Elon Statement on
RESIDENTIAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

as a High-Impact Practice

2019

Twenty scholars participated in the Center for Engaged Learning research seminar on Residential Learning Communities (RLCs) as a High Impact Practice from 2017-2019. The seminar facilitated multi-institutional research examining the environments and outcomes of RLCs, with the aim of understanding how to promote evidence-based, high quality RLCs. Research seminar teams addressed gaps in the literature and contributed to understanding the richness of RLCs as a space for integrating student learning and development.

Research participants identified a number of frameworks that provide a strong foundation for the findings emerging out of empirical studies on RLCs. This statement summarizes and synthesizes the seminar's discussions about Residential Learning Communities as a High-Impact Practice, addressing key terms, theoretical foundations, enabling practices, and working principles. In addition, this statement discusses assessment of RLC student outcomes and the ways these outcomes can be achieved.

ELON UNIVERSITY | CENTER FOR Engaged Learning

TERMS

Learning Community

Considered a High-Impact Practice, learning communities are defined by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) as curricular structures in which students co-enroll in at least two courses, sometimes focused on a common topic (Kuh, 2008). Learning communities are often interdisciplinary, offering opportunities for integration of concepts from different disciplines. Learning communities might also incorporate co-curricular activities, such as service learning (Kuh, 2008). The Learning Communities Association describes learning communities as "…represent[ing] an educational approach that involves the integration of engaged curricular and co-curricular learning and emphasizes relationship and community building among faculty or staff and a cohort of students in a rich learning environment" (http://www.lcassociation.org/about-us.html).

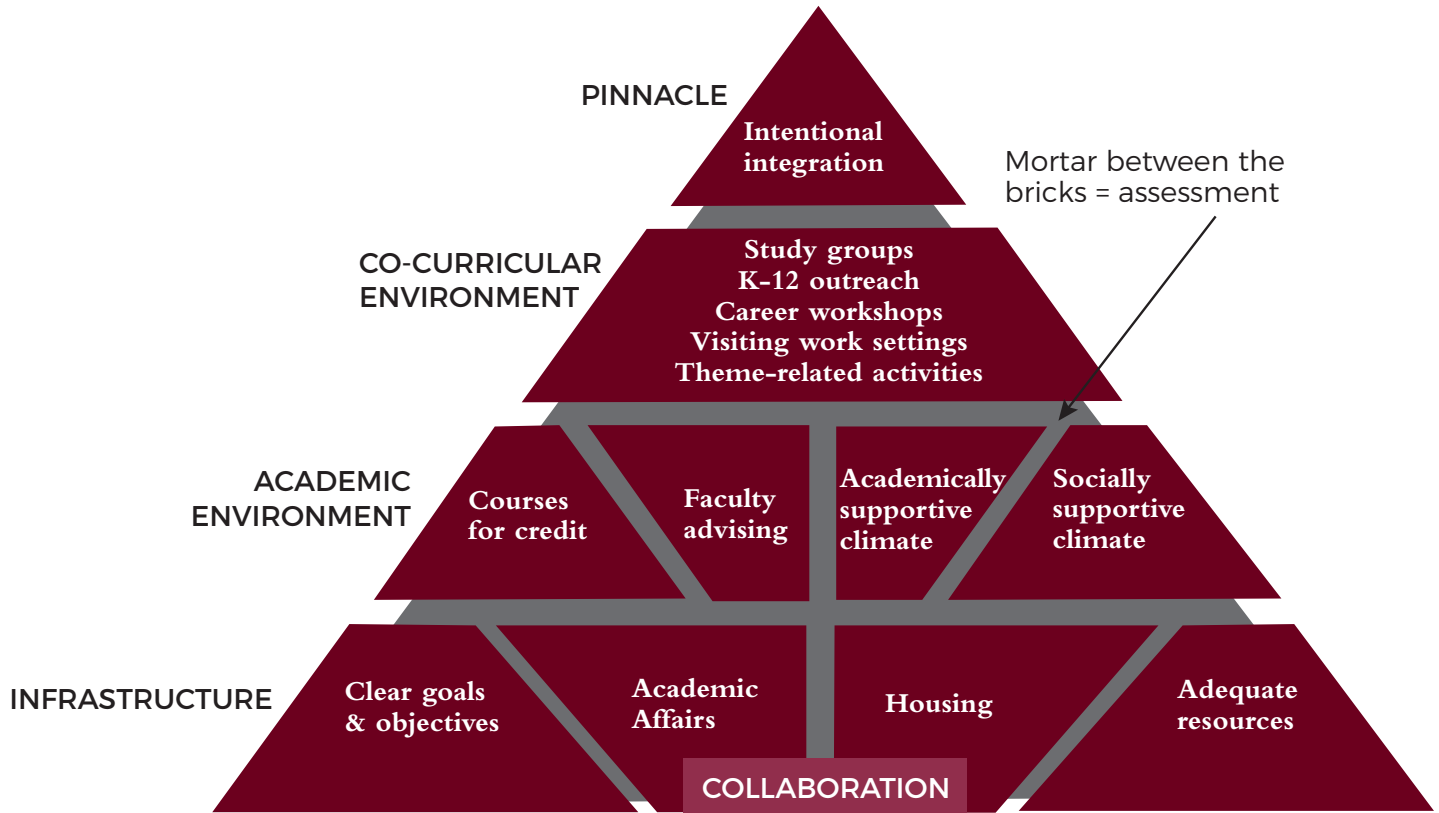## Residential Learning Community / Living-Learning Community / Living-Learning Program

