.

Although all participants stressed the importance of campus involvement, those who were members of an LLC were able to build connections to campus quickly. P2 provided insight into how the LLC assisted in getting her connected to campus.

It helped me go into the CEIGE office and I'd talk to the staff there. I started doing my homework there and I just started to really like gain friends and everything. Just going the CEIGE Office kind of forced me to talk to people.

P4 explained how his LLC brought students together:

We all get together and participate in activities because we were in an LLC. And because I was in an LLC, I had that group of friends that I went with, so it was pretty fun.

The non-LLC participants also vocalized the importance of campus involvement and highlighted ways they have gotten involved. According to P3 there is a group of African American men at SRU that get together to discuss issues that they are facing and to also celebrate one another, "It's called barbershop talk, which just like they get the

Black men on campus around to go in there, hang out and talk and do all that. It's a great experience."

Mentorship

Mentorship has consistently been identified as a high impact and best practice for USM students on college campuses (Allen et al., 2019; Hernandez et al., 2017; Hurd et al., 2017). However, despite the known benefits, only P2, P5, and P7 mentioned having a mentor at SRU. P5 turned to the older members of the football team for mentorship. While P7 had a family friend who served as a mentor and explained the relationship and personal connection:

I met him my freshman year. We would get coffee and he was a family friend. I didn't really know him; he was acting president of a fraternity on campus, so he was very sociable, and he was humble. He was actually Homecoming King my first year. He invited me to like some really cool get togethers and stuff to meet people. He was just an awesome guy. He wanted to see my social life thrive, wanted to see my academic life thrive, which was amazing because you don't really see that too much.

Although P2 identified as an LLC participant, her mentor was a staff member not connected to the LLC. P2 expressed how she developed a relationship with her mentor:

I got my mentor because I'm trying to become an RA next semester. I expressed an interest in being an RA and told her how like I'm busy and overwhelmed by it because I had to switch majors, after three weeks because my advisor decided to go on maternity leave without telling anyone, so that was just a hot mess. I had to quarantine for a whole week because I had swollen tonsils; it was just a whole

conundrum. My mentor and I really got close and everything and then especially over break like when I would text her questions; I'm pretty sure I annoyed her at some point. I'd text her all the time, but she never made me feel like I annoyed her. I asked her, would you mind being my mentor and everything and she said she didn't mind. I will text her twenty-four-seven about literally every single thing in my life. She has always been someone who thought I can just talk to about like just anything and everything. If she leaves, I'll go wherever she goes, because I love her so much.

Faculty/Staff Interaction

Interactions with faculty and staff leads to positive outcomes for college students (Astin, 1984). This interaction is beneficial both inside and outside of the classroom.

Apart from P2 and P8 all participants expressed building relationships with faculty members and possessing understanding the support that faculty members bring.

According to P7, faculty have been more than willing to support him in his time at SRU,

It's been so crazy. I was writing a paper my first year. It was like my first English paper and the day before it was due, I met with my professor to talk about it and she just looked at me and was like "this is really bad." Like if I were to give you a grade right now, I'd have to fail it. I was like you're not supposed to tell me that. She was like I'll give you tonight. I'll give you a couple of extra days to do it and I rewrote everything; I got a friend's help and turned it in and she literally gave me a hug.

Despite being participants in LLCs, P2, P8 and P6 did not develop relationships with faculty through being a member of their respective LLCs. When asked about faculty interaction P8 shared:

We had a couple of events that were like, zoom events, they're like, kind of like this, it was like all the people in the LLC and the faculty would get on, but it was during COVID so like I don't really know exactly what their goal was. I can't really think of any time specific outside of my classes. So yeah, I'm not sure about that one, I would probably say no.

P6 remarked:

In class they [faculty] identified those who are in the LLC, but they never like you know came out and interacted with us outside of class. Honestly it [LLC] gave me more of an opportunity to work with upperclassman because that was like the facilitator of the LLC.

Theme 3: Transition from High School to College

A smooth and successful transition to college is often rooted in privilege and consists of language and norms for behaviors that may leave USM students disadvantaged. For this reason, it is essential for college and universities to provide contextual knowledge for USM students (Jackson & Son, 2021). When explaining her transition to SRU, 2 had this to say:

So, my freshman semester, my first semester, I was having like a hot mess semester, and I met the wrong people who were kind of just like here to play around and they're like let's go party. Like we're grown and my grandma can't reach me over here, I'm a grown adult, I can do X, Y, Z. I don't want to go to

class and do homework, which hit me when I got a nice little email like if you don't do these classes, we will not be seeing you next semester, I was like, oh my goodness.

