

# THE CURRICULAR APPROACH TO RESIDENTIAL EDUCATION: LESSONS FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS PRACTICE

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The curricular approach to student learning beyond the classroom is a strategic way to be proactive with designing, executing, and assessing student learning. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study is to understand the perceptions of one senior administrator in academic affairs, housing employees, and student leaders at one institution where a curricular approach was adopted. Research methods included semi-structured interviews, document analysis, focus groups, and photo elicitation. Findings from the study revealed that participants perceived the following benefits of adopting a curricular approach: improved clarity on the department's direction, better strategic standards and structures for staff, and an enhanced sense of voice for some staff. Participants perceived the downsides of adopting a curricular approach to be: not all student populations benefitted equally from a one-size-fits-all approach, physical space limitations, and lack of communication and clarity about the curricular approach language.

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Senior housing officers for many residential life units have chosen to adopt the curricular approach to learning beyond the classroom (Kerr, Tweedy, Edwards, & Kimmel, 2017), to enhance students' learning and development. The curricular approach to learning beyond the classroom (Kerr, Tweedy, Edwards, & Kimmel, 2017) involves a proactive 10-step approach for enhancing students' learning and growth by aligning the mission, goals, outcomes, and practices of a department to those of the respective institution (Edwards & Gardner, 2018; Kennedy, 2013; Kerr, Tweedy, Edwards, & Kimmel, 2017; Kerr & Tweedy, 2006; Shushok, Arcelus, Finger, & Kidd, 2013). Despite the popularity of the curricular approach to residential education, to date, there is no peer-reviewed research on the topic. Prior to 2017, writings on the curricular approach were limited to Kerr and Tweedy's (2006) foundational article describing the approach, and some related writings, including a blog (Brown, n.d.; Edwards & Gardner, 2015; Kennedy, 2013; Shushok, Arcelus, Finger, & Kidd, 2013). In 2017, Kerr, Tweedy, Edwards, and Kimmel provided a written record of much of the content delivered at the annual ACPA – College Student Educators International's Residential Curriculum Institutes over the past ten years. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study is to understand the perceptions of one senior administrator in academic affairs, housing employees, and student leaders at one institution where the curricular approach was implemented. Understanding the processes involved and the lived experiences of those designing and executing the curricular approach can enhance practice and organizational effectiveness of other residential life and student affairs units.

### History of Approaches to Residential Education

Distinguishing how the curricular approach differs from previous tactics to residential education is important for under-

standing how educational practices have changed over time. Previous approaches to residential education included, but were not limited to, the Intervention Strategies Model from Morrill, Hurst, and Oetting (1980), which guided the following three types of programming in the residence halls: (a) remedial programming; (b) preventive programming; and (c) developmental programming. Mosier's (1989) Health and Wellness Model, influenced programming along the following six dimensions: emotional, intellectual, physical, social, occupational, and spiritual development. Further, previously, residence hall programs were initiated based on the social desires of students and the interests of staff to fulfill programming requirements and standard practices adopted by residence life professionals (Blimling, 2010; Kennedy, 2013). Blimling (2015) asserted that traditional residence hall programming focused on students' interest and availability whereas the intentional goal-directed approach emphasized the priority of advancing student learning.

### Residential Curriculum History

The curricular approach to student learning beyond the class room is a more strategic way to be proactive with designing, executing, and assessing student learning. Kennedy (2013) claimed, "Of all the models examined, the residential curriculum is the emerging model in the field" (p. 68).

The curricular approach originated at the University of Delaware. Kathleen Kerr and Jim Tweedy authored *Beyond Seat Time and Student Satisfaction: A Curricular Approach to Residential Education* (2006), which featured the University of Delaware's journey of adopting a residential curriculum. Kerr and Tweedy (2006) described the observation of adopting the curricular approach as:

When we shifted our focus to what we teach, how we teach it, and how our students learn, combined with a consideration of every student's approach to and purposes for learning, and away from attendance statistics, we realized

that traditional programming as the primary educational vehicle was not effective...we had focused on exposure rather than learning. (pp. 10-11)