Residential Learning Community (RLC), Living-Learning Community (LLC), and Living-Learning Program (LLP) are commonly used to refer to the same type of structure, and there are various definitions of these initiatives. Inkelas and Soldner (2011) define LLCs as those that "…typically group students together in a residence hall, offer a shared academic experience, and provide cocurricular learning activities for student engagement with peers" (Inkelas, Jessup-Anger, Benjamin, Wawrzynski, 2018, p. 1). Common features of these programs include students living in proximity to each other with intellectual and co-curricular programming. The term Residential Learning Community was chosen for the Elon Center for Engaged Learning seminar; the book that shares the Best Practices Model (noted below) uses the phrase Living-Learning Community. For the purposes of this statement, these phrases are used interchangeably.

High-Impact Practice

Practices in undergraduate education that are **high impact** increase students' engagement, enhance their sense of belonging, and prompt deeper, more engaged learning. (See Kuh, 2008, and AAC&U https://www.aacu.org/leap/hips)

LLC Best Practices Model (BPM)

This model, based on data from the National Study of Living-Learning Programs, notes essential elements for successful living-learning communities (Inkelas, Jessup-Anger, Benjamin, & Wawrzynski, 2018). Structured as a pyramid based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the BPM identifies critical foundational elements of living-learning communities without which the programs will be less effective.

PINNACLE

Intentional integration

Mortar between the bricks = assessment

CO-CURRICULAR ENVIRONMENT

Study groups
K-12 outreach
Career workshops
Visiting work settings
Theme-related activities

ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

Courses for credit

Faculty advising

Academically supportive climate

Socially supportive climate

INFRASTRUCTURE

Clear goals & objectives

Academic Affairs

Housing

Adequate resources

COLLABORATION

The LLC Best Practices Model is composed of four levels, including the infrastructure, academic environment, co-curricular environment, and a pinnacle. The infrastructure details the foundational elements of RLCs, including clear goals and objectives, academic and residential life/housing collaboration, and provision of adequate resources. The academic environment rests upon the infrastructure and details the best practices typically associated with the scholarly dimensions of RLCs, including courses for credit, academic advising, and an academically and socially supportive environment. Next, the co-curricular level of the BPM includes the formal, out-of-class activities that supplement the academic goals of the RLC. These activities typically relate to the theme of the community and enhance students' exposure to and experiences with the applied dimensions of the RLC. The pinnacle rests at the top of the Best Practices Model and serves to remind RLC designers to integrate all elements of the communities to ensure alignment with the goals and objectives. The final aspect of the BPM is assessment, which helps ensure that each element of the BPM is successful as well as integrated with the whole.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

A growing body of scholarship, particularly theories about student learning and development, helps us understand the rich potential for RLCs as a high-impact practice. As students transition into the university, intentional experiences can enhance student interactions in a variety of campus learning environments. In studying RLCs, we must keep in mind that the vast majority of these students are traditional-aged college students.