COVID-19 Implications

The COVID-19 pandemic influenced the campus experience for all nine participants within this study. Although participants were not asked directly about how COVID-19 may have impacted their transition to or time at SRU, five participants made mention of it. P1 discussed how COVID-19 impacted her decision to even attend SRU:

My college process, it was a little bit janky because like where my high school didn't really help as much because of COVID, they kind of just gave up on my graduating class, so I got like really lazy, and all of my stuff was kind of last minute.

Colleges and Universities were called to shift modalities for delivering content to students and utilize virtual engagement in unprecedented ways in efforts to ensure the safety of students, faculty, and staff during the COVID 19 pandemic (Davis, Sun, Lone, Levi, & Xu, 2022). Although these adaptations were paramount to ensuring the health and well-being of the campus community, it often left students feeling disconnected. P8 shared remarks regarding engagement with peers:

I've definitely noticed a shift, since COVID and I hate to use that as you know kind of a catch all, it's so common, everything is about COVID these days, but like I remember before COVID everyone's talking before classes, and they were meeting people and now it's like no one wants to talk at all and would rather be online for their classes. Yeah, even when I got out to the plaza or anything like

that you know before COVID there was hundreds of people there on any sunny day, and now it's just nobody there ever.

P1 reflected on the challenges she faced going from virtual learning in her senior year of high school to in person learning at SRU:

Last semester, I just got overwhelmed so quick; I get easily overwhelmed and that's mostly because of COVID. When we went online, all my teachers were like watch the video, here's what we are doing today, here's your assignment, do it. And then in college they're like okay so you need to write a four-page paper by next week, and also read this book, and also make a one-page paper about that, and I'm just like oh.

Self-Efficacy

The participants in this study spanned across all four classifications for undergraduate students, one constant that emerged through the interviews was the initial feeling of being overwhelmed by the differences between high school and college and then the realization that they were capable of achieving at a high level. P4, a second semester freshman shared:

I feel more, I guess I feel more capable because of what I went through. Well actually I feel less capable, but more. It's a weird thing, I feel less capable and more capable at the same time. So back in high school, I didn't study or anything; it was just like a memory thing, like I would learn it one day and I'd go back, take a test and I get like a 90 or like an 80 or something on it. And I would always have good grades, but then when I came to college you kind of have to like to

change that mentality, you have to actually like sit down and study for like hours.

You know it's just more difficult, it feels like you're learning things on your own.

P6 reflected on his entire transition from freshman year to his current status as a senior.

Before I started college, I was worried about you know writing long papers. I didn't realize, ten-page papers would come easy at this point, I would never have guessed that. But yeah, freshman me, I was definitely freaking out over four-page papers, but now since we have like these papers that we have, for example, we have this 24-page paper that is due at the end of the semester, and if I like heard about that my freshman year, I would have been like what in the world. But yeah, now I look at it like it's not that bad because we break it up in phases. And another point is right before college, I was worried about the math portion, because that was not my strong suit such as English and writing. And I was definitely worried about taking like geometry or algebra, you know college algebra. Well, I found out that in my major only statistics is required. That's the only math course I did take; I was pretty happy. Yeah, but once you're in that course, any course for example, it gets better, like before you take the course you kind of freak out, but once you're in it, you know it's not as bad as you think.

Despite the challenges and obstacles that participants faced, all nine believed that they were going to complete their bachelor's degree at SRU. Further, P2 was the only participant that was not pleased with their academic performance. The narratives of participants and their belief in their abilities manifesting into academic success and persistence is consistent with the findings of Cuyjet (2006), Pajares and Miller (1994), and Phinney and Haas (2003).

Additional Findings

Living on campus is directly correlated to increased academic performance and student involvement (Astin, 1984). Living Learning Communities have been shown to increase these gains for undergraduate students (Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Pascarella et al., 1994). In this study, participants who were not connected with an LLC knew the general concept and associated benefits. P9 explained how he knew what LLCs were but also stated “I just feel like a lot didn’t really interest me, or like pertain to me, so I kind of didn’t really feel like it was necessary.”

These thoughts are similar to ones shared by P7:

I didn’t apply just because one, I missed the cutoff date for it and I didn’t really know what I wanted to do at the time, so I was still in the weird flux of not wanting to commit to something I didn’t know much about.

The five participants who have been involved in LLCs all recommended LLCs to other USM students. P2, who lived in the Student Success LLC, an LLC aimed at retaining all students, but carried an emphasis on retaining USM students shared:

I wish there was like a, I know this will come off wrong, but like a minority LLC, just like minorities like Blacks and Hispanics and all that and just like being together and share. I mean we have like rock climbing and all these other ones, golf and all this other stuff. That’s nice and all, but why do you need that You have all these communities for all these other things. Being a minority it’s not just something you do for a hobby, like it’s something that you are or who you are, so I feel like to have like a safe space, a whole floor. It’s just like all of us. I thought

that would be just so beneficial to somebody who wouldn't have to leave the comfort of their room.