Kerr, Tweedy, Edwards, and Kimmel (2017) contrasted components of previous techniques for residential education, which they termed the Traditional Model with the Curriculum Model (CM). The curricular approach is undergirded by The Ten Essential Elements of a Curriculum Model for Learning Beyond the Classroom (10EECM) (Kerr, Tweedy, Edwards, & Kimmel, 2017):

1. Directly connected to institutional mission;
2. Learning goals and outcomes are derived from a defined educational priority;
3. Based on research and developmental theory;
4. Departmental learning outcomes drive development of educational strategies;
5. Traditional programs may be one type of strategy – but not the only one;
6. Student leaders and staff members play key roles in implementation but are not expected to be educational experts;
7. Represents developmentally sequenced learning;
8. Campus partners are identified and integrated into plans;
9. Plan is developed through a review process; and
10. Cycle of assessment for student learning and educational strategies.

The 10 Elements outline direction for the design, implementation, and assessment of the curricular approach to student learning. For example, the learning goals and outcomes should directly influence the development of educational strategies. Professional staff then create lesson plans or facilitation guides (terminology can vary) for execution. Past models for residential education did not provide this type of infrastructure to guide educational efforts. Res-

idence life professionals have discussed the application of these Elements at a national institute described next.

### **Annual ACPA Residential Curriculum Institute**

The professional association, ACPA – College Student Educator's International (ACPA), hosted the annual Residential Curriculum Institute (RCI) from 2007 to 2017. The purpose of the RCI was to provide an overview and training on the curricular approach to residential education and offered advanced sessions for institutions already using the curricular approach. The University of Delaware hosted the inaugural RCI in 2007 (Brown, n.d) and annual attendance at the RCIs has increased from 74 participants in 2007 to more than 300 participants in 2016 (Kerr, Tweedy, Edwards, & Kimmel, 2017). The ACPA's 2018 Institute on the Curricular Approach (ICA) became the next iteration of RCI and focused on how the curricular approach has permeated practice within divisions of student affairs and various functional areas in and beyond campus housing.

### **Methodology**

This qualitative study was designed as a descriptive case study (Yin, 2014) with data from one residence life unit at one institution in the United States. Yin (2014), defined a case study as a means to investigate phenomenon in a particular context. The embedded unit of analysis (Yin, 2014) was the staff members' experience with implementing the curricular approach.

The research question that guided this study was: What were participants' perceptions of adopting a curricular approach? The first sub-question was, what did the participants perceive as positive in this transition? The second sub-question was, what did the participants perceive as challenging in this transition? To capture, in rich detail, the types and nature of changes residence life staff experienced, a descriptive case study design was required to provide "an exten-

sive and in-depth” description of the phenomenon (Yin, 2014, p. 4).

**Context**

Given the research questions, and case study design, site selection was conducted using both purposeful sampling and criterion-based selection (Patton, 2002). Criteria for the site selection included adoption of the curricular approach for three years and the continued use of the curricular approach. According to Patton, purposeful sampling affords researchers the opportunity to study information-rich cases, which provides an in-depth understanding of the phenomena of interest. We identified one residence life department using criterion-based sampling based on our professional knowledge of institutions that had adopted the approach. The site for this study was a public, mid-sized, coeducational institution located in the Midwestern region of the United States. The pseudonym “Midtown State University” (MSU) was used to protect the identity of the institution and pseudonyms were used to protect the anonymity of the participants.

During phone calls from summer 2015,

through September 2015, we communicated with two key informants, Matthews (pseudonym), the senior housing officer and Thompson (pseudonym), a mid-level residence life professional. Yin (2014) described key informants as individuals who provide ongoing insight into the environment of study. We expressed interest in interviewing participants who served in the organization long enough to comment on what had changed, what they perceived as positive and challenging in the transition, and how residence life staff characterized the experience of adopting the curricular approach. Using these criteria, Matthews and Thompson selected professional, graduate, student staff, and Residence Hall Association RHA student leaders to participate in the study. Table 1 provides an overview of participants’ demographics, using pseudonyms for names and titles.

