Exploring Students' Perceptions of Academically Based Living-Learning Communities

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This qualitative study employed focus group interviews to explore students' perceptions of three well established academically based living-learning communities at a large, land-grant university in the Midwest. Three themes emerged that illustrated students' perceptions of a culture that promoted seamless learning, a scholarly environment, and an ethos of relatedness among faculty, staff, and peers. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.

Learning Reconsidered advocates for a coordinated, campus-wide effort to create transformative educational experiences for students in all aspects of their lives (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators & American College Personnel Association, 2004). One such effort for creating educational experiences for students should include student affairs educators and faculty focusing on living-learning communities. For students residing on campus, living-learning communities are one way to integrate the classroom and residence hall environments, blurring the boundaries of the classroom and students' co-curricular activities into a seamless whole (Kuh, 1996; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). Living-learning communities consist of participants who: (1) "live together on-campus, (2) take part in a shared academic endeavor, (3) use resources in their residence environment designed specifically for them, and (4) have structured social activities in their residential environment that stress academics" (Inkelas, Zeller, Murphy, & Hummel, 2006, p. 11).

Most current research on living-learning communities is quantitative, seeking to understand the outcomes of students' participation in terms of their interaction with faculty (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Stassen, 2003), peer interaction and social integration (Inkelas & Weisman; Pike, 1999; Pike, Schroeder, & Berry, 1997), and persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1981; 2005; Stassen, 2003; Tinto, 1997). Although there is growing evidence detailing positive learning outcomes associated with living-learning communities (see Blimling's (1998) meta-analysis), less attention has been paid to understanding how these environments actually produce these outcomes. Furthermore, existing studies often group all living-learning students together and compare them to traditional residence hall peers, negating differences between types of living-learning communities (e.g., thematic living-learning communities versus academically based living-learning communities) and making it difficult to discern what about these communities makes them successful.

The purpose of our study was to understand how students perceived their academic living-learning community environment and what aspects of the environment they valued. We explored how students described and made meaning of their involvement with the living-learning communities; how they believed their experiences were different from their nonliving-learning community peers; and what they believed to be the benefits of their particular living-learning community. The voices of our student participants elicited descriptions of the subtle aspects and interactive elements of living-learning community participation, which are often overlooked in existing studies.

Literature Review

Existing research examining living-learning community environments and student outcomes details conflicting findings regarding the influence of these environments on academic achievement, faculty and student interaction, and social integration. Using first semester GPAs as an indicator, Stassen (2003) found that students participating in living-learning communities had greater academic achievement than their traditional residence hall peers, even after controlling for pre-entry characteristics. Pasque and Murphy (2005) reported similar findings from their study examining both intellectual engagement and academic achievement. On the other hand, Pike et al. (1997) found no connection between living-learning community participation and academic achievement.

In addition, although one might expect greater faculty-student interaction to result from living-learning community participation, the research on social interactions between faculty and students in living-learning communities also reveals conflicting findings. Several studies credit the living-learning community environment with providing more frequent informal social interactions between faculty members and students (Pike, Schroeder, & Berry, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1981), yet other researchers found that greater faculty-student interaction is not guaranteed by the presence of a living-learning community (Stassen, 2003). In addition, Inkelas and Weisman (2003) examined three different types of living-learning communities (i.e., curricular, honors, and transition) and compared them to traditional residence halls at one institution and concluded that only students in the honors and transition living-learning communities were more likely to interact socially with faculty outside of class than the students living in curricular and traditional residence halls. These findings suggest that simply creating a living-learning environment does not guarantee that meaningful informal interaction between faculty and students will occur.

Finally, although greater peer interaction, social integration, and higher levels of involvement are other benefits almost universally reported by students in living learning communities (Pike, 1999; Stassen, 2003), existing literature illustrates how some communities are more conducive to promoting these outcomes. For example, Inkelas and Weisman (2003) found that students in curriculum focused and honors living-learning communities believed their residence hall environments to be more socially supportive than students living in transition based living-learning communities and those in traditional residence halls. They also discovered that students in all living-learning environments were more involved in college activities than those living in traditional residence halls. Interestingly, although Pike, Schroeder, and Berry (1997) also found that living-learning communities had a significant positive effect on social integration, they did not find that it was a factor in persistence.

Despite the increase in research on living-learning communities, the conflicting findings lead to enduring questions about how these environments influence student outcomes. Also absent from existing literature are students' perceptions of their living-learning environments. Through exploration of how students perceived their academic living-learning community environments and what they valued about their experience within them, we sought to add to existing literature by detailing how these environments influence student outcomes and particularly the aspects of the environments that were most valuable to students.