Chapter Summary

Chapter four outlined the experiences of all nine participants and subsequent themes that emerged: finances influencing decision making, sense of belonging, and transition from high school to college. In addition to the three primary themes identified subthemes were found through additional data analysis. The research questions that guided this qualitative study were:

1. How do Living Learning Communities impact sense of belonging and connectedness for Underserved Minority Students?
2. How do Living Learning Communities assist in developing relationships with faculty and staff for Underserved Minority Students?
3. How does participation in a Living Learning Community impact self-efficacy for Underserved Minority Students?

Through a semi-structured interview protocol, the research questions that guided this study were addressed. The perspectives of participants highlighted throughout this chapter give rise to more similarities than differences that exist between USM students live in campus housing regardless of LLC membership. The findings stress the importance of self-efficacy, affordability of college, peer support and faculty and staff interaction.

Chapter five will provide an interpretation of data outlined in chapter four. The researcher will discuss the significance of the primary themes identified as well as

implications for this research. Additionally, chapter five will highlight limitations that existed with this current research and discuss recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5: Conclusion, Discussion, and Recommendations

As mentioned in previous chapters, this study was designed to provide insight into the experiences of underserved minority (USM) students at Southern Regional University (SRU). Specifically, the researcher sought to understand how membership in Living Learning Communities may have impacted participants. This chapter will further explain the results, discuss limitations that existed with the current research, and lastly provide recommendations for future research.

Research Questions

The central research question that guided this study was: How do Living Learning Communities impact college success for Underserved Minority Students? The central research question led to three sub-research questions that further guided this study.

1. How do Living Learning Communities impact sense of belonging and connectedness for Underserved Minority Students?
2. How do Living Learning Communities assist in developing relationships with faculty and staff for Underserved Minority Students?
3. How does participation in a Living Learning Community impact self-efficacy for Underserved Minority Students?

To address these questions a phenomenological method was utilized. The researcher conducted individual semi-structured interviews with both USM students who were members of LLCs and USM students who lived on-campus and were not members of LLCs. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions that allowed for participants to respond freely with depth.

Interpretation of Findings

The goal of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of USM students who reside in on-campus housing at SRU and how participation in an LLC may have impacted their college success. For the purposes of this study, college success is defined as sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and faculty and staff interaction. The narratives from five USM students who were members of LLCs and four USM students who were not in an LLC were utilized to identify themes and the subsequent findings. The findings from the current study indicate that LLC participation was not the sole contributing factor to college success for USM students at SRU. Further, all participants in the present research indicated the ability to establish a peer group, exuded high levels of self-efficacy and were able to establish relationships with faculty or staff.

Faculty and staff interaction outside of the classroom are an essential component for the matriculation of USM students (Astin, 1984 as cited in Astin, 1999, p. 524-525; Kelly, 1996; Stier, 2014). Further, faculty and staff serve a critical role in academic and personal development for USM students through mentoring (Allen et al., 2019; Hernandez et al., 2017). Despite the known benefits of having a faculty and staff mentors, only two participants in this study mentioned having a mentor. Additionally, although both participants who had a mentor were members of an LLC, they did not find their mentor through the LLC. A primary function for LLCs as identified by NSLLP (2003) is the development of mentors through in-depth interactions with faculty.

Regardless of having an affiliation with an LLC or not, the nine participants were all able to establish a peer group for support. Consistent with the findings of Astin (1993) and Morrow and Ackermann (2012), peers provided both academic and personal support

to the nine participants at SRU. Majority of the relationships built amongst participants in this study happened outside of the classroom.

Underserved minority students who have high levels of self-efficacy are more likely to matriculate and graduate from a college or university (Pajares & Miller, 1994; Phinney & Haas, 2003). Based on the narratives from participants, it was apparent that supportive relationships with peers, family and faculty and staff resulted in higher levels of self-efficacy. Every participant indicated in their interview that they have made it through adversity and were confident in their ability to earn a degree from SRU.

Although the perspectives of the nine participants did not lead to a conclusion that LLCs were a driving force behind college success for USM students at SRU, majority of participants recommended USM students participate in an LLC. Table 5.1 illustrates participant thoughts on LLC membership for future USM students.