**Data Collection**

Yin (2014) explained the case study a means to investigate phenomenon in a particular context. To understand the lay-

	Professional Staff (12)	Graduate Staff (4)	Undergraduate Student Staff (7)	Undergraduate RHA Student Leader (7)
Pseudonyms	Dr. Blair, Sonya Matthews*, Violet Thompson*, Rae Jae, Sara Weber, Benedict, Carole, Ell, Lance, Steve, LaShay, Jim	Hunter, Logan, Rel-len, Taylor	Derek, Dylan, Ivory, Jay, Katie, Lloyd, Rose	Bethany, Beth, Jackie, Jamie, Keith, Rosa, Talia
Highest Degree Earned	2 PhD (1 person)	All M.A. in progress	All B.A. in progress	All B.A. in progress
Previously Attended or Worked at an Institution with a RC aligned with The 10EERC	3 – Yes, worked 1 – Yes, attended and worked 8 – Neither	1 – attended 1 – worked 1 – Do not know 1 – Neither	1 – Yes, attended 1 – Do not know 5 – Neither	2 – Yes, attended 3 – Do not know 2 – Neither
Previously Attended ACPA’s RCI	5 – Yes (once) 2 – Yes (more than 1) 5 – No	1 – Yes (once) 3 – No	1 – Yes (more than 1) 1 – “MSU” 5 – No	0 – Yes 7 – No

ers within this bounded context of one residence life department, the five data collection methods involved a site visit for ethnographic interviews (Roulston, 2011) with 16 staff inclusive of professional and graduate staff; two focus groups (Roulston, 2011) - one with 7 student staff and another with 7 RHA student leaders; document analysis (Yin, 2014); and photo and artifact collection (Banks, 2007; Glesne, 2011; Yin, 2014).

In-person interviews and focus groups allowed us to observe non-verbal cues while audio-recording verbal exchanges. Video conferencing software was used to interview a former professional staff member identified by the key informants. Interviews and focus groups were semi-structured to allow for participants to share freely about topics related to the research questions for the study.

### Triangulation and Analysis

A case study does not produce generalizability. Rather, it promotes the development of an adequate description, interpretation, and explanation of the case being studied (Glesne, 2011). Regarding the realities of a case study design, Yin (2014) emphasized Patton's (2002) and Roulston's (2010) notions of data triangulation such that convergence of data, or evidence, would strengthen the construct validity of the case study and other perceived measures of quality of research.

To pursue the claim of triangulation, themes were identified by employing multiple cycles of coding (Saldaña, 2013). Protocol coding (Saldaña, 2013), or the use of pre-determined topics such as theory or concepts, helped when listening to the audio recordings prior to conducting member checking. Next, we coded the salient points participants shared from an emic perspective, where the researcher learned about the specifics of participants' lives, or the case without a priori use of theory (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Yin, 2014). We employed Saldaña's (2013) descriptive coding, or

identifying a word or phrase in the data, in vivo coding, also referred to as, "literal coding," involves noting a direct quote in the data (Saldaña, 2013, p. 91). "Versus coding" (Saldaña, 2013) helped us to examine changes that were relevant to the research questions, such as identifying contrasting concepts. Finally, protocol coding (Saldaña, 2013) informed by Bolman & Deal's (2014) four frames (structural, human resources, political, and symbolic) was also utilized. After writing analytic memos as a strategy to enhance researcher credibility and trustworthiness of data (Saldaña, 2013), a second cycle of coding was undertaken (Saldaña, 2013).

Second cycle coding involved pattern coding, or labeling categories that offer meaning to how the data are organized. For example, we identified the category, "analogies," to label data for how some participants used analogies to describe and characterize their experience of adopting the curricular approach. For the document analysis, we used Saldaña's (2013) descriptive, in vivo, and versus coding. Merriam (2014) asserted documents could aid the researcher in understanding insights related to the research topic.

After conducting the two coding cycles, and creating a codebook, we identified patterns and then themes (Glesne, 2011; Saldaña, 2013) to help tell the story of participants' perspectives regarding their unit's shift to the curricular approach. For this stage of analysis, we used a spreadsheet, with one research question per tab to filter early categories for further engagement with the data. Ultimately, the results from filtering helped us to identify patterns, or themes, across multiple data sources (Saldaña, 2013; Yin, 2014). In conclusion, Yin (2014) and Saldaña (2013) proposed for themes to be compelling, the researcher must demonstrate the use of data triangulation and distinguish how content are saturated, or frequently shared, in the data.