Many educational scholars (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999) credit Alexander Meiklejohn and John Dewey for the foundation of existing learning communities in the United States (Jessup-Anger, 2015). Meiklejohn is acknowledged for his contributions regarding the structure of learning communities, and Dewey (1938) "encouraged educators to ground the curriculum in students' experiences, cultivating students' individuality, advancing their interests, and promoting their construction of knowledge" (Jessup-Anger, 2015, p. 18).

To enhance student learning in residential environments, administrators and practitioners need to focus attention on theoretical foundations for this important work. Several theories (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1993) support contemporary structures of RLCs. Astin (1984) asserts that student involvement, which requires an investment of physical and psychological energy, is a critical element of student development. Ideally, RLCs increase student involvement between faculty, staff, and peers, thus contributing to a student's overall development. Tinto (1993) underscores the importance of academic and social integration within the university environment. When this intended integration occurs, students are more likely to persist at the institution.

Ecology models (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010; Renn & Arnold, 2003) assist us in understanding how student development and learning occurs in a residential campus. Most of the existing scholarship inadequately attends to the influence of RLC environments on student learning (Inkelas, Jessup-Anger, Benjamin, & Wawrzynski, 2018). Studying these outcomes enables administrators and practitioners to modify living and learning programs and environments to best support students in their development during their time at an institution.

Since RLCs are commonly resource rich and assumed to be more similar than different (Ryan, 1993; Smith, 1994), any environmental variation is particularly relevant; thus, studying these environments from a multi-institutional standpoint is helpful. Seifert (2006) and Porter and Swing (1996) point out that higher education survey research often only explains about 30% of the total variance in a given outcome. Because studies of college impact demonstrate that the majority of variation in outcome is expected at the individual level (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), even a small amount of variation at the environmental level merits exploration, as it may provide insight into the aspects of the environment that are influential to a given outcome.

ENABLING PRACTICES

The multi-institutional research conducted during Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning Seminar on Residential Learning Communities as a High-Impact Practice advanced research in several ways. Below we detail some of the enabling practices for student learning and for faculty/staff development in support of student learning.

Instrument Adaptation and Use

One contribution seminar participants made to research and assessment of RLCs is the adaptation and use of measures intended to reveal aspects of the RLC environment. Among the measures adapted:

The **Thriving Quotient** (www.thrivingincollege.org), a construct developed by Schreiner (n.d.) that measures student experiences in five dimensions of the learning environment, namely students' self-reported learning engagement, academic determination, diverse citizenship, social connectedness, and positive perspective.

Deeper Life Interaction scale, initially advanced by seminar participant Sriram and his colleague (Sriram & McLevain, 2016). The instrument, which examines exchanges related to meaning, value, and purpose, measures deeper life interactions as distinct from social and academic interactions between students and faculty/staff and between peers. The team utilized this instrument to measure the interactions of students who participated in RLCs.

Collegiate Psychological Sense of Community scale (Lounsbury & DeNeui, 1996), which measures feelings such as belongingness, togetherness, attachment, investment, commitment to the setting, among others.

Psychological Sense of Belonging scale (Johnson et al., 2007), which represents a student's perception that they belong in a community.

Academic Engagement, a scale initially developed by Yorke (2016), measures the time and effort students devote to common outcomes of college.

Self-Efficacy scale (Chen, Gully, & Eden, 2001), which is drawn from Bandura's work indicating one's belief in their ability to accomplish a task (Bandura, 1977).

The AAC&U (2009) **Integrative Learning** rubric, a measure intended to explore four dimensions of integrative learning, including 1) connections to experience, 2) connections to discipline, 3) transfer, and 4) reflection and self-assessment.