Table 6 Participant Thoughts on Future USM Students joining LLCs

Participant	Response
P1	Yes. Um, I think it does make it easier to like have a group, because I've also seen the ROTC LLC, because I have friends that live in Telford. They're just really nice.
P2	I guess it just kind of depends on which one. I felt like I wish there was like a, I know this will come off wrong, but like a minority LLC, just like minorities like blacks and Hispanics and all that and just like being together and share. I mean we have like rock climbing, and all these other ones golf and all this other stuff that's nice and all, but why do you need that? You have all these communities for all these other things. Being a minority it's not just something you do for a hobby like it's something that you are or who you are, so I feel like to have like a safe space a whole floor. It's just like all of us. I thought that would just be so beneficial to somebody who wouldn't have to leave the comfort of their room
P3	Yeah, I mean, I think not just minorities but everybody should look into it because it's very helpful from what I can tell. So that should be something that you should really strive to try to get into.

P4	Oh, yeah, I would. I think also just having people who are learning like the same thing as you.
P5	Um, I definitely would because of make more sense because of a sense of connection and of like belonging, so I'll, I'll definitely consider that for minority students.
P6	I think I would because it definitely like I said earlier gives you more opportunities. Because if you're by yourself and you're struggling alone. It's hard to actually reach out and get those opportunities when you're by yourself; you know a lot of people don't go out there and put themselves out there if they're by themselves. When you're with other people. I think it's a lot easier.
P7	Yes, because that is definitely one thing that you see here, ECU a lot is there is a separation I feel like between like minorities and like not and regardless of that element like LLC or just kind of like a way for you to kind of get involved without getting involved, like it's a way for you to step into your element with your major, like if you don't know what you're doing you know like if you nursing majors, for instance, that is hard, that could never be me. But you know, bounce off ideas, you know it's a place that you can just feel comfortable and share, you know, which is what you're going to go through. So, I would say yes for sure this year.
P8	Yes, I would definitely say yes. I'm now living with two other PGM guys because, you know, we all lived in the same LLC, and we got to know each other through it. We were a couple of doors down the hall and so I was saying hey like you guys want to live together next year? We became great friends and so now we're all living together so that really helped develop our friend group. I think my peers are more aware of my presence. Now that I was in the LLC; I was kind of around more often. Now I get messages for like help with assignments or somethings like that. And I think that was made possible because of my presence was more ambient in the LLC
P9	Honestly, I do not know much about LLCs, I know I haven't really seen much interaction or events that go on, so I don't really know how serious they take them here. And I feel like a lot of the other LLCs, I just don't know about. Besides, like the one in Martin, I know the honors LLC is up there. But I haven't personally seen anything go on over here in Palmer. I'm not sure what they really do.

Regardless of LLC status, the constant that existed amongst all nine participants was living in a residence hall and the support that exists regardless of LLC membership.

These findings are consistent with Astin (1984) and Astin (1996) who found that living on campus positively influences persistence.

Discussion of Themes

Three themes emerged from through analyzing data from this qualitative study that give rise to the lived experiences of participants.

Theme 1: Finances Influencing Decision Making

In 2018, 57% of 18–21-year -olds, who identify as Generation Z were enrolled in a college or university, which is a higher percentage than both Millennials and Generation X achieved at any given time, making them the most educated generation of all time (Dennington, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2021). A significant characteristic for Generation Z students is financial consciousness fueled by the experience of witnessing their parents' financial hardships during a recession and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. It is important for colleges and universities to take note of inequities that exist with finances and how that intersects with degree attainment.

In a qualitative study, Moore et al. (2021) found finances not only impact decision making, but they can also contribute to stress, and influence relationship development for college students. The current financial climate has heavily influenced the decisions that each participant has made during their time at SRU. Three out of five LLC participants in this study mentioned that a significant factor in their decision to join the LLC was based on the financial benefits they received. Further, one participant did not originally have the finances to join an LLC in his first year at SRU due to the LLC being in a residence hall at a higher price point. These findings show how some students can benefit from

financial assistance provided by an LLC, while others are disadvantaged by the affordability of LLCs.

Theme 2: Sense of Belonging

Fostering a sense of belonging is an imperative task for any college or university in their efforts to retain students (Astin, 1999; Hausman, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 2007; Museus, Saelua, & Yi, 2018; Patterson, Wolk, Taylor, Maguin & BlackDeer, 2021; Zosel, 2018). This sense of belonging for USM students is directly impacted by the campus climate (Gummadam, 2006; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Most participants in this study indicated that they persisted and found success at SRU due to the support they received. Specifically, P8 explained a wide variety of resources that assisted him.