## Trustworthiness

We employed several monitoring strategies, particularly given our subjectivity and positionality, to safeguard the trustworthiness and rigor of the data. This step limited researcher bias by focusing on how findings were congruent with reality. Monitoring strategies, or measures, helped address potential criticisms related to the study's validity (Lather, 1986). Member checking (Lather, 1986) involved sending the transcript from each respective interview to each interviewee or focus group participant to invite potential changes to the data, and allowed for elaboration on topics or any general content. Of the 30 participants, all but two RHA student leaders responded to multiple member checking attempts. We committed to frequently writing analytic memos, as described by Saldaña (2013), throughout the coding and analysis processes to fully disclose personal assumptions and biases, but also to critically engage with the data. Prolonged engagement with the data helped us to stay close to the participants' words and to optimize data triangulation (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2014) when presenting the findings.

## Findings

The findings featured are those we identified based on Yin (2014) and Saldaña's (2013) claim that the most compelling findings in a qualitative research study involve data that was noted in a minimum of three data sources. The findings reflect learning from all data sources, except the photo elicitation activity. Both the perceived positive and challenging aspects of adopting curricular approach will be shared below.

## Perceived Positives of Adopting the Curricular Approach

Participants described positive aspects associated with the process of adopting the curricular approach. Perceived positives of adopting the curricular approach included departmental direction, strategic standards and structures for staff, and sense of voice

for some staff. Representative data, primarily from the semi-structured interviews and focus groups, afford perspective to address the positive perceptions of adopting the curricular approach.

**Departmental direction.** Participants found that adopting the curricular approach resulted in a newfound sense of departmental direction as the residence life staff began to observe positive results from changes to educational philosophy and practice within the unit. Some participants explained that past initiatives in the department typically did not last longer than a year and that the culture was stagnant prior to adopting the curricular approach. For example, Benedict shared his belief that the department had a change in direction from previous efforts:

I was here when we started the RCI [referring to MSU's residential curriculum], and we're still doing it. I don't think anything as far as a departmental goal or any sort of curriculum has ever lasted more than about a year. So, the fact that we are still doing it and you know, it sits in its various forms, I think having that direction finally is definitely a positive thing.

Other participants, particularly RHA student leaders, spoke about the ways in which this newfound department direction unified efforts in the unit. For example, RHA student leaders reported that there was increased awareness of RHA's mission and priorities. Jamie, an RHA student leader, explained, "I just think that's the underlying curriculum in the minds of our professionals with their advising style." Similarly, she shared that student staff seem to be more involved in residents' lives, and she explained, "Before it was like, 'We're putting on this fun program.' Now they're focused, but they don't tell the students that's what's happening." An unidentified female in the RHA student leader focus group stated, "I think it's [RHA] becoming more understood because RHA is built into the curriculum. They [student staff] see RHA in their curriculum." Related to hall councils, Talia, an RHA student leader,

spoke positively about increased attention to hall council constitutions, "I also know on the hall council level that like they redid the hall council constitutions to make sure that students were being more intentional about what they were doing, giving like students in hall council more guidelines." Carole, as one of the advisors of RHA, shared the following about how the RHA student leaders' efforts were influenced by the residential curriculum, "RHA was able to better focus some of the things that they did instead of just saying let's just have a pizza party. So, I think it gave them a little more direction and a little bit more solid footing."

Others commented that adopting the curricular approach contributed to a departmental culture of unity and cohesiveness around the notion of student and staff learning. For example, Taylor, a graduate hall coordinator, conveyed:

I believe we are changing the culture. We are creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for our students to succeed. We have looked at the student demographic at [MSU] and established the needs of our students. We have then looked at what we want our students to learn from living in the residence halls. We have shifted the way everyone in the department thinks. We have moved from a "Make sure your residents are doing something to stay active and involved" to "we need to be intentional about how we are reaching our students and focus on what we want our students to learn from these interactions."

