



THE COUNCIL OF
INDEPENDENT COLLEGES

INNOVATIONS IN TEACHING AND LEARNING
RESEARCH BRIEF 4

Living-Learning Communities and Independent Higher Education

*CIC Project on the
Future of Independent Higher Education*

October 2015

About the Project on the Future of Independent Higher Education

CIC's Project on the Future of Independent Higher Education is a multi-year initiative to identify and examine the forces that are most likely to affect the future of independent colleges and universities and to help member institutions prepare for both new challenges and new opportunities. With the guidance of a steering committee of college and university presidents (see page 17), the project considers potentially disruptive changes to American society and education and explores fresh approaches to higher education and new college business models. The project also examines the distinctive characteristics and missions of independent colleges that have enabled them to offer a high-quality education for so many years. The project is supported by the Lumina Foundation for Education and the TIAA-CREF Institute.

Other Reports in This Series

This Research Brief is the fourth in a series of short papers on innovations in pedagogy and curriculum that may enhance student learning at independent colleges and universities. Each brief includes a review of recent literature, examples of how the innovation has been adopted by CIC members, discussion questions for further exploration, and recommendations for additional reading. The principal author is Philip M. Katz, CIC's director of projects.

Research Brief 1: *Competency-Based Education* (April 2015)

Research Brief 2: *Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Education* (May 2015)

Research Brief 3: *Career Preparation and the Liberal Arts* (July 2015)

Research Briefs and other CIC research reports on the future of independent higher education can be downloaded from www.cic.edu/ResearchFuture.

© The Council of Independent Colleges, 2015

The Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) is an association of 755 nonprofit independent colleges and universities and higher education affiliates and organizations that has worked since 1956 to support college and university leadership, advance institutional excellence, and enhance public understanding of private higher education's contributions to society. CIC is the major national organization that focuses on providing services to leaders of independent colleges and universities as well as conferences, seminars, and other programs that help institutions improve educational quality, administrative and financial performance, and institutional visibility. CIC conducts the largest annual conferences of college and university presidents and chief academic officers. CIC also provides support to state fundraising associations that organize programs and generate contributions for private colleges and universities. The Council is headquartered at One Dupont Circle in Washington, DC. For more information, visit www.cic.edu.

Living-Learning Communities and Independent Higher Education

KEY POINTS:

- Living-learning communities combine curricular, co-curricular, and residential components of college life. They are a relatively new variation on the residential education that has been part of the undergraduate experience at America's independent colleges and universities for centuries.
- Research suggests that living-learning communities have a positive impact on academic performance, intellectual development, civic engagement, and the smooth transition of first-year students into college life, among other desirable student outcomes.
- Challenges to developing and maintaining effective living-learning programs include difficulties related to assessment, faculty participation, collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs, and program costs.
- Independent colleges and universities have developed living-learning communities for a wide range of student populations—first-year students, first-generation students, upper-class students with specific academic interests, even commuters—in a variety of residential settings from traditional dorms to yurts.

Introduction

Residential education has been part of the undergraduate experience at America's independent colleges and universities since the colonial era. The living-learning communities described in this research brief, however, are a relatively new phenomenon. These communities combine curricular, co-curricular, and residential components in a purposeful way to encourage collaboration among students, faculty members, and staff and thus enhance students' academic and social development. Despite a few earlier experiments, most of today's living-learning communities are the result of innovations that began in the 1980s in the wake of public criticism that challenged higher education to "increase community, respond to an ever more diverse student population, and expand access to postsecondary education as an option for all" (Dean and Dunn 2013; also see Spear et al. 2003, Penven et al. 2013).

Living-learning communities (LLCs for short) can be defined in simple spatial terms as "*residence hall-based* undergraduate programs with a particular topical or academic theme" (Inkelas and Soldner 2011, 1) or in simple functional terms as "structured programmatic interventions that bring students and faculty members together in meaningful ways and include students living together" (Dunn and Dean 2013, 12). Because living-learning communities are called by many other names as well, including living-learning programs, residential learning communities, living-learning centers, theme houses, and residential colleges, they can be difficult to define precisely; indeed, one influential typology includes 17 different categories of LLCs, broken down further into 41 types. These range from "a handful of students living together because they share common academic interests to a four-year, degree-granting, residential 'college-within-a-college'" (Brower and Inkelas 2010, 36; also see Inkelas and Soldner 2011).

One curricular model that is common especially for first-year students, involves paired or clustered courses. In this model, small groups of students are

enrolled in the same two (or sometimes more) courses, which usually are scheduled as a block but taught separately. One course will often be content-based and the other skill-based, such as a first-year seminar and a writing course. Other popular models include residence-based cohorts of students enrolled in larger courses or specific majors, which may involve student peers or faculty members as discussion leaders to help synthesize the subject matter; team-taught programs with "a cohort of students in two or more courses organized around an interdisciplinary theme"; and communities that closely integrate residential life with a coordinated curriculum that makes up all or most of a student's coursework (Price 2005, 6–7; Shapiro and Levine 1999). Living-learning communities almost always have a dedicated living space, may have faculty members and/or student affairs staff in residence, and usually provide opportunities for service learning and "ample...extracurricular activities, such as student-faculty retreats, theater productions, parties, and group dinners" (Price 2005, 7).

The number of living-learning communities in the United States and their distribution by institutional type are unknown. As of September 2015, the list of living-learning programs maintained by the Association of College and University Housing Officers-International (<http://rlc.acuho-i.org>), which is based on voluntary reports, included just 89 American campuses, with 11 CIC member institutions among them. A systematic but hardly comprehensive search of the internet revealed several dozen more CIC institutions with LLCs, a sampling of which is featured in this report. A survey conducted by the Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education in 2011 reported that nearly half of all private institutions had some kind of living-learning community program in place for first-year students, but that is just one student population—and the researchers cautioned that small private institutions were underrepresented in the sample (Stier 2014, 38; Barefoot and Koch 2011). The evidence is sufficient, however, to conclude

along with a pair of recent observers that “living-learning communities are commonplace” (Dunn and Dean 2013, 12).