I can go to the writing center in the library to get help. And my advisors have everything, and all the answers and they helped me like write resumes and cover letters; everything I need to get in the industry. As far as like emotionally, I would just say I'm involved in a campus ministry, and they are just a really good group for me to like spiritually get connected to. Whenever I'm struggling like emotionally, I hit up a couple of the guys and we'll go and talk and spend time just encouraging each other. We'll go do other activities like go to the gym and stuff like that, so as far as support I think I've got professionally advisors and the staff and then you know surrounding myself with good friends is like personal n this study all nine participants were felt as if they belonged at SRU, despite the individual challenges they faced. More specifically, three participants within LLCs and three participants not associated with LLCs mentioned navigating

campus as a minority. The struggles that participants shared were associated with political differences, not knowing who to trust, and finding a space on campus to be in community with other USM students.

Within the overarching theme of sense of belonging, subthemes of peer groups, comfortability at SRU, campus involvement, mentorship, and faculty/staff interaction were identified. Sense of belonging manifested in several different ways for participants, regardless of LLC affiliation. This connection to SRU came from student organization involvement, organic relationships through classes or the dining hall, spending time in the diversity office and for two participants came from finding a mentor.

Theme 3: Transition from High School to College

According to Hurd et al. (2017), USM students may experience higher levels of psychological distress when transitioning from high school to college (Hurd et al., 2017). All nine participants in this study mentioned challenging transitions between high school and college. The impact of COVID-19 on this transition to college and experience while at SRU is one that participants shared multiple times throughout their interviews. For nearly two years at the time of this study, connections with peers or with faculty and staff were often limited to a computer screen. Only three participants in this study had the opportunity to experience SRU prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite struggling initially with transitioning to college, all participants were confident in their abilities to complete their undergraduate degree at SRU. This subtheme of self-efficacy is crucial as USM students who have higher levels of self-efficacy are more likely to persist in college (Cuyjet, 2006; Pajares & Miller, 1994; Phinney & Haas, 2003). Consistent with Harper (2006), Harper (2009) and Harrington (2002) participants

of this study attributed their high levels of self-efficacy to support from peers, family, or faculty and staff from SRU. P9 declared “I have strong, high hopes, I will finish [college] whether or not I have troubles or whatnot.”

Limitations

Multiple limitations were identified throughout this study. This first limitation is associated with the qualitative research design. Although qualitative research allows a researcher to dive deep into the lived experience of a participant, the results are not generalizable (Maxwell, 1992).

The participants from this study were all from the same university, which limited the sample size. The researcher had the initial goal of conducting at least five individual interviews with USM students who were members of LLCs and five individual interviews with USM students who lived on campus but were not members of LLCs. Despite the researcher’s best efforts after weeks of sending recruitment emails, only four USM students who were not in an LLC agreed to participate. Further of the five LLC participants, two were in the same LLC.

A third limitation that emerged was the impact that COVID-19 had on the participant experience at SRU and throughout the data collection process. Of the nine participants, only three had experienced SRU outside of the COVID-19 pandemic. Starting college during COVID-19, altered the on-campus living experience regardless of LLC membership. For the safety of both the researcher and the participants, all interviews were conducted using a video conferencing platform. Although video conferencing has become common practice during the COVID-19 pandemic, Chen, Buchan, and Adair (2021) explain the challenges that exist when trying to establish

rapport, build relationships and pick-up nonverbal cues (as cited in Foster School of Business, 2021).

The final limitation identified by the researcher dealt with the participants themselves and the level of trust that was established between the researcher and participants. Participants were called to discuss personal experiences with a researcher that they had just met, which may have limited what they were willing to share. Additionally, the researcher is a former administrator at SRU, which may have influenced the willingness of participants to share completely.

Recommendations and Research Implications

This phenomenological study was conducted to fill a void that existed in literature regarding LLCs. Several qualitative and quantitative studies have been conducted regarding LLCs, but there is limited research on the subpopulation of USM students. Three theoretical frameworks were utilized for this study: Astin's (1984) Theory of Student Involvement, Astin's (1993) I-E-O Model and Critical Race Theory. The themes that emerged from this study align with all three theories that were utilized to conceptualize the present research.

Through prior research, it has been determined that LLCs foster relationships with faculty and staff, assist in developing relationships with peers, and increase retention (Astin, 1984; Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Inkelas & Wiseman, 2003; Mach et al., 2018; NSLLP, 2003; Wilson et al., 2018; Zinhteyn, 2019). Despite these known benefits, this current research involving only USM students revealed more similarities than differences in the experiences of participants who were members of LLCs and those who were not.