Steve, a mid-level professional, in speaking about the positive effects of adopting the curricular approach to further the department's mission stated, "We are going to try to do something that's nationally being adopted at a quick rate. So, I really enjoy that." He added, "We're trying to think harder about what we want to do with our students. How we want to... plan out things to help them succeed." Finally, Steve shared, "We're not just another department

that houses people."

**Strategic standards and structures for staff.** Participants found that adopting the curricular approach also positively impacted the unit by providing structure and standards for employees. Jae, an assistant director and member of the central leadership team, articulated that the curricular approach, and written resources, provided structure for residence life staff. When asked specifically what was positive about transitioning to the residential curriculum, he said, "We are in a day and age where individuals need structure. Student staff need structure. Our [graduate hall coordinators] and even our [coordinators of residence life] need structure. And so, this is kind of spelling out a little bit more." Jae also expressed, "The structure was something that the new staff really liked. Our millennial student staff members want to know exactly what is expected of them. Taking a curricular approach to what we do allows for that structure."

Nearly all participants, at all levels, conveyed that the Residential Curriculum Playbook (RCP), a comprehensive resource manual compiled to help housing staff implement the curricular approach, provided positive structure and resources for the student staff members' efforts to foster residential environments that were aligned with the curricular approach. Specifically, participants valued the RCP for its content of dates, deadlines, and expectations. The most common sentiment among the student staff was that the RCP was a helpful tool to communicate standards. Jay, a student staff member, concurred, "I'm sure most of us can agree that the curriculum [RCP] has helped out... because I love it, especially at a glance, and it has week-by-week like what you should be focusing on in this particular week." He added, "Now that we can all be on the same ship and on the same page, we understand better. It's more of a structure now. I like it." Dylan, a student staff member, articulated that the RCP afforded helpful structure for himself and some of his friends on staff,

and he expressed, "Most people who had been on staff before were excited that there was a little bit more structure and clarity on what exactly we were supposed to be doing with our jobs."

Similarly, Logan, a graduate hall coordinator, articulated, "Definitely from student staff perspective and talking to them, they feel much more prepared this year, especially giving them the [RCP]. They know what is expected of them. They know when they need to be doing things." He added that returning student staff have had a "better experience this year than last year," and he reported, "...now that we've kind of solidified and created some things that allow them to have those interactions with them." Rellen, a peer, said, "...the standards...if you look at the lesson plans, the lesson plans are detailed." When speaking about the student staff she claimed, "The staff appreciate, and they know the hard work that went into that. And in a meeting we talked about the curriculum, and we allowed them to provide open feedback...And they all love the idea of having the book." Dr. Blair, a senior administrator at the institution, effectively summarizes how the RCP was a positive source of intentionality and structure for MSU's residence life staff when adopting the curricular approach:

With the curriculum, the intentionality is, there's actually a structure. There is some guiding principles and notions about what we're trying to do here, and... then how that comes together in some practical ways in terms of what we are actually going to be doing, when are we going to be doing, and how are we going to be doing it. So how are we using the bulletin board spaces, for example, as educational opportunity? How are we using some of our lounge space to have activities; or within the broader community, facility spaces and classrooms downstairs? Those sorts of things would be examples of more of the intentionality. People know what's coming, how it's coming, and how it links to

learning outcomes.

Finally, some participants expressed that the curricular approach helped the residence life department to be more proactive with efforts by using learning outcomes, (e.g., translating concepts of the curricular approach to residence hall front desk operations).

**Sense of voice.** Several professional and graduate staff participants expressed they were able to provide feedback and have "a voice" in developing resources. For example, Steve said, "So, every single iteration of this group, I've been involved with it, whether that's been creating the educational priorities, sticking around, I feel that my decision making is trusted." Weber, an assistant director who joined the organization in August 2015, echoed the importance of involving multiple people involved in the process, "I think, from my perspective, what I liked about that, though, and having seen a different curriculum being created [at her previous institution], that there was a lot more broad involvement from a variety of levels."