Living-learning communities are a subset of intentional learning communities, not all of which include residential components but otherwise share similar goals. A recent dissertation by Mark M. Stier (2014), an experienced student affairs officer at a public liberal arts college, summarizes the common characteristics of learning communities as reflected in the extensive literature generated by researchers and practitioners since the 1980s. Stier concludes that effective learning communities are all designed to accomplish the following:

- 1) Create an environment where all participants are identified as contributing members;
- 2) Provide physical space for members to interact in transformative learning activities;
- 3) Create an environment conducive to new membership;
- 4) Develop a seamless learning experience between academics and out of classroom activities;
- 5) Build bridges between different disciplines; and
- 6) Allow for opportunities for developing complex thinking skills, social cognition, and creativity (Stier 2014, 40).

Drawing upon more than a decade of research by the National Study of Living-Learning Programs, Brower and Inkelas identify three characteristics of highly successful living-learning communities in particular: “a strong student affairs–academic affairs presence and partnership”; “clear learning objectives with strong academic focus throughout the program”; and the ability to “capitalize on community settings to create opportunities for learning wherever and whenever it occurs” (Brower and Inkelas 2010, 42).

Living-Learning Communities and Student Outcomes

Residential colleges have proven value. Even without the added value of LLCs, on-campus housing “provides a great deal of return to the students who choose to live in the residence halls,” with a demonstrated positive impact on degree attainment at undergraduate institutions of all sizes and types (McCuskey 2015). A half-century of education research also has revealed a clear link between student success—whether defined as student persistence and completion, cognitive development, or student engagement—and high-quality interactions between students and faculty members and among students themselves. LLCs are especially effective at encouraging such interactions (Brower and Inkelas 2010; Inkelas and Soldner 2011; McCuskey 2015).

Based on a detailed meta-analysis of research literature published between 1980 and 2010, Inkelas and associates conclude that participation in living-learning communities is associated with a range of desirable student outcomes including “academic performance, persistence, intellectual development, faculty and peer interaction, the transition to college, campus life, satisfaction, academic engagement and co-curricular involvement, attitudes and beliefs, self-efficacy, and psychosocial development” (Inkelas and Soldner 2011, 2; also see Brower and Inkelas 2010). Thus, compared with students who live in traditional college housing, students who participate in living-learning communities:

- Make smoother academic and social transitions to college;
- Report higher levels of informal faculty mentorship;
- Are more likely to apply critical thinking skills;
- Are more likely to apply knowledge in new settings;
- Are more committed to civic engagement;
- Are more likely to become peer mentors; and

- Binge drink less and experience fewer of the other negative effects of drinking.

Furthermore, undergraduate women who live in LLCs demonstrate a stronger sense of belonging, more academic self-confidence, and more professional self-confidence than their peers who live in traditional college housing. Some evidence suggests additional benefits for first-generation students in living-learning communities, but the research on this topic is inconclusive. (This summary of current research is drawn primarily from the two cited reports by Inkelas and associates; Conte 2015; and SILLP, “Research Findings.”)

Living-learning communities also *probably* contribute to student persistence, but Inkelas and Soldner (2011) warn that the research evidence for this outcome is too thin to be conclusive. Indeed, scholars disagree about the magnitude and statistical validity of the various effects listed in the previous paragraph. Because so much of the research is based on small case studies, it is hard to generalize the results or draw distinctions between different sectors of higher education; larger samples and more rigor would be required (Inkelas and Soldner 2011, 41–49; Kilgo, Sheets, and Pascarella 2015). Importantly, a new national research initiative is likely to provide more rigorous evidence for the effectiveness of LLCs. The Study of Integrated Living Learning Programs (SILLP), directed by Matthew J. Mayhew, associate professor of higher education at New York University, will begin collecting data from participating colleges and universities in spring 2016. SILLP incorporates an “empirically validated measure of college student experiences with living learning programs” and is designed to provide institutions with an assessment and benchmarking tool. The focus of the study is “the relationships between institutional structures, forms of student engagement, and student academic, intellectual, and social outcomes” (SILLP, “The Study”).

At present, it cannot be stated with certainty whether living-learning communities are more

pervasive or more effective at independent colleges and universities. In fact, according to the latest results from the National Survey of Student Engagement, first-year students at independent colleges and universities are slightly less likely to participate in learning communities than their peers at public institutions—but *more* likely to have participated in learning communities than their public peers by the time they graduate (Gonyea and Kinzie 2015). By their nature, however, small residential campuses tend to offer more opportunities for informal learning communities. This is one reason why the residential model of small liberal arts colleges has been so extensively mimicked by larger institutions, especially in the form of honors colleges (Kimball 2014). The explicit rationale has been to “humanize the scale of higher education and promote community” (Smith 2001)—that is, to recreate the learning environment afforded by most independent colleges and universities. In turn, independent liberal arts colleges have adopted freely from living-learning community models developed at other kinds of institutions with the understanding that these formal communities are a supplement to the “sense of belonging” that already characterizes many small residential institutions (Mount Holyoke College 2014; also see Penven et al. 2013, Spear et al. 2003).