Only one participant in this study who was in an LLC mentioned developing stronger relationships with faculty based on LLC participation. It is imperative to note that connections with faculty and staff may have been impacted by reduced opportunities to engage due to health and safety of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve and eventually will come to an end, it is essential to find ways to increase and enhance interactions that USM students have with faculty and staff at SRU.

All participants in this study were able to establish strong peer relationships, but only one participant mentioned their LLC being a conduit for developing a supportive peer group. Other participants were able to form a peer group through being a student athlete, joining student organizations, through academic courses and through spending time in a student support office. It is important for LLC faculty or staff coordinators to provide opportunities to students to build relationships. These opportunities should not be limited to programming inside the residence hall. Again, this may have been impacted over the course of the past two academic years due to COVID-19.

All LLCs at SRU have memorandums of understanding (MOU) that exist between the department which sponsors the LLC and the university housing office (Barnes, 2019). These MOUs are a great tool in outlining responsibilities and should continue. Although each LLC is unique it is important that a baseline of support is established for the area of faculty and staff engagement that is offered to students in an LLC to ensure all LLC participants have an equitable experience.

Finances will continue to be an issue for USM students at SRU. As one study participant shared, they were unable to join an LLC their freshman year due to the cost of

the residence hall for the LLC connected to their major. Currently, the Honor's Academic Academy is currently the only LLC, that houses students in two separate buildings; this was done to accommodate students who could not afford a more expensive residential facility. Additional LLCs should consider utilizing the housing model that the Honor's Academic Academy uses.

This study also revealed a gap in mentoring relationships for USM students who live on campus. Both formal and informal mentorship opportunities have been shown to improve academic success, positive psychological well-being, and a sense of belonging (Allen, et al., 2019; Hernandez et al., 2017). Creation of mentor programs through offices that coordinate LLCs or through other student support offices can have a meaningful and significant impact on USM students at SRU.

This current study is only a starting point in revealing the lived experiences of students of USM students at SRU and what strategies can help lead to college success. This phenomenological qualitative design does not provide generalizable results; however, this research does reveal ways in which SRU can support USM students moving forward. The recommendations provided are directly intended to help improve the college success for USM students and their experiences at SRU.

Future Research Recommendations

The results and recommendations for this research provide insights into how much of an impact LLCs may have on USM students at SRU. The research highlights the lived experiences of USM students who lived in campus housing and were members of LLCs and those who were not members of LLCs. Although USM students are sub-population at SRU, the sample for this research was broad and not limited by gender, age,

class standing, in-state or out of state student designation, or specific race other than identifying as USM. Future research can explore disaggregating the USM population even further to learn the experiences of sub-groups.

The perspectives of the participants suggest that supportive peers, supportive family, faculty or staff interaction, and high levels of self-efficacy have led to college success. The current research did not delve into how these relationships were cultivated. Future research presents the opportunity to further explore how these relationships were developed and the significance they have on college success.

An opportunity also exists to explore the impact on LLCs for USM students from a quantitative design. Future researchers can examine data points such as grade point average, credit hours earned, credit hours attempted, and graduation rates for LLC participants and compare to non-LLC participants. Conducting quantitative research on this topic will allow for objective data that can be generalizable.

In accordance with Maxwell (2002) this study is not generalizable due to its qualitative design. Although this current study is not generalizable, an opportunity exists for this study to be replicated at a future date at SRU and on other college campuses. The researcher recommends replicating this study at SRU once the campus has safely and effectively ended all COVID-19 restrictions, which had an impact on participant responses.

Conclusion

As the number of USM students continues to increase on college and university campuses, it is imperative to employ strategies that aid in their matriculation. Living Learning Communities have been identified as a tool to increase sense of belonging,

faculty and staff interaction and retention (Astin, 1984; Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Inkelas & Wiseman, 2003; Mach et al., 2018; NSLLP, 2003; Wilson et al., 2018; Zinhteyn, 2019). This study conducted at SRU utilized the narratives of five USM students who were members of LLCs and four USM students who were not members of LLCs, but did live on campus, to explore what impact LLCs may have on college success.

The results of this study illustrated strong similarities for USM students who were members of an LLC and those who were not. Considering the one constant each participant had was living in a residence hall at SRU, the researcher is led to believe that living on-campus has a positive impact on the college success of USM students at SRU. Specifically, all participants in this study have a sense of belonging and affinity for SRU, have had opportunities to develop relationships with either faculty or staff and have shown high levels of self-efficacy. These findings directly align with the previous research of Riker and Decoster (2008) and Astin (1993) who found that living on campus can positively impact both academic and personal success.