Advances in the Best Practices Model

The seminar participants advanced several RLC concepts embedded in the LLC BPM. For example, **seminar participants used a Delphi approach to arrive at a definition of academic and student affairs collaboration**, namely *"Collaboration between academic and student affairs is the continuous process of cultivating an interdependent relationship where each stakeholder is mutually committed to working toward the shared purpose of holistic student learning"* (Leary, Muller, Kramer, Sopper, Gebauer, & Wade, n. d.). A shared, research-informed definition of academic and student affairs collaboration will have many implications for future RLC research. A clear definition will enable researchers to develop a measurable construct, which will help examine more precisely the relationships between academic and student affairs collaboration and RLC outcomes. Another advantage of a clear definition of academic and student affairs collaboration is the guidance it will provide to practitioners who are developing or seeking to improve RLCs. By having a clear definition to strive for, practitioners can make decisions about roles, resources, reporting lines, and relationships to advance student and academic affairs collaborations.
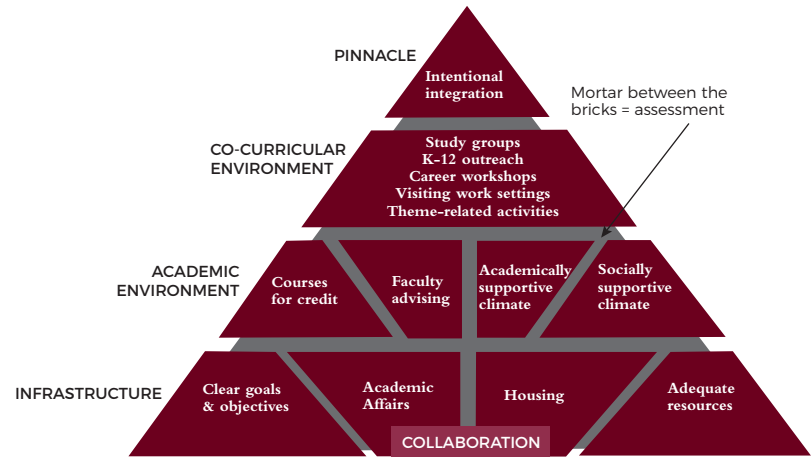
"Collaboration between academic and student affairs is the continuous process of cultivating an interdependent relationship where each stakeholder is mutually committed to working toward the shared purpose of holistic student learning" (Leary, Muller, Kramer, Sopper, Gebauer, & Wade, n. d.).

A second advancement in the LLC BPM is further articulation of the academically and socially supportive environment blocks of the academic level.

The work of seminar teams added complexity to understanding the academic and social environments of the RLC. Sriram, Weintraub, Murray, Cheatle, Haynes, & Marquart (under review) examined how the RLC context promoted students' psychological sense of community. Their regression model illustrated that five out of eight variables significantly contributed to psychological sense of community, including academic interactions with peers, social interactions with peers, deeper life interactions with peers, deeper life interactions with faculty/staff, and social interaction time with faculty/staff. Their overall model accounted for 50% of the variance in psychological sense of community, which can be interpreted as a large effect.

In studying students in RLCs, Eidum, Lomicka, Chiang, Endick, and Stratten (n.d.) extended the field's understanding of how student demographics and RLC environments contribute to student thriving. Specifically, they found that being female positively predicted four out of five thriving outcomes (engaged learning, academic determination, diverse citizenship, and positive perspectives) and being a first-generation student positively predicted three out of five thriving outcomes (academic determination, diverse citizenship, and positive perspective). That said, there was a significant negative relationship between being a first-generation student and social connectedness. Moreover, there were negative relationships between dimensions of thriving and other sociodemographic variables including identifying as a Black student (academic determination), Latinx student (academic determination and positive perspective), Asian student (engaged learning, academic determination, and positive perspective), and South Asian student (engaged learning and academic determination), suggesting a need for additional support for these students.