Another positive associated with adopting the curricular approach noted by professional and graduate staff members was that communication with and from central leadership had improved. Rellen stated that some of questions that central leadership staff asked were, "What do you think of this? What did you do at your old institution? Where do you think we're lacking? Where do you think that we're doing awesome? Where do you think we can improve?" Similarly, Logan, a graduate hall coordinator, spoke positively about communication within the department, "Each month we give feedback to central office, and, they in turn, use that for the future and knowing what works and what doesn't. And so, we can constantly start shaping what the next phase of the curriculum looks like." Notably, these perspectives contrast with messages from the student staff and RHA leader students; the students expressed concerns with providing feedback. Examples of student leaders' con-

cerns are featured below within content on perceived challenges of adopting the curricular approach.

### **Perceived Challenges of Adopting the Curricular Approach**

The process of adopting the curricular approach also challenged participants. Perceived challenges of adopting the curricular approach included concerns about using one approach to meet the needs of diverse student populations, physical space limitations, and language. Finally, data on communication channels in the organization revealed representative data on the delayed distribution of the RCP and sense of voice.

**Standardization of the curricular approach.** Participants described one challenge as attempting to use a single framework to meet the needs of diverse student populations, including first-time first-year students, upper-level, and graduate students with families. This challenge was mentioned despite there being three versions of the RCP: first-year, sophomore, and upper-class. The professional, graduate, and student staff conveyed this challenge using varied examples. Ivory, a student staff member, mentioned, "...[we] are having a hard time implementing anything that's in there [RCP] because it doesn't fit with the residents we have there, being grad students, families, single students that are going through their junior or senior year." A student staff member, in an anonymous letter wrote, "Members of the [apartment] community come to the [apartments] to get away from the typical 'RA infested communities.' Graduate students, families, doctoral students, upperclassmen, and international students create a very large and diverse community." Rellen explained that there are cultural differences involved. For example, "A lot of our Saudi Arabian population there, if the male is not present, the female cannot answer the door." She also described that graduate students are in their labs on campus late into the night, which makes it challenging for student staff members to initiate

conversations with this population.

Three staff members mentioned the physical space challenges associated with implementing the residential curriculum. For example, Hunter, a graduate hall coordinator, stated, "The curriculum doesn't necessarily acknowledge that some communities only have one bulletin board. Some have four. Some have two small ones. Some have all these different things...and there's not a consistent [standard]." Hunter added, "It's not realistic to have a crossword puzzle with your students' names if you're in an upper-classmen building and they're never going to walk by that bulletin board. That lesson plan may not be the best for your community." This comment about a lesson plan, or facilitation guide, relates to understanding the structure of the curricular approach and how learning goals and outcomes cascade into educational strategies that can be specifically tailored to diverse student populations.

**Challenges with language.** The student staff focus group participants described perceived challenges with how language, such as word choice, was structured within the RCP. The overall sentiment was that the language included in lesson plans, for example, was perceived as jargon or unfamiliar to the student staff. Derek, stated, "I'm a business major. And the language used within the curriculum is not always clear because I don't really have any student affairs and higher education training." Katie shared that many of her peers do not understand the difference between learning goals and learning outcomes. Lloyd, agreeing with Derek and Katie, reported, "I am lucky enough to be best friends with an education major who specializes in writing lesson plans, and reading lesson plans, and evaluating lesson plans and with assessment." He added, "Without that knowledge coming into this year, I would feel completely lost with reading the curriculum itself." Lance, a coordinator of residence life, mentioned that some student staff "feel like someone with a Master's degree cannot speak the language

of the students.”

**Communication channels.** Two aspects of communication seemed to be challenging for most participants: the delayed distribution of the RCP to student staff and the other was participants’ sense of voice. However, these topics were challenging for participants in different ways depending on their position level.

**Delayed distribution of RCP.** Professional, graduate, and student staff members, and RHA student leaders stated that the delay in distributing the printed RCP to the student staff members was a challenge. Thus, the student staff members could not visualize the content. Matthews explained:

We ran into an issue because our printer was running behind schedule. We printed them about two days before [graduate hall coordinator] training on curriculum happened. And then the students got theirs, the color versions, towards the end of training.

Weber articulated that the delay in distributing the RCP was a “physical boundary” and challenging due to student staff members’ diverse learning styles, stating, “we wanted to refer to stuff but for them to have it, see it, and be able to live it a bit more and start some of the planning process by being able to see it in front of them.” Lloyd, a student staff member, offered a summative quote with which his peers seemed to agree, “We did not have them [RCP] yet. So, that was a hindrance, I think, first of all, because we didn’t get them until after residents moved in, even though we were here for three weeks of training.”