The ability for colleges and universities to articulate the value added behind high impact and retention initiatives is essential. Throughout this study it was evident that participants knew about and recommended LLCs but did not fully understand all of the benefits that they can or could receive by being a member of an LLC. Living Learning Community coordinators, staff and faculty associated with an LLC need to ensure that the experience members of the LLC are receiving go above and beyond those of the general residence hall student.

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Appendices

APPENDIX
A: Interview Invitation to Participate

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

Hello!

My name is Brandon Thompson, and I am a doctoral student at Eastern Kentucky University. I am reaching out to you because you identify as an Underserved Minority (USM) student, and you have lived in a residence hall at Eastern Kentucky University.

I would like to invite you to participate in a research study that will explore the impact that participation in Living Learning Communities (LLCs) can have on USM students at Eastern Kentucky University. If you decide to participate, the information you provide will be utilized to complete research requirements for the Educational Leadership & Policy Studies doctoral dissertation at Eastern Kentucky University.

There is not a large time commitment associated with participating in this study. Each participant will be asked to take part in a 60 to 90 minute interview over Zoom. During the interview, participants will be asked questions about their experiences and transition into the campus community. **All participants will be provided a \$25 Amazon gift card after the conclusion of the interview.**

Participation in this study is voluntary and can be withdrawn at any point. If you do choose to participate in this research study, you will be provided additional details and will be asked to complete a consent form that outlines the entire study and indicates your willingness to participate.

If you are interested in participating or have any questions, please feel free to contact me by phone (call or text) (708)-595-8806 or by email at brandon_thompson114@mymail.eku.edu

Thanks,
Brandon Thompson
Doctoral Student
Eastern Kentucky University

APPENDIX
B: Interview Protocol

LLC PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Date and time of Interview_____

Participant Name (pseudonym)_____

1. Please tell me where you are from.
2. How would you define college success?
3. What factors contributed to your decision to attend SRU?
4. How many semesters have you been enrolled as a student?
5. What is your academic major?
6. If someone were to ask you about your experience at SRU, how would you describe it?
7. What LLC are you a participant in?
8. Why did you decide to participate in a Living Learning Community?
9. In what ways has the LLC assisted in your transition to college?
10. Has your LLC provided opportunities for you to build relationships with faculty members outside of the typical classroom setting?
11. Have you had the opportunity to interact with university staff as a result of participating in your LLC?
12. Have you developed a mentor through your LLC?
13. Where do you typically go to find support while at SRU?
14. Would you say that participation in your LLC assisted in developing a friend group or peer support group?
15. Do you believe you are capable of completing your college degree?

16. Has your perception of your academic ability evolved in your time at SRU? If so
in what ways?
17. Do you believe that participation in an LLC made it easier to transition to a
predominantly white institution?
18. Would you recommend participating in LLCs to other minority students?

NON-LLC PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Date and time of Interview _____

Participant Name (pseudonym) _____

1. Please tell me where you are from.
2. How would you define college success?
3. What factors contributed to your decision to attend SRU?
4. How many semesters have you been enrolled as a student?
5. What is your academic major?
6. If someone were to ask you about your experience at SRU, how would you describe it?
7. What LLC are you a participant in?
8. Why did you decide to participate in a Living Learning Community?
9. What campus resources have assisted in your transition to college?
10. Has your LLC provided opportunities for you to build relationships with faculty members outside of the typical classroom setting?
11. Have you had the opportunity to interact with university staff as a result of participating in your LLC?
12. Have you developed a mentor through your LLC?
13. Where do you typically go to find support while at SRU?
14. Would you say that participation in your LLC assisted in developing a friend group or peer support group?
15. Do you believe you are capable of completing your college degree?

16. Has your perception of your academic ability evolved in your time at SRU? If so
in what ways?
17. Do you believe that participation in an LLC made it easier to transition to a
predominantly white institution?
18. Would you recommend participating in LLCs to other minority students?

APPENDIX
C: Interview Script

INTERVIEW SCRIPT

Hello, thank you for agreeing to voluntarily participate in this study. Once again, my name is Brandon Thompson, and I am a doctoral student at Eastern Kentucky University. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of underserved minority students and the impact that participation in living learning community may have on sense of belonging, faculty and staff interaction and self-efficacy. If at any point you decide that you no longer wish to participate in this study, you can remove yourself by simply telling me.

Prior to us continuing, I would like to remind you that this conversation is being recorded to ensure accuracy. Throughout the interview I may ask for further clarification on any responses that you provide. After the conclusion of the interview, I will transcribe our conversation and send a copy of the transcription to you, so we can ensure that I have accurately captured your experiences.

Do you have any questions at this point? If any questions or concerns arise after our interview concludes, please contact me by phone or email; my contact information is listed in the informed consent document.

Again, thank you, for voluntarily participating in this study. We will now officially begin the interview.