The team also illustrated how RLC environments contribute to thriving. Specifically, they found that faculty presence in the RLC is significantly positively related to engaged learning, academic determination, and diverse citizenship. Furthermore, in examining the role of budgetary resources on thriving outcomes, they found significant positive relationships between per student expenditures and engaged learning, social connectedness, and diverse citizenship. This finding differed from previous findings (Inkelas, Soldner, Longerbeam, & Leonard, 2008) that indicated effective programs can be modestly resourced.

WORKING PRINCIPLES IN DEVELOPMENT

As the work of the multi-institutional research teams progresses, there are additional emerging findings that inform RLC research and practice.
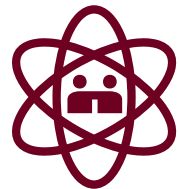
Leary, Muller, Kramer, Sopper, Gebauer, and Wade (n. d.) are exploring the measurement of **academic and student affairs collaboration**, with the intent of examining how it relates to residential learning communities.

Gebauer, Sopper, Wade, Leary, Muller, and Kramer (n.d.) are exploring **integrative learning** within RLCs, specifically looking at how they utilize direct (student writing) and indirect (pre- and post-tests) measures and how these measures relate to each other.
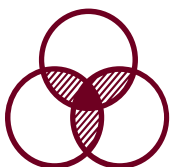
Several other multi-institutional teams are working on questions that will further advance outcomes associated with the academic level of the BPM, particularly the supportive academic and social climate dimensions.

As mentioned in the measurement section, another team has adapted a scale of deeper life interactions (Sriram & McLevain, 2016) to understand the **role an RLC might play in encouraging interactions related to meaning, value, and purpose.** In their initial research, Sriram, Haynes, Weintraub, Cheatle, Marquart, and Murray (under review) and colleagues found that several student background characteristics (i.e., academic classification, first generation status, and race/ethnicity) were significantly associated with students' discussions with peers about deeper life interactions. However, the variables in their regression model only predicted a very small percent variance (R^2 = .03), suggesting that there are several other student demographic characteristics and college environments that more effectively predict deeper life conversations with peers. Moreover, the regression model predicting deeper life conversations with faculty and staff was not significant. Therefore, further investigation regarding both outcomes is warranted.

Leibowitz, Lovitt, and Seager (n.d.) are focused on understanding whether and how **participation in STEM RLCs** promotes **sense of belonging within students' major**, within the university, and within the RLC. The same group is examining how RLC participation in a STEM RLC affects students' academic engagement, self-efficacy, and persistence. Early results suggest females in STEM RLCs exhibit higher academic engagement and self-efficacy than non-RLC students. Advancing understanding of these questions will help practitioners to justify the need for these RLCs from both student development and retention perspectives.

As a result of discussions throughout the seminar, we have identified a **need for clearer definitions of terms** that requires parsing out the distinctions among residential learning communities, living-learning communities, living-learning programs, residential colleges, and academic initiatives.

ASSESSING AND ADDRESSING FACULTY/STAFF IMPACT ON RLCS

Residential learning communities can positively impact students' learning and development and can also provide faculty and staff who advise them with valuable experiences that directly influence their own work whether that be in the classroom, conducting research, or serving college students and the university in other ways (Haynes & Janosik, 2012). Although it may be easy to demonstrate one's contribution to university service in the activities related to playing a role with an RLC (e.g., submitting an activity log or calendar of programs/events planned and implemented, collecting data on the number of applicants and accepted members each year to demonstrate consistent or increasing interest in the RLC by the student body), it is more difficult to articulate the pedagogical and/or academic value of faculty/staff roles in advising an RLC. This challenge is particularly true when the advising that occurs in the RLC is outside of one's own discipline and area of expertise or when the RLC does not have traditional classroom or curricular components.

Listed are some actions practitioners and faculty may want to consider taking to demonstrate the impact of their work on students' learning and development and on advancing the mission/extending the reach of their particular department:

- Use any of the adapted measures described above (e.g., thriving quotient, psychological sense of belonging, deeper life interactions, psychological sense of community, self-efficacy) to assess the impact of your involvement with RLCs on various student outcomes.

- Partner with your institutional research office to pull specific data on students in your RLC (or in RLCs at the institution) related to GPA, retention, and graduation rates and compare that to the rest of the student population in order to assess the impact of RLC participation on students through "traditional" criteria of academic success (i.e., retention, persistence, GPA, graduation rate).