The existing evidence of close student-faculty interactions and measurable gains in student outcomes fostered by LLCs may provide independent colleges and universities with specific examples of the importance of resource-intensive forms of educational experience to counteract recent public attacks on the cost-effectiveness and student benefits of residential education. Conservative political analyst Michael Barone sums up one line of criticism by noting that “The residential college model, with its bloated ranks of coddler/administrators, has become hugely expensive and increasingly dysfunctional. It’s overdue for significant downsizing” (Barone 2015; also see Lawler 2014). Other critics focus on “amenity-driven residence halls” or campus appurtenances such as climbing walls (Penven et al. 2013, 123–125;

Woodhouse 2015). In response, many leaders of independent institutions, such as Scott D. Miller, president of **Virginia Wesleyan College**, assert that “Student-centeredness is the currency of the small college, where value-added is defined not simply by student creature comforts but by access to their fellow creatures—devoted faculty and staff who proudly commit to students’ success in every arena of their lives” (Miller 2014). Living-learning communities provide particular evidence of this impact, though the evidence must be considered with caution.

Challenges

Major challenges to developing and sustaining living-learning communities include program assessment, faculty recruitment and retention, insufficient collaboration between academic and student affairs staff, and program costs.

The growth of living-learning communities since the 1980s has not always been matched by “calls to assess whether [such communities] could live up to their lofty reputations” (Inkelas and Soldner 2011, 17). The shortage of rigorous sector-wide assessments contributes to the tentativeness of some of the research findings listed above. Yet many individual colleges and universities successfully track the impact of living-learning communities on their own students (Lardner 2014), relying on institutional retention data, customized student surveys (Eck, Edge, and Stephenson 2007; Otterbein University 2013), and standard instruments for measuring student engagement or intellectual and social development, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (Kilgo, Sheets, and Pasarella 2015). Researchers associated with the National Resource Center for Learning Communities recommend the following essential best practices for assessing any undergraduate learning community:

- 1) Articulate agreed-upon learning community program goals;
- 2) Identify the purpose of assessment (e.g., summative or formative);

- 3) Employ qualitative and quantitative assessment methods for assessing the most critical outcomes for administrative and instructional team-member decision-making processes;
- 4) Employ indirect and direct measures of student learning; and
- 5) Ensure that assessment results are used by campus decision makers (Huerta and Hansen 2013).

A 2007 survey conducted by the National Study of Living-Learning Programs, which included both public and private institutions and remains the most comprehensive snapshot of living-learning communities to date, found that faculty involvement in LLC programs was “overall, quite low.... Twenty-three percent included no faculty participation whatsoever, and 64 percent utilized somewhere between one and three faculty members.” In many cases, faculty involvement was limited to teaching courses and academic advising, with student affairs staff members taking a much larger role in developing co-curricular and extracurricular activities (Brower and Inkelas 2010, 39). Team-teaching, a component of some but not all LLCs, frequently requires more time and effort from faculty members and can be implicitly discouraged by academic departments or divisions (CIC 2015, 2–3). Similarly, “because the most integrated learning communities require advance planning and intensive faculty collaboration, many professors and instructors (especially those with large teaching loads) may be reluctant to offer learning communities without commensurate course-release time or additional compensation” (Price 2005, 17). Even at many small, student-focused institutions, tenure and promotion policies do not encourage or reward faculty members who commit their time to living-learning communities; instead, participating faculty members are often motivated by their own sense of the importance of student-faculty interactions outside of the classroom (Kennedy 2011; Sriram et al. 2011).

The 2007 survey by the National Study of Living-Learning Programs found that nearly half (47 percent) of living-learning communities were managed by student affairs offices, while just 21 percent were directed by someone in an academic department. Another 13 percent were co-directed by representatives of academic affairs (which could be a staff member rather than a faculty member) and student affairs (Brower and Inkelas 2010). Although many researchers emphasize “the importance of partnerships between academic and student affairs units in order to operate effective [living-learning communities],” the literature offers surprisingly few examples of how institutions have bridged the different cultures, perspectives on students, assessment models, and budget priorities that academic and student affairs staff bring to their work (Inkelas and Soldner 2011, 18–19). When administrative responsibilities for LLCs are not clearly defined or well-coordinated, there can be poor alignment between curricular and co-curricular activities, ineffective assessment (Dunn and Dean 2013, 18–19), or disputes over operating budgets, as in the following scenario:

[Consider] the challenges of developing an integrated living-learning center within the structure of traditional budgets that call for money to flow through either academics or residential areas. If the “living units” are physically located above the “learning spaces” and the funding for maintenance of spaces follows traditional silos, whose budget pays for a shower leak that drips from the living space into the learning space? (Bickford and Wright 2006).

Additional costs are almost always a challenge for living-learning communities. Building or renovating residence halls that incorporate common spaces and learning spaces may be more expensive than constructing other student housing options (Penven et al. 2013, 123); customized residential experiences are more complicated to administer than standardized housing units; and living-learning

communities demand extra time from faculty and staff members. In addition, fees for co-curricular or extracurricular activities sometimes present a barrier to student participation in LLCs (Skurla and Sandvall 2015), and the rising cost of on-campus housing at independent colleges may make living-learning communities an unrealistic option for students who want to live off-campus or must live at home.

Limited access to living-learning communities, due to the expense, a lack of space, or other constraints on institutional resources, can have undesirable consequences. **Baylor University** (TX), for example, developed a first-year residential program for engineering students that significantly raised retention rates. This success became a selling point for the program, which was “quickly outgrown.” According to Carolyn Skurla and Emily Sandvall, faculty members in the Baylor engineering department, “the LLC experience has been beneficial to students, [but] this residential option is expensive, and space is limited. Not all students wishing to live in this community can be accommodated.” Some accepted students have enrolled in other colleges when they could not be accommodated. And “anecdotal evidence indicates that some non-LLC students feel disenfranchised because programming and [academic resources] that LLC students have access to are not available to them” (Skurla and Sandvall 2015). Based on this experience, Skurla and Sandvall call for more attention to the students who cannot be included in the living-learning community. Weighing the costs of living-learning communities against the benefits of alternative strategies for student engagement, some researchers reiterate that “simple structures that facilitate student interaction around academic work (even without coordinated faculty involvement [or co-residency]) have a positive effect for students,” which should “encourage ... campus leaders with limited resources who are working to develop methods for improving the undergraduate educational experience on their campuses” (Stassen 2003).

