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Residential Learning Communities: Facilitating Seamless Learning

By Polly Graham

Abstract
Research has shown that residential learning communities positively affect student outcomes. This study looked at the literature, finding a basis for this trend and uncovering the current impact residential learning communities are having on higher education. This study sought to challenge Christian higher education administrators and faculty to consider whether residential learning communities fit within their institution’s mission and vision.

Introduction
The idea of learning communities is not a new one; in fact, it dates back almost 100 years to Alexander Meiklejohn and his “Experimental College” which began at the University of Wisconsin in the 1920s. The goal of the “Experimental College” was to create a seamless living and learning environment—an aspiration that continues for many of today’s universities (Stassen, 2003). Meiklejohn’s “Experimental College” was created as a reaction to the “increased disciplinary specialization and fragmentation of the undergraduate curriculum” and was designed to “facilitate faculty-student interaction” (Stassen, 2003, p. 581). The revival of Meiklejohn’s initiative began in the 1980s when a series of reports surfaced criticizing American higher education. For example, the Involvement in Learning report called for more student involvement, and in 1987 the Carnegie Foundation lamented the “loss of community and common purpose in higher education” (Ebbers & Lenning, 1999, n.p.).

In part as a result of the criticism, the learning community movement was launched. As Larry Ebbers and Oscar Lenning (1999) testify, the movement was propelled by many other occurrences: the founding of the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education in 1985; the publication of a Jossey-Bass New Directions source book on learning communities in 1998; the research studies on learning communities conducted by Vincent Tinto and his colleagues at the National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment in 1994; and the funding for development of learning communities provided by FIPSE in 1994. The nationwide attention to this issue prompted higher education to react. In the search for a response, higher education looked to the current research. Research from Tinto and Alexander Astin concluded that student success is linked (among many other factors) to social and academic integration (Stassen, 2003). Thus, the learning community emerged as one of the answers to higher education’s problems.
Residential Learning Community Defined

Learning communities can take many different forms, one being residential. Residential learning environments bring academics into the residence halls. As Howard Schein explains, “These programs usually have a developmental underpinning, they frequently incorporate academic themes or courses, and they frequently are structured in response to their campus’s specific needs” (2005, p. 3). They also emphasize team (interdisciplinary) and thematic teaching. Social networking among students is an intended result of these communities which provide “mutually supportive learning environments, where friends can seek help from one another or encourage each other to go to classes” (Klein, 2000, p. 14).

A concrete definition of residential learning communities can be found in looking at specific examples. One such example is Chapman Community, which is housed on the campus of Bowling Green University in Ohio. It houses 300 students, four classrooms, 18 faculty offices, an art studio, recreation and study rooms, and a café and library (Klein, 2006). Each student enrolls in at least one general education course and a one-hour field experience course with a resident faculty member. “This structure… is designed to maximize collaborative relationships by offering ample opportunities for study groups and other forms of communal gatherings, support, and enrichment” (Klein, 2006, p.24). While the faculty do not live in the residence hall, they teach classes and have their offices on site (Klein, 2000).

Another example of a residential learning community can be found at Auburn University. At Auburn, first-year students who are enrolled in the College of Liberal Arts, the Samuel Ginn College of Engineering, or the College of Sciences and Mathematics have the opportunity to live in the same residence hall and co-register for required classes. The students are housed in a co-ed residence hall where they have the opportunity to make friends and find study partners. However, unlike Chapman, faculty personnel do not have offices within the hall (Living and living-learning communities, 2007).

Further examples of residential learning communities can be found nationwide. While each institution tailors its learning community to fit its needs, the focus of each is to respond to the concern of student learning. Other institutions with commendable residential learning communities include Earlham, Stanford, Michigan State, and Maryland (Ebbers and Lenning, 1999).

Are Residential Learning Communities Really Needed?

Currently in higher education, the most prevalent model of teaching has its roots in Germany. As Thomas Klein (2000) explains, “The learning community, and especially its fullest realization in the residential variation, represents a change in kind, not just degree, from the standard cafeteria model of education inherited from the nineteenth-century German research university” (p. 13). The “cafeteria model” has its weaknesses, namely the lack of student involvement. As Tinto (2000) pinpoints, “The experience of learning in higher education is, for most students, still very much a spectator sport. In most learning situations, faculty talk dominates and there are few active student participants” (p. 1). Thus, lack of student participation in the learning process is one weakness of the prevailing learning model.
There is also a lack of cohesiveness in the current model—content is not connected between different courses nor are peers consistent in different courses (Tinto, 2000). As Ebbers and Lenning highlight, “Students often experience learning in an isolated, fragmented manner” (1999, n.p.). This is especially concerning since current research supports that students learn best when they are “interdependently engage[d] with the material to be learned, with each other and with lecturers” (Smith & Bath, 2006, p. 276). Therefore, research demonstrates that there is a need for the interconnectedness that residential learning communities can provide.

**Residential Learning Communities in the Literature**

**Educational and Social Benefits**

Ebbers and Lenning (1999) conducted a comprehensive assessment of the research on student learning communities. Their assessment did not only address residential learning communities, but also included other types of learning communities such as classroom and curriculum. They found that “well-designed learning communities emphasizing collaborative learning result[ed] in improved GPA, retention, and satisfaction for undergraduate students” (Ebbers & Lenning, 1999, n.p.). They also found that it was not only students who benefited from learning communities, but faculty as well. Faculty benefited from, among other things, viewing their disciplines in a more revealing light, an increase in collegial trust, a sense of satisfaction in their work, and an increase of continuity and integration in the curriculum (Ebbers & Lenning, 1999).