- Collect direct measures of student learning and/or implement pre- and post-tests on integrative learning (AAC&U, 2009) to determine whether students in your RLC are better able to integrate their learning across in-class and out-of-class experiences as compared to students not in RLCs.

- Report how advising an RLC (whether an academic/subject-specific or thematic/topical RLC) helps introduce students to an area of study/discipline and recruits additional minors or majors to that field.

- Demonstrate how students engage in service-learning opportunities or other forms of experiential learning as a result of RLC participation.

- Engage RLC students in designing and facilitating assessment of RLCs within the institution in order to include their voices and perspectives on learning and development; consider running student-led focus groups to gather qualitative data on the impact your RLC has on students.

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GLOSSARY

Residential Colleges

According to the Residential College Society, a residential college is "a collegiate residential environment in which live in faculty play an integral role in the programmatic experience and leadership of the community. Some may have features that include:

- Academic department association
- Strong partnerships and collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs
- Linked credit-bearing academic courses
- Academic experiences (curricular and/or co-curricular) infused into the life of the residential college
- Traditional programming including social events, meals, and associated faculty-student engagement" (http://residentialcollegesociety.org/definition/)

Theme Housing

Theme housing offers a common living space for students with similar interests or hobbies. Theme housing typically does not include an academic component.

Deeper Life Interactions

Sriram and McLevain (2016) identify these interactions between students, faculty and staff as those that exceed typical academic and social interactions, resulting in greater introspection on the part of the student. Because students live in proximity to each other and due to the intentional efforts on the part of faculty and staff in co-ordinating RLCs, these environments offer unique opportunities for interactions of this nature.

Integrative Learning

As RLCs provide curricular and cocurricular experiences for students, opportunities abound for "linking ideas and domains that are not easily or typically connected" (Taylor Huber, Hutchings, Gale, Miller, & Breen, 2007, par. 3) (https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/leading-initiatives-integrative-learning). AAC&U identified integrative learning as a "growing national emphasis" (https://www.aacu.org/resources/integrative-learning) that incorporates connections to experience, connections to discipline, transfer, reflection and self-assessment. One way to address this emphasis is through integrative experiences resulting from participation in RLCs.

Thriving

Schreiner, Pothoven, Nelson and McIntosh (2009) define thriving as an experience beyond surviving in college. Thriving students are fully engaged emotionally, socially, and intellectually, resulting in well-being that may result in persistence and overall life success. Academic thriving factors include engaged learning and academic determination; social thriving involves social connectedness and diverse citizenship; and emotional thriving requires a positive perspective (Schreiner, Louis, & Nelson, 2012). Attention to these elements within RLCs may lead to positive student outcomes.

Seminar Participants

Collaboration and Integrative Learning: Richard Gebauer, Samantha Kramer, Margaret Leary, Tina Muller, John Sopper, Mary Ellen Wade

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Deeper Life Interactions: Joseph Cheatle, Cliff Haynes, Christopher Marquart, Joe Murray, Rishi Sriram, Sue Weintraub

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Citation Guidelines

Please cite this version of the Elon Statement as follows:

APA Citation

Elon Statement on Residential Learning Communities as a High-Impact Practice. (2019). Retrieved from http://www.centerforengagedlearning.org/elon-statement-on-residential-learning-communities/

MLA Citation

Elon Statement on Residential Learning Communities as a High-Impact Practice. 2019. Web. Date of Access. <http://www.centerforengagedlearning.org/elon-statement-on-residential-learning-communities/>.

Chicago Citation

Elon Statement on Residential Learning Communities as a High-Impact Practice. 2019. http://www.centerforengagedlearning.org/elon-statement-on-residential-learning-communities/.

Credits

Icons on page 8 from the Noun Project:

Collaboration by Chinnaking
Integration by Tomas Knopp
Atom by Three Six Five
Friendship by Yorlmar Campos

Value by hafiudin
Venn diagram by Sharon Showalter

All photos by Elon University.