A final challenge to successful living-learning communities worth noting is the intensity of the residential experience itself. As one early critic of living-learning communities argued, residence halls “[should be] decompression chambers instead of pressure cookers” (Gordon 1974, 239). Living with other students in a college residence hall can help build a tremendous sense of belonging and foster a supportive network of peers (Spanierman et al. 2013), but it also can bring out less agreeable traits and feed interpersonal tensions. The intense peer interactions within living-learning communities may exacerbate both tendencies. Faculty members also can feel the pressure of LLCs, especially when they lack a clear understanding of program goals, student expectations, or boundaries between their roles as instructors, academic advisors, informal mentors, and members of a residential community (Kennedy 2011). Yet many faculty members also are energized when “the boundaries between academic and non-academic discussions become constructively blurred as they interact with all parts of a student’s life.” These experiences can have a positive impact on their teaching practices (Sriram et al. 2011, 46).

Examples of Innovations in Living-Learning Communities at Independent Colleges and Universities

CIC member institutions offer their undergraduate students an impressive range of living-learning communities.* These offerings include LLCs designed specifically for first-year students; residential communities built around a common theme or student interest, or around academic majors or other curriculum components; LLCs designed for special populations of students; and some programs that take advantage of unique residential settings to provide highly integrated learning experiences.

*Except where noted elsewhere, the descriptions of academic programs in this section are based on information from the institutions’ public websites.

First-year students are the most common beneficiaries of living-learning communities, and the increasing, systematic attention paid to the first-year experience in general since the 1980s has led to a steady expansion of LLCs as a programmatic offering (Laufgraben 2005; Zeller 2005). The First-Year Program at **St. Lawrence University** (NY) was an early innovator (Spear et al. 2003, 29–35) and is now promoted on the university’s website as “one of the oldest living-learning programs in the country, helping students make successful transitions from high school to college, intellectually and socially, since 1987.” During their first semester, all entering students in a class of about 600 are enrolled in small sections of an interdisciplinary, team-taught course that integrates a broad thematic topic with an “elaborate writing skills sequence” and “formal instruction in oral communication.” The same faculty members who teach this course also serve as the students’ academic advisors; faculty offices are located in the residence halls; and they collaborate with student affairs staff members (some of whom are in residence) to plan co-curricular activities related to the course themes. During the second semester, students enroll in follow-up seminars that bring together students from all the first-year residence halls while retaining the emphasis on written and oral skills. The students remain with the same academic advisors and student affairs staff members for the entire year. Student representatives from each living-learning community also participate in a first-year council designed to introduce the new college students to leadership roles and social opportunities across the institution.

The early development of living-learning communities at St. Lawrence directly inspired several other independent colleges and universities to implement their own LLCs for first-year students, including **St. John Fisher College** (NY). In the early 1990s, Fisher was faced with declining enrollments and a high first-year attrition rate. In response, the institution piloted an optional living-learning community with two, three, or four common courses

for small first-year cohorts. The pilot soon became a permanent, mandatory program for all entering students when it was observed that retention rates rose by as much as 9 percent (Spear et al. 2003, 24–28). The first-year program at Fisher has continued to evolve and now combines living-learning communities—anchored by a one-credit seminar taught in small residential cohorts—with learning communities of linked thematic and writing courses designed for first-year students who are not necessarily in the same housing units. The first-year retention rate remains very high at 88 percent (in 2013).

The first-year program at **Rollins College** (FL), introduced in 2003, shares many characteristics with the established programs at the two New York institutions, suggesting the development of a fairly standard model, at least for institutions that primarily attract students of traditional undergraduate age. The Rollins program began as a pilot for 20 percent of the entering class and expanded to half the first-year class within a few years. A rigorous assessment in 2007 demonstrated significant gains in student engagement and integration to college life, so participation is now required of all entering students (Eck, Edge, and Stephenson 2007). All students in a residential cohort take at least one seminar together and usually have a second shared course, all built around a common curricular theme that was introduced in 2014—“imagining the future.” The students “meet together in [the residence] hall to share reading, assignments, presentations, discussions, and other academic programming designed by their faculty and peer educators.” A faculty member is in residence, as are specially trained upper-class resident assistants who serve as “academic and social role models ... to better integrate and engage first-year students.”

First-year students are not the only target population for living-learning communities. Recognizing the positive impact of their first-year programs, a number of independent colleges and universities have developed LLCs for second-year students as well. In 2011, for example, **Assumption College** (MA) introduced SOPHIA, the Sophomore

Initiative at Assumption College. This initiative extended the work of a successful first-year LLC program called “Tagaste”—after the birthplace of St. Augustine—that also combines academic, social, and spiritual themes appropriate to the institution’s Augustinian religious heritage. SOPHIA is “specially designed to help students discover a deeper connection between their spiritual, personal, and professional lives.” The 24 participants, selected via competitive application, live in the same residence hall, take at least one shared course each semester, and participate in weekly meals, monthly outings with a core group of four faculty mentors, and a retreat each semester. The common courses are designed to explore themes related to religious and personal meaning of vocation, with subjects such as “Living Lives that Matter” and “Classics of Spiritual Direction.” The initiative also includes an optional capstone experience: a trip to Rome for two weeks of “intensive focus on community, reflection, and mentoring.” The SOPHIA program was inspired by Assumption’s participation in the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education (which is administered by CIC) and developed with the support of a grant from the Teagle Foundation (WoodBrooks 2015).