Calvin Smith and Debra Bath (2006) studied learning outcomes at a research university in Australia. Their research was done in response to the growing value that higher education is placing on developing graduate attributes. Their results demonstrated that student learning outcomes should not only be attributed to teaching and program quality. Rather, Smith and Bath (2006) found:

> whilst it continues to be appropriate for universities to be concerned with the quality of their teaching and programs, the interactive, social and collaborative aspects of students’ learning experiences, captured in the notion of Learning Community, are also very important determinants of graduate outcomes, and so should be included in the focus of attempts at enhancing the quality of student learning (p. 259).

In other words, institutions should consider creating learning communities, for they have proven to increase the quality of student learning.

Judith Johnson and Stephen Romanoff evaluated a residential learning community at the University of Southern Maine. The program was assessed after its first year to determine how it influenced student satisfaction and learning. Like the previous research, the outcomes were positive (Johnson & Romanoff, 1999). In comparison to the control group, the students were more satisfied with the faculty and more willing to approach them with questions and concerns. The students also had higher grade point averages, earned more credits, and were more satisfied with their college experience than those in the control group. Additionally, the learning community residents appreciated the opportunity to easily make friends and were more likely to...
be involved in organized campus activities (Johnson & Romanoff, 1999).

Astin (1993) studied student outcomes and how college environments affected them. While his study did not specifically focus on residential learning communities, his findings support their methods. Astin found that the peer group had the biggest impact on student learning and development, with the faculty influence following as the second most influential. In fact, student-faculty interaction significantly impacted college GPA, degree attainment, graduating with honors, and enrollment in graduate or professional school (Astin, 1993). Thus, according to the findings, the emphasis that many residential learning communities put on faculty-student interaction is a significant factor in student success.

Research has proven that it is not only student learning that is positively impacted by living in a residential learning community, but also social behaviors such as drinking. Caitlyn Allen, Aaron Brower, and Chris Golde (2003) found “a significant decrease in alcohol abuse and its associated problems among students in planned residential LCs” (p. 149). In this case, it was the learning communities’ culture that provided the stimulus for change. Students had positive expectations for their interaction with each other, causing responsibility for behavior to develop within the community. Most notably, this responsibility developed “even when there was no explicit programming to counter alcohol use or misuse” (Allen, Brower, & Golde, 2003, p. 149). They noted that the disconnect between in-class life and out-of-class life can cause students to feel lonely or insignificant. These feelings lead many students to bond through the misuse of alcohol. However, the residential learning communities provided an alternative that was both socially and academically satisfying.

Financial Restrictions

While the previously mentioned studies focus primarily on complex models of residential learning communities, the reality is that these are not financially viable options for many universities; thus, that begs the question—do less involved residential learning communities have positive impacts as well? Martha Stassen (2003) conducted research on three different models of residential learning communities, each with a different mission and structure. She found:

Even in the least coordinated, most basic, learning community model, students show more positive outcomes (first semester GPA, retention, first-year experience) than nonlearning community students. The fact that simple structures that facilitate student interaction around academic work (even without coordinated faculty involvement) have a positive effect for students of all preparation levels provides encouragement to campus leaders with limited resources who are working to develop methods for improving the undergraduate educational experience on their campuses (p. 581).

Hence, a simple model is better than no model at all.
Challenges and Questions

While much research supports the benefits of residential learning communities, there are still those who question its conclusive effectiveness. Stassen (2003) identifies one weakness of students living in learning communities is that they “report few opportunities to interact with peers of a different race or ethnicity” (p. 607). She notes that this is due to the lack of diversity in learning community enrollments, and institutions need to find a way to prevent this problem (Stassen, 2003). Deron Boyles and Susan Talburt (2005) also challenge learning communities by assessing them through three lenses: (1) nostalgic legacies providing historical justification, (2) normative assumptions, and (3) their and their students’ experiences living in an LC. They conclude with three warnings. First, institutions should carefully assess which students would best benefit from living in a learning community as opposed to marketing them to all. Second, institutions should carefully consider the viability of administrative centralization of learning communities (especially when considering courses offered and their requirements). Finally, institutions need to be aware of what historical traces are affecting their learning community (Boyles & Talburt, 2005). They conclude by cautioning, “If FLCs [freshman learning communities] are to continue to proliferate nationally, educators must attend to the nuances of the assumptions underlying them, their potential effects on faculty and students, and ultimately FLCs themselves as democratic learning communities” (Boyles & Talburt, 2005, p. 233).

Questions and Considerations for Christian Higher Education

1. Does a residential learning community fit within the mission and culture of your university? Adrianna Kezar and Peter Eckel (2002) noted that a university should consider its culture before implementing large-scale changes. This points to the need for administrators to consider if a residential learning community is congruent with their institution’s culture prior to implementation, and, if so, determining what type or form of a residential learning community would be the best fit.

2. How can you best get faculty and other stakeholders on board? Benjamin Kulpa from George Fox University noted the importance of the Provost in gaining faculty support (personal communication, January 16, 2008). Residential learning communities illustrate a seamless learning environment and require a high level of collaboration between academic and student affairs.

3. What financial issues need to be considered? Karla Cunningham from Butler University explained the increase financial commitment residential learning communities require (personal communication, January 17, 2008). There are many issues to be considered, such as facilities,—not only adjustments to structure but also losing potential revenue-generating space—programming, stipends for faculty, meal plans, etc.
Even with these issues to consider, it is clear that residential learning communities have the capacity to positively impact student learning. With the rise in accountability in higher education, institutions need to find answers as to how to improve students’ learning. As the majority of the research testifies, residential learning communities are a favorable option. It has only taken a century, but Meiklejohn’s idea is finally beginning to take hold.

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