APPENDIX
D: Informed Consent

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Impact of Living Learning Communities on Underserved Minority Students at a Regional Comprehensive University

Key Information

You are being invited to participate in a research study. This document includes important information you should know about the study. Before providing your consent to participate, please read this entire document and ask any questions you have.

Do I have to participate?

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You will not lose any benefits or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer. You can stop at any time during the study and still keep the benefits and rights you had before volunteering. If you decide to participate, you will be one of about 10 people in the study.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this study is to help understand the experience that Underserved Minority (USM) students have from participation in Living Learning Communities (LLCs) and the experience that USM students who live on campus, but do not participate in LLCs have. In particular, the research will clarify how LLCs may impact a sense of belonging, connection to faculty and staff and self-efficacy (a person's belief in the ability to achieve).

Where is the study going to take place and how long will it last?

The research procedures will be conducted at over Zoom given the COVID-19 pandemic. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for this study is 60-90 minutes over the course of one day.

What will I be asked to do?

Participation in this study is voluntary and not required. Participants will be asked to answer pre-determined interview questions about experiences at ECU and experiences within their particular LLC. These interviews will last 60-90 minutes and will be recorded. Each participant will only need to participate in one private interview. The interview questions are open ended and follow-up questions may be asked.

Are there reasons why I should not take part in this study?

If you do not identify as an USM student or have not lived in a residence hall at Eastern Kentucky University, you should not participate in this study.

What are the possible risks and discomforts?

To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm or discomfort than you would experience in everyday life. The interviews between the participant and researcher are private. The recordings and transcripts from the

interviews will be kept on a password protected computer and a flash drive that will be in a locked drawer. With any research there is a possibility a breach of confidentiality that could expose a participants' identity; although possible, this is unlikely.

What are the benefits of taking part in this study?

There is no guarantee that you will get any benefit from taking part in this study. However, some people have experienced satisfaction or gratification when providing their personal lived experience. We cannot and do not guarantee that you will receive any benefits from this study. Your participation is expected to provide benefits to others by providing insight into benefits that LLCs may or may not have for USM students

If I don't take part in this study, are there other choices?

If you do not want to be in the study, there are no other choices except to not take part in the study.

Now that you have some key information about the study, please continue reading if you are interested in participating. Other important details about the study are provided below.

Other Important Details

Who is doing the study?

The person in charge of this study is Brandon Thompson, a doctoral student at Eastern Kentucky University. Brandon is being advised by Dr. Ann Burns for this research. There may be other people on the research team assisting at different times during the study.

What will it cost me to participate?

There are no costs associated with taking part in this study.

Will I receive any payment or rewards for taking part in the study?

You will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card funded by the primary researcher for participating in this study.

Who will see the information I give?

Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write up the study to share it with other researchers, we will write about this combined information. You will not be identified in these written materials.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. Include the following statement if the data will not be recorded with identifying information: For example, your name will be kept separate from the information you give, and these two things will be stored in different places under lock and key.

Can my taking part in the study end early?

If you decide to take part in the study, you still have the right to decide at any time that you no longer want to participate. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study.

The individuals conducting the study may need to end your participation in the study. They may do this if you are not able to follow the directions they give you, if they find that your being in the study is more risk than benefit to you, or if the University or agency funding the study decides to stop the study early for a variety of reasons.

What happens if I get hurt or sick during the study?

If you believe you are hurt or get sick because of something that is done during the study, you should call Brandon Thompson at 708-595-8806 immediately. It is important for you to understand that Eastern Kentucky University will not pay for the cost of any care or treatment that might be necessary because you get hurt or sick while taking part in this study. Also, Eastern Kentucky University will not pay for any wages you may lose if you are harmed by this study. These costs will be your responsibility.

Usually, medical costs that result from research-related harm cannot be included as regular medical costs. Therefore, the costs related to your care and treatment because of something that is done during the study will be your responsibility. You should ask your insurer if you have any questions about your insurer's willingness to pay under these circumstances.

What else do I need to know?

You will be told if any new information is learned which may affect your condition or influence your willingness to continue taking part in this study.

We will give you a copy of this consent form to take with you.

Consent

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact the investigator, Brandon Thompson at 708-595-8806 or brandon_thompson114@mymail.eku.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research volunteer, you can contact the staff in the Division of Sponsored Programs at Eastern Kentucky University at 859-622-3636.

If you would like to participate, please read the statement below, sign, and print your name.

I am at least 18 years of age, have thoroughly read this document, understand its contents, have been given an opportunity to have my questions answered, and voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study

Date

Printed name of person taking part in the study

Name of person providing information to subject