RHA student leaders reported that graduate hall coordinators, as hall council advisors, lacked details related to hall council or RHA because of the delay in distributing the RCP to staff. Keith, a RHA student leader, said, “I think a challenge that I kind of noticed was during the retreat. I don’t think the curriculum was quite finalized 100 percent. Because I know there was talk about it.” Keith added a perceived challenge was that graduate hall coordinators would need

to share the details with the community advisors and residential academic ambassadors, which “might have been kind of rushing them.” Talia, a RHA student leader, said, “I know that, in general, the student staff, it’s caused a lot of conflict just because it seems like it’s very...just the way that it was presented to them, people didn’t take it well.”

**Sense of voice.** Some participants reported not having a sense of voice, or being unable to provide feedback. This sentiment is in contrast with what some participants shared as positive perceptions of departmental communication when adopting the curricular approach.

Approximately half of the graduate hall coordinators, and most of the student staff members, reported that perceptions about hierarchy within the organization made it challenging to have a voice with the curricular approach. Taylor, a graduate hall coordinator, indicated that she was able to provide feedback about the curriculum during one-on-one meetings with her supervisor, but that, “there’s no guarantee that it’s [her feedback] is going to make it to the leadership team.” Hunter, her peer, spoke about student staff, “We’re making decisions about student staffs’ jobs and how they’re going to be interacting with residents... yet they’re not here in the conversation.” In fact, one of the most discussed topics among the student staff focus group participants was the notion of what Lloyd described as a “top-down approach.” He stated, “I think that it should be the other way around. It should be much more bottom-up based instead of top-down. Because the top-down approach hasn’t worked for a couple years, and it’s still continuing not to work.” Katie, a student staff member, reported, “I also think that there have been times where our feedback might actually reach head staff, but it’s not exactly what we say because it goes through so many people that it gets misinterpreted. It gets a little bit changed.” Derek provided a summative quote, “...to the best of my knowledge, there was no stu-

dent interaction below the graduate level.” He shared, “Then we heard about it during winter training when they said, “Hey, we have a curriculum. Follow the lesson plan, and do the assessment.”

Although the RHA student leaders did not use the phrase “top-down,” they expressed similar concerns as the student staff members reported. RHA student leaders perceived that neither student staff nor RHA leaders had a voice with the residential curriculum. Beth explained, “I think it was almost a little bit abrupt ... I feel like it would have been beneficial if they kind of like had asked the opinion of [community advisors] and [academic peer ambassadors].” For example, she added, “What do you guys think about this transition?” I feel like it was just a, ‘Here you go. Here’s our new way of doing everything.” Rosa, an RHA student leader, echoed her fellow leaders’ opinions: “From an RHA perspective, I think that student staff didn’t get a ton of preparation, but they got way more preparation on the residential curriculum than RHA did.”

### **Discussion and Implications for Practice**

As the first empirical research published on the curricular approach to student learning in student affairs, this study contributes to understanding how residence life departments and student affairs units can enhance the implementation of curricular approaches and/or change initiatives in general. As this study was conducted directly in the context of a residence life department, the primary focus of the following discussion and implications will relate to that context. However, given the evolution of ACPA’s RCI to now the ICA reflects a need to consider broader application within student affairs.

### **Residence Life Departments**

Staff in residence life departments that adopted or are considering adopting the curricular approach to student learning could find the following implications for practice helpful. The curricular approach can be most

impactful to students and constituents when all staff and student leaders of a housing and residence life department are included in discussions. When all members of the team believe they have a voice about the educational outcomes, goals, and strategies for what students should learn by living in a residence hall, they potentially become more invested in the delivery of learning experiences for their peers and also gain valuable design experience. Further, residence life professional and graduate staff members should be cautious to not misinterpret the spirit of Element 6, which calls for situating, not disregarding, the roles of all staff members. Student staff and student leaders may be better equipped to articulate and act on an organizational mission in their chosen careers based on the knowledge, skills, and abilities professionals nurtured through the adoption of the curricular approach. Ultimately, professionals should teach students and student staff members about learning outcomes and research findings in ways that can inspire and engage them rather making them feel excluded or not qualified to engage in these discussions.