Looking even further beyond the first year of college, **Marietta College** (OH) announced the construction of a new residence hall in 2011 designed, in part, to help prepare “seniors for life after college” through career preparation courses and life skills taught in a residential setting (Marietta College 2011). This approach incorporates lessons learned from a first-year LLC program introduced in 2004 that has since evolved into learning communities with a tightly integrated curriculum but no co-residential requirement. The building reflects a new emphasis by Marietta’s president, Joseph Bruno, on “the transition students face at the end of their college life ... [which] only a few American colleges have a program in place to support” (Bruno 2012).

Living-learning communities at independent colleges and universities are organized around many

themes. The **University of Denver** (CO) offers LLCs for first-year students in five areas—creativity and entrepreneurship, environmental sustainability, international understanding, social justice, and wellness—as well as a multi-year program in leadership that includes residential components in both the first and sophomore years and supports a 24-credit interdisciplinary minor in leadership studies. **Baylor University** offers two LLCs for upper-class students, one focuses on entrepreneurship and the other on outdoor living. The Outdoor Adventure Living and Learning Center includes a common course each semester as well as social and pre-professional activities related to outdoor activities (Dunn and Dean 2013, 14–15). Academically, it serves as an entry point to the major in recreation and leisure services. It also is intended to address “social, service, leadership and spiritual aspects of a student’s life” by offering physical challenges and teaching life skills.

Calvin College (MI) offers a living-learning community for upper-class students that combines outdoor adventure with environmental stewardship, defined as “creation care” in keeping with the institution’s faith-based heritage and mission. It includes a common class on wilderness skills and a weekly group dinner. Many institutions have residential communities centered around language study, but the Jordan Family Language House at **Austin College** (TX) is notable for offering immersive instruction in five languages (to separate groups of students) under one roof. **Millikin University** (IL) has a multi-year living-learning community exclusively for nursing students. **Agnes Scott College** (GA) and **Cedar Crest College** (PA), both women’s colleges, have living-learning communities specifically designed to promote the success of women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Indeed, although research suggests that LLCs can be especially effective in attracting and retaining women in STEM majors, independent colleges and universities have not been as active as larger public institutions in developing living-learning programs in this area (Inkelas 2011).

Finally, many independent colleges and universities also offer themed residential halls that bring together students with shared academic or social interests. On most campuses, the focus of these communities is predefined by administrators, perhaps in consultation with faculty and student representatives, and they may remain located in the same residential spaces for years or even decades (for example, some foreign language houses). Themed residential halls emphasize “structured socializing opportunities,” as the website of **Augustana College** (IL) describes them, but may be integrated formally with the curriculum through common courses and faculty advisors. On other campuses, however, students compete for small residential spaces by submitting proposals for organizing themes to committees of faculty members and student affairs staff. The themes may run the gamut; at **Roger Williams University** (RI), recent themes included “Eco Geeks and Freaks of Nature” (sharing an interest in animal and environmental issues), “We Fit” (personal wellness), and “Skin We’re In” (diversity issues).

Some living-learning communities at independent colleges and universities have been developed for students with distinctive characteristics who may need additional support in the transition to college life. The First in the Family Community at **Pacific Lutheran University** (CA) is designed for first-generation students as a residential option. The 30 students have a resident director from the student affairs staff and two resident assistants, along with additional access to academic support and advising. The cohort also is enrolled in a common academic course, Psychology 113: Care and Education Planning, which helps the students “identify their values, interests, personal styles, and skills to discover majors and careers that they would find fulfilling.” The students participate in social activities designed to introduce them to the campus and the community and to build a strong peer support network, which research shows has a positive effect on first-generation student retention. The students also visit local high

schools, where the First in the Family Community is used to recruit future first-generation students. Several of the exemplary institutional efforts to retain first-generation college students supported by the CIC/Walmart College Success Awards program incorporated living-learning communities similar to Pacific Lutheran's (Strand 2013), but learning communities without a residential component seem to be a more common support strategy for first-generation students, many of whom are adult or commuter students.

One of the most distinctive populations for a living-learning community is the commuting students who enroll at **Cabrini College (PA)**, which is located in the Philadelphia suburbs. As the college website explains, a living-learning community "for commuter students sounds impossible, but Cabrini Cruisers is designed specifically for commuting first-year students to explore their talents and develop leadership skills." Although the students do not technically reside together, the program explicitly echoes all the elements of a successful living-learning community: an integrated curriculum of several common classes, a core group of faculty and staff advisors, two specially-trained "master learners" (upper-class students who usually live in the residence halls and serve as peer mentors), on-campus social activities, off-campus learning opportunities with other commuter students in the cohort, and a dedicated liaison to the Center for Student Engagement and Leadership. From an administrative perspective, Cabrini Cruisers is treated the same as the other seven LLCs on campus, under the direction of the director of the First-Year Experience and with the guidance of a Living and Learning Community Council involving faculty members, staff, and students. The success of all the living-learning communities at Cabrini has been supported by the development since 2007 of "an explicit, interconnected relationship" between four key offices at the institution: enrollment management, admissions, marketing and communications, and the first-year experience office (Gebauer et al., 2013, 2). Another factor in the success of the

living-learning programs at Cabrini has been active recruitment and professional development for faculty members who teach the interdisciplinary courses integrated within each community. The impact of all the LLCs at Cabrini has been a 12 percent increase in first-year student retention between 2008 and 2013 and "a sense of confidence that ... while hard to measure, is enacted across campus, through daily interactions with faculty, staff, and fellow students, from semester to semester" (Gebauer et al., 2013, 9).

