



Thriving in Residential Learning Communities: The Role of Faculty Involvement

Warren Chiang, Stanford University; Jennifer Eidum, Elon University; Ghada Endick, Rutgers University; Lara Lomicka Anderson, The University of South Carolina; Jill Stratton, Washington University in St. Louis

Background

With higher faculty-student interaction, the following areas also show positive outcomes:

- Grade point average (Anaya & Cole, 2001)
- Persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977)
- Self reports of learning (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004)
- Social integration (Schwitzer et al., 1999)
- Critical thinking, cognitive complexity, appreciation for liberal learning (Inkelas, et al., 2008)

The quality of interaction is important – more focused interaction can have a higher impact on knowledge acquisition and skill development (Kuh & Hu, 2001)

Common Forms of Faculty Involvement:

- **Intellectual Leaders:** Principals, Heads, Directors, Senior Fellows
- **Mentors/Role Models:** Fellows, Faculty Associates, Affiliates
- **Faculty plan or participate in a variety of activities:** Attend dinners, film series, lecture series, book clubs; lead museum trips, study abroad, recreational activities, community service projects; hold office hours and advise students.

The Thriving Quotient

The Thriving Quotient (Schreiner, 2010) is a survey that measures the academic, social, and psychological aspects of a student's college experience that are the most predictive of academic success, institutional fit, satisfaction with college, and ultimately graduation. It encompasses the following dimensions of student success:

- **Engaged Learning:** focused attention in the learning process; making meaning in and outside the class
- **Academic Determination:** self-regulated learning, effort, time management and goal-directedness
- **Positive Perspective:** students' optimism
- **Social Connectedness:** positive relationships and friendships on and off campus
- **Diverse Citizenship:** appreciation of differences, making contributions to a community

Research Methodology

We used two different survey instruments to conduct multi-institutional research at 4 universities:

- We created an institutional mapping survey of residential learning communities (RLCs), utilizing Inkelas and her team's (2007; 2008) typology for living learning program themes and collected information on RLC components to map the RLCs at each institution.
- We used Schreiner's Thriving Quotient (2010) to gather quantitative data about students' experiences in those RLCs, along with a few short answer questions to gather qualitative supporting data.

This project was supported by the 2017-2019 Research Seminar on Residential Learning Communities as a High-Impact Practice, a multi-institutional research initiative hosted by Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning (www.CenterForEngagedLearning.org).

INSTITUTIONAL PROFILES

Institution Name	Institution Type	Number of students	# 1st Yr Students	1st Year Students Required to live on campus?	Number of RLCs	Live-in Faculty in RLCs	Faculty Involvement (not live-in)
Elon University	Mid-level Private	6,196	1,698	Yes	32	8	70
WashU	Mid-level Private, R1	14,049	1,812	Yes	10	11	50
The U of South Carolina	Large Public, R1	34,731	5,851	Yes	21	1	7
Rutgers University	Large Public, R1	43,354	6,602	No	16	1	16

The Faculty Factor

The Faculty Factor is related to three mapping variables:

- Presence of a live in faculty (yes/no)
- Faculty incentives for RLC involvement (none, limited, significant)
- Overall faculty involvement rating (none, low, middle, high)

Results

The faculty factor showed statistically significant benefits to students living in RLCs in the following areas:

- Engaged Learning
- Academic Determination
- Diverse Citizenship

The faculty factor showed neither positive nor negative results for social connectedness, positive perspective, or overall thriving.

In contrast, the presence of residentially-linked courses shows neither positive or negative results in any of the components of thriving or overall thriving.



Examples of Faculty Involvement on our Campuses

Elon University:

- Monthly dinners where students engage with faculty discussants on topics related to global engagement
- Monthly international film series with faculty-led conversation
- Sunday bagel brunches within the RLC at the faculty apartment



University of South Carolina:

- Weekly evening office hours where students engage in discussion with faculty principal on a variety of topics
- Monthly cookie delivery to all residents to assess their well-being
- Monthly international-themed home cooked meals and game nights at the faculty apartment
- Short term study abroad to Morocco and critical inquiry course for residents

Implications for RLCs

Any faculty involvement matters, especially if it's regular and consistent.

- This affirms research by Inkelas, Jessup-Anger, Benjamin, Wawrzynski (2018) that faculty presence is important
- Important for institutions to have different types of faculty involvement, as faculty have different pressures, motivations, and work-life balance.
- There are a variety of incentives for faculty involvement: ranging from apartments and course releases to tenure & promotion support and institutional service (takeaway: you don't have to spend a ton of money)

This study indicates that the **presence of faculty in residential learning communities** may have more of an impact than teaching residentially-linked courses.