Related to the findings on departmental direction and having effective structures for a curricular approach, senior housing officers should evaluate staff hiring and retention practices, allocation of resources such as funds and staff time, and address gaps in staff training and development for staff at all levels of the organization. Staffing levels, structures, and accountability measures must be considered when adopting a paradigm change and should be communicated to staff prior to instituting changes. Forums for staff at all levels to express joys, challenges, and ideas related to adopting the curriculum approach or any new endeavor signify a culture of care, growth, and learning. Additionally, just as some institutions like MSU hosted on-site workshops similar to ACPA’s RCI which were led by consultants who had served on the RCI faculty, housing and residence life departments should consider utilizing the expertise of campus

faculty, particularly in the business or organizational studies departments, to offer advice on the organizational implications of adopting the curricular approach.

Staff members in residence life departments frequently turnover. Consequently, when staff turnover occurs, roles and structures associated with staffing and executing efforts, within the organization change. Senior housing officers, and mid-level staff members who are responsible for staff training and development, need to proactively plan for continuing education on the curricular approach. Sharing this content is a way to demonstrate having and communicating departmental direction, a positive aspect participants voiced. For example, a year-long training and on-going development plan, for professional, graduate, and student staff members may be designed to mirror the curricular approach. Staff competencies, inclusive of competencies tailored to responsibilities and duties within a specific housing and residence life department, should influence outcomes for training and development. The content of the residential curriculum should also be infused into all facets of onboarding and training new staff members. Senior housing officers, and mid-level managers, must clearly and consistently communicate expectations for implementing the curricular approach and regularly assess their efforts.

### **Communication of Change Initiatives**

Communicating change to a broad array of constituents is a challenge that almost all student affairs professionals frequently face in their daily work lives. Adopting the curricular approach to creating change in beyond-the-classroom settings provides structure that participants in this study appreciated. Human beings tend to prefer certainty; however, simplicity and certainty are not always possible. The curricular approach in student affairs settings provides step-by-step instructions and an infrastructure that many employees find comforting. Knowledge of student development theory

can be used to engage students in taking risks, learning from mistakes, and measuring progress towards completing short- and long-term goals.

Although The 10EERC are undergirded by scholarly work, professionals ought to challenge preconceived notions of whether students may be competent to engage in dialogues about learning. Kerr, Tweedy, Edwards, and Kimmel (2017) wrote, "A fundamental tenet of the CM [Curriculum Model] is that students are not educational content and pedagogy experts, so campus educational experts should not give them the responsibility of designing learning experiences without proper support and guidance" (p. 28). However, students can be important partners in helping to ensure that materials related to the curricular approach are written in such a way that student leaders can understand and implement the content.

Findings from this study also serve as an important reminder to student affairs professionals of developing and using intentional plans to educate newcomers to the organization subsequent to adoption of the curricular approach. Staffing changes, particularly within entry-level roles, are inevitable and often unpredictable. Therefore, as part of the onboarding process, new employees should be taught why the curricular approach has been adopted and how it continues to evolve over time.

In conclusion, the findings of the present study relate to a need for increased communication with housing and residence life organizations, and reflect an opportunity to designate practices and timeframes for facilitating individual, group, and written feedback about the curricular approach for all levels of staff within the organization. Moreover, the curricular approach to residential education is an opportunity to build a shared community of practice among educators who are committed to enhancing students' learning and development in diverse areas of student affairs. Communication, a central aspect of how human beings interact and interpret the world, must be considered

when exploring philosophies and organizational practice. The adage “perception is one’s reality” can be useful to remember as staff within organizations often have needs and wants that do not always correspond to managers’ or change agents’ vision. What is conceptualized is not always communicated, or communicated well, when changes are envisioned or implemented in organizations. Ultimately, communication in student affairs functional areas is often implicated by considerations such as honoring confidentiality, applying knowledge in the aggregate of student development theory, and situating roles and responsibilities in organizational practice.

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