To return to the first institutional example introduced in this report, **St. Lawrence University** may offer a conventional residential setting for its first-year living-learning communities, but it also takes full advantage of its geographic location to offer a unique residential setting for an intensive semester-long program devoted to interdisciplinary environmental studies: a yurt village called Arcadia in the middle of the 6 million-acre Adirondack State Park (York 2007; Spear et al. 2003, 33–34). Every fall, a dozen students and three members of the program staff live together for 16 weeks in this wilderness setting off the grid; additional faculty members stay two nights a week at the site. The students enroll in a full load of courses, often taught outdoors in half-day sessions, including the Natural History of the Adirondacks, Creative Expressions of Nature, and Land-Use Change in the Adirondacks, plus woodworking classes and field excursions. The program's website promises that "since all students take the same courses, talking about what you are learning in them [becomes] as natural as talking about the weather." Students also are encouraged to practice sustainability in a "materially simple, close-knit community," sharing daily chores and unplugging from digital technologies. The goal of the Adirondack Semester is "to enable students to study nature and human relationships with nature through academic classes enriched by direct experience." This is an extreme example of "curricular and co-curricular learning within a living environment" (Conte 2015, 93), but in 2014 the website *Complex.com* named Arcadia one of the "coolest dorms in America."

Questions to Consider

The leaders of independent colleges and universities may want to consider the following questions about designing and sustaining residential learning communities:

- Merrily Dunn and Laura Dean (2013) provide a list of questions to help plan new living-learning communities that are equally useful to reconsider existing programs: “Will the program be managed by student affairs or academic affairs? How will the intersection with student affairs, particularly student housing, be structured and sustained? What role will faculty members play? What role will student affairs/housing play? Who will be responsible for programmatic and staffing functions? How will communication be structured to ensure effectiveness? What is the funding source? What does the reporting structure, both academic and residential, look like? Finally, how will the outcomes be assessed?”
- How clearly can the institution define a role and expected outcomes for living-learning communities on campus? How do (or could) living-learning communities “fit within [the] institution’s mission, structures, processes, culture, and climate” (Taylor et al. 2003, 9)?
- Are formal living-learning communities necessary at small colleges and universities where many students may already live in campus housing? When Mount Holyoke College (MA), a women’s college with a distinguished record of residential education, introduced a pilot program of LLCs in 2014, the dean of students alluded to the competition between smaller private institutions and “larger schools [that] have been doing this for a long time because they want to emulate communities like ours. ... We’re creating a smaller area within the community so that it will be even more intimate” (Mount Holyoke College 2014). Can the introduction (or expansion) of living-learning communities make independent colleges and universities a more attractive option for students who are interested in a traditional residential college experience? Or can living-learning communities make such institutions seem too elitist to some potential students and their families?
- What is the best curricular structure for living-learning communities on a given campus? Should the living-learning communities include clustered courses, team-taught courses, an immersive residential experience, or other approaches? Each approach calls for “varying degrees of student and faculty engagement and curricular integration” (Laufgraben 2005) and requires different amounts of faculty coordination and support.
- As Penven and associates (2013) note, living-learning communities should provide an “infrastructure for substantial collaboration between academic and student affairs ... [which] can be a powerful pedagogical tool.” How can faculty members

and student affairs staff collaborate most effectively—or be encouraged to collaborate—on living-learning communities? What can senior academic leaders do to encourage and recognize effective living-learning communities and to reward the faculty and staff members who contribute to the effectiveness of these communities on campus?

- How many students can be accommodated in living-learning communities, given such constraining factors as student demographics, residency requirements, on-campus housing space, staffing, and support? How should students be selected for participation in living-learning communities? Should participation be voluntary?
- Are the residential buildings on campus appropriate for living-learning communities? Are they designed to encourage community interactions, with dedicated public spaces and, if desired, room for offices and residences for staff or faculty members? Some research suggests that the “current emphasis on suite or cluster design in residence halls,” which students tend to prefer to traditional dorms with long hallways in terms of personal living space and amenities, does not “necessarily [lead] to positive outcomes in terms of sense of community” (Devlin et al. 2008, 491). So, renovations or new construction designed to appeal to prospective students may be less conducive to living-learning communities once they enroll.

References

Note: All web links were working and accurate at the time of publication.

- Barefoot, Betsy, and Drew Koch. 2011. "Preliminary Findings from a National Survey of Efforts to Improve Undergraduate Student Success and Retention." Presentation at the National Conference on the First-Year Experience, Atlanta, GA, February 7. www.jngi.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/JNGINatSurvey-Prelim2011.pdf.
- Barone, Michael. 2015. "Colleges and Universities Have Grown Bloated and Dysfunctional." *American Enterprise Institute*, May 27. www.aei.org/publication/colleges-and-universities-have-grown-bloated-and-dysfunctional.
- Bickford, Deborah J., and David J. Wright. 2006. "Community: The Hidden Context for Learning." In *Learning Spaces*, edited by Diana G. Oblinger, 4.1-4.22. Washington, DC, and Boulder, CO: EDUCAUSE. <http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/pub7102d.pdf>.
- Brower, Aaron M., and Karen K. Inkelas. 2010. "Living-Learning Programs: One High-Impact Educational Practice We Now Know a Lot About." *Liberal Education* 96 (2): 36-43. www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/living-learning-programs-one-high-impact-educational-practice-we.
- Bruno, Joseph. 2012. "Engaging Our Resources." *Marietta.edu*, October 12. <http://news2.marietta.edu/node/9158>.
- CIC (Council of Independent Colleges). 2015. *Research Brief 2: Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Education*. Washington, DC: Council of Independent Colleges. www.cic.edu/Programs-and-Services/Programs/Documents/CICBrief2-Interdisciplinary.pdf.
- Conte, Sarah. 2015. "Learning Community Literature: Annotated Bibliography." *New Directions for Student Services*, no. 149 (Spring): 91-100. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/enhanced/doi/10.1002/ss.20120>.
- Devlin, Ann Sloan, et al. 2008. "Residence Hall Architecture and Sense of Community: Everything Old Is New Again." *Environment and Behavior* 40 (4): 487-521. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0013916507301128>.
- Eck, Jim C., Hoyt Edge, and Katherine Stephenson. 2007. "Investigating Types of Student Engagement through Living-Learning Communities: The Perspective from Rollins College." *Assessment Update: Progress, Trends, and Practices in Higher Education* 19 (3): 6-8.
- Gebauer, Richard D., et al. 2013. "Beyond Improved Retention: Building Value-Added Success on a Broad Foundation." *Learning Communities Research and Practice* 1(2): Article 4. <http://washingtoncenter.evergreen.edu/lcrjournal/vol1/iss2/4>.
- Gonyea, Robert M., and Jillian Kinzie. 2015. *Independent Colleges and Student Engagement: Descriptive Analysis by Institutional Type*. Washington, DC: Council of Independent Colleges. www.cic.edu/Programs-and-Services/Programs/Documents/CIC-NSSE-report.pdf.
- Gordon, S. Stewart. 1974. "Living and Learning in College." *The Journal of General Education* 25 (4): 235-245.
- Huerta, Juan Carlos, and Michele J. Hansen. 2013. "Learning Community Assessment 101—Best Practices." *Learning Communities Research and Practice* 1(1): Article 15. <http://washingtoncenter.evergreen.edu/lcrjournal/vol1/iss1/15>.
- Inkelas, Karen K. 2011. "Living-Learning Programs for Women in STEM." *New Directions in Institutional Research*, no. 152 (Winter): 27-37.
- Inkelas, Karen K., and Matthew Soldner. 2011. "Undergraduate Living-Learning Programs and Student Outcomes." In *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research* no. 26, edited by John C. Smart and Michael B. Paulsen, 1-55. New York, NY: Springer.

- Kennedy, Kirsten. 2011. "Understanding Faculty's Motivation to Interact with Students Outside of Class." *Journal of College and University Student Housing* 38 (1): 10-25.
- Kilgo, Cindy A., Jessica K. Ezell Sheets, and Ernest T. Pascarella. 2015. "The Link between High-Impact Practices and Student Learning: Some Longitudinal Evidence." *Higher Education* 69 (4): 509-525.
- Kimball, Bruce A. 2014. "Revising the Declension Narrative: Liberal Arts Colleges, Universities, and Honors Programs, 1870s-2010s." *Harvard Educational Review* 84 (2): 243-264.
- Lardner, Emily. 2014. "What Campuses Assess When They Assess Their Learning Community Programs: Selected Findings from a National Survey of Learning Community Programs." *Learning Communities Research and Practice* 2 (2): Article 2. <http://washingtoncenter.evergreen.edu/lcrjournal/vol2/iss2/2/>.
- Laufgraben, Jodi Levine. 2005. "Building Learning Communities for First-Year Students." In *Improving the First Year of College: Research and Practice*, edited by Robert S. Feldman, 195-218. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Lawler, Peter A. 2014. "What Residential Colleges Are For." *Postmodern Conservative*, December 10. www.nationalreview.com/postmodern-conservative/394374/what-residential-colleges-are-peter-augustine-lawler.
- McCuskey, Beth. 2015. "Why There Is Value in On-Campus Living." *The Conversation*, August 31. <http://theconversation.com/why-there-is-value-in-on-campus-living-45691/>.
- Marietta College. 2011. "New Residence Hall in the Works." *Trailblazer*, Winter issue. http://issuu.com/marietta_college/docs/tb-winter11.
- Miller, Scott D. 2014. "Why Small, Residential, Student-Centered Colleges Will Prevail." *Huffington Post*, December 9. www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-scott-d-miller/why-small-residential-stu_b_6296424.html.
- Mount Holyoke College. 2014. "Two Living-Learning Communities to Debut." *Mtholyoke.edu*, August 20. www.mtholyoke.edu/media/two-living-learning-communities-debut.
- Otterbein University. 2013. *Leadership Living-Learning Community: Executive Summary of Fall 2012 Survey Results*. Westerville, OH: Otterbein University. www.cic.edu/News-and-Publications/Multimedia-Library/CICConferencePresentations/2013%20CAO%20Institute/20131103-Living-Learning-Communities.pdf.
- Penven, James, et al. 2013. "The Past, Present, and Future of Residential Colleges: Looking Back at S. Stewart Gordon's 'Living and Learning in College.'" *The Journal of College and University Student Housing* 39 (2): 114-127.
- Price, Derek V. 2005. *Learning Communities and Student Success in Postsecondary Education: A Background Paper*. New York, NY: Manpower Demonstration Research Corp. www.mdrc.org/publications/418/full.pdf.
- Shapiro, Nancy S., and Jodi H. Levine. 1999. *Creating Learning Communities: A Practical Guide to Winning Support, Organizing for Change, and Implementing Programs*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- SILLP [Study of Integrated Living Learning Programs]. n.d. "Research Findings." *Sillp.org*. Accessed September 16, 2015. www.sillp.org/research-findings.html.
- . n.d. "The Study." *Sillp.org*. Accessed September 16, 2015. www.sillp.org/index.html.
- Smith, Barbara Leigh. 2001. "The Challenge of Learning Communities as a Growing National Movement." *Peer Review* 4 (1): 4-8. www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/challenge-learning-communities-growing-national-movement.
- Spanierman, Lisa B., et al. 2013. "Living Learning Communities and Students' Sense of Community and Belonging." *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice* 50 (3): 308-325.
- Spear, Karen, et al. 2003. *Learning Communities in Liberal Arts Colleges*. Olympia, WA: Washington Center at the Evergreen State College. <http://evergreen.edu/washingtoncenter/about/monographs/liberalarts.html>.
- Sriram, Rishi R., et al. 2011. "Students as Teachers: What Faculty Learn by Living on Campus." *Journal of College & University Student Housing* 38 (1): 40-55. http://works.bepress.com/rishi_sriram/5.

- Stassen, Martha L. A. 2003. "Student Outcomes: The Impact of Varying Living-Learning Community Models," *Research in Higher Education* 44 (5): 581-613.
- Stier, Mark M. 2014. "The Relationship between Living Learning Communities and Student Success on First-Year and Second-Year Students at the University of South Florida." Doctoral diss. University of South Florida.
<http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/5133>.
- Taylor, Kathe, William S. Moore, Jean MacGregor, and Jerri Lindblad. 2003. *Learning Community Research and Assessment: What We Know Now*. Olympia, WA: Washington Center at the Evergreen State College. <http://evergreen.edu/washingtoncenter/about/monographs/researchassessment.html>.
- WoodBrooks, Catherine. 2015. "The SOPHIA Program: Sophomore Initiative at Assumption College." Presentation at the annual meeting of the American College Personnel Association, March 7.
<http://convention.myacpa.org/tampa2015/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/SOPHIA-ACPAProgram1.pptx>.
- Woodhouse, Kellie. 2015. "Lazy Rivers and Student Debt." *Inside Higher Ed*, June 15.
www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/06/15/are-lazy-rivers-and-climbing-walls-driving-cost-college.
- York, Michelle. 2007. "Living the Wild Life at College." *New York Times*, November 7.
www.nytimes.com/2007/11/07/education/07adironack.html.
- Zeller, William J. 2005. "First-Year Student Living Environments." In *Challenging & Supporting the First-Year Student: A Handbook for Improving the First Year of College*, edited by M. Lee Upcraft, John N. Gardner, and Betsy O. Barefoot. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Aaron M. Brower and Karen K. Inkelas, “Living-Learning Programs: One High-Impact Educational Practice We Now Know a Lot About,” *Liberal Education* 96:2 (2010), 36–43, www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/living-learning-programs-one-high-impact-educational-practice-we. This article includes a summary of the research on student outcomes associated with living-learning communities and a typology of 17 different kinds of living-learning programs, based largely on Inkelas’s work as director of the National Study of Living-Learning Programs in the 2000s. A more detailed version of the typology and a technical analysis of the research literature can be found in Karen K. Inkelas and Matthew Soldner, “Undergraduate Living-Learning Programs and Student Outcomes,” in John C. Smart and Michael B. Paulsen, ed., *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research* no. 26 (New York, NY: Springer, 2011), 1–55. For more than a decade, Inkelas served as principal investigator of the National Study of Living-Learning Programs, a pioneering attempt to explore the structure and impact of living-learning communities.

Sara Conte, “Learning Community Literature: Annotated Bibliography,” *New Directions for Student Services* no. 149 (Spring 2015), 91–100, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/enhanced/doi/10.1002/ss.20120>. An excellent introduction to the best recent literature on learning communities, not limited to living-learning communities.

Merrily Dunn and Laura A. Dean, “Together We Can Live and Learn: Living-Learning Communities as Integrated Curricular Experiences,” *SCHOLE: A Journal of Leisure Studies and Recreation Education* 28:1 (2013), 11–23. This article provides a succinct overview of the history, implementation, and assessment of living-learning communities, with examples drawn from the field of recreation and leisure studies.

Richard D. Gebauer and associates, “Beyond Improved Retention: Building Value-Added Success on a Broad Foundation.” *Learning Communities Research and Practice* 1:2 (2013), <http://washingtoncenter.evergreen.edu/lcrpjournal/vol1/iss2/4>. This article provides a detailed look at the development of living-learning communities for first-year students at one small independent institution, Cabrini College in Pennsylvania, with a focus on institutional structures, professional development, and gains in student outcomes.

The Washington Center for Improving Undergraduate Education at The Evergreen State College in Washington (<http://evergreen.edu/washingtoncenter/resources/learningcommunities.html>) is the national resource center for learning communities, with a wealth of research, planning, and evaluation materials related to residential and non-residential learning communities.

Project on the Future of Independent Higher Education Steering Committee Members

Chris Kimball (Chair)
California Lutheran University

Steven C. Bahls
Augustana College (IL)

Ronald L. Carter
Johnson C. Smith University

Roger N. Casey
McDaniel College

Jeffrey R. Docking
Adrian College

Margaret L. Drugovich
Hartwick College

Elizabeth A. Fleming
Converse College

Thomas F. Flynn
Alvernia University

Christopher B. Howard
Hampden-Sydney College

Todd S. Hutton
Utica College

Walter M. Kimbrough
Dillard University

Larry D. Large
Oregon Alliance of Independent Colleges
and Universities

Paul J. LeBlanc
Southern New Hampshire University

Mary B. Marcy
Dominican University of California

John McCardell
Sewanee: The University of the South

Kevin M. Ross
Lynn University

Ed L. Schrader
Brenau University

Elizabeth J. Stroble
Webster University

Henry N. Tisdale
Claflin University

Edwin H. Welch
University of Charleston

John S. Wilson
Morehouse College

Cynthia Zane
Hilbert College