Methodology

A constructivist epistemology guided our qualitative research study. A constructivist approach acknowledges that knowledge is transmitted through a social context that is based on individuals interacting with their environments (Crotty, 1998). Because we sought to understand students' perceptions of their living-learning community environments from their perspective, a constructivist approach was appropriate, as it enabled us to gain insight into students' meaning making about their environment from within that environment (Krueger, 1988).

Procedure

Setting. Our study took place at Midwest University (MU) (pseudonym), a four-year public, land grant university, which boasts a long history of well established academically based living-learning communities. At the time the study was conducted, the campus was home to eight living-learning communities. The organizational structures of these environments are somewhat unique because they are all administered through academic departments or colleges with varying

levels of support from the student affairs division. Although we conducted interviews with students from seven of the eight communities, our analysis in the current paper is limited to students' perceptions from the three most established and resourced living-learning communities, Lillian Bounds School (LBS), Residential Option in Arts and Humanities (ROAH), and James Monroe College (JMC). (Pseudonyms were created for each of the living-learning communities and descriptions of each community are provided below). These three communities are the only communities on MU's campus classified as *collaborative* living-learning communities using the empirically developed structural typology by Inkelas, Longerbeam, Leonard, and Soldner (2005), which indicates that the communities are comprehensively resourced with a strong integration of responsibility between student affairs and academic affairs. These communities have associated students grouped together on a floor or throughout an entire building, more than one faculty member affiliated directly with the program, and one or more faculty offices located within the community. In addition, specific classes for students in each collaborative living-learning community were offered within the residence halls. Furthermore, staff from residence life meet regularly with administrators of the program, consulting on matters ranging from resident assistant selection to programming that will enhance the academic mission of each program. In LBS, there is a full-time academic advisor/residence life position that reports to both student and academic affairs. Because these communities were so much more comprehensively resourced than others on MU's campus, we chose only to include them in our analysis to ensure we were examining students' perceptions of similarly resourced communities, thus guarding against making inferences about the communities that were solely related to resources (or lack thereof).

Despite the similarities in resources and integration between academic and student affairs, the three communities represented in the analysis differ in their structure, focus, and duration. LBS is a four-year community focusing on the natural sciences. The program is housed throughout an entire residence hall and includes dedicated space for faculty offices and laboratories. Students live in the building for at least their first year, a policy consistent with the broader university under which all first-year students are generally required to reside on-campus.

JMC, a degree granting college, was founded on a model of liberal education and offers multidisciplinary programs in the social sciences. JMC is housed throughout a residence hall and includes faculty offices, classrooms, dedicated study spaces, and a library. JMC students live in the building for at least their first year on-campus; however, not all students living in the building are JMC students.

ROAH, a two-year program, brings together students with common academic interests in the arts and humanities. ROAH students live together on four dedicated floors of one residence hall, which also houses a classroom, an administrative office (used by the faculty director, a graduate student, and several student staff members), and a multipurpose room dedicated for use by ROAH students only.

Method. The data used for the current study were part of a larger study examining the experiences of 34 students in living-learning communities, in which we conducted 10 single session focus group interviews. Between two and five students participated in the focus groups, which lasted 50 to 75 minutes in the fall of 2006. Focus groups were appropriate for gathering data because they often produce rich data that are cumulative and elaborative (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Furthermore, focus groups often generate "vertical interaction, or interaction between the moderator and the interviewees, but also horizontal interaction among the group participants" (Madriz, 2000, p. 840) to come to a deeper understanding of the living-learning community environment perceived and described by the students. Also, we wanted to hear the voices of multiple students and capture the nuanced descriptions of their perceptions and participation in the communities in order to better understand reasons behind the outcomes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The focus group interviews were semi-structured, with questions developed from existing literature on living-learning communities and from the results of a survey that we conducted the previous spring. Some examples of questions included, "what is it like to be a member of your living-learning community?" and "how has being a member of your living-learning community impacted your experiences at MU?" We chose to conduct the focus groups in the various students' living-learning communities to diffuse the power of the researcher (Madriz, 2000). During each focus group introduction, the facilitator described the purpose of the interview as a forum for discussing ideas and perceptions with one another and with the facilitator; and asked students to fill out a form detailing demographic information and a chosen pseudonym.

Participants. Participants in the focus groups discussed in this paper were 19 students from the three living-learning communities represented in the analysis. We used both purposive and convenience sampling (Patton, 1990) to solicit participants. We emailed students who provided contact information on a survey conducted during the spring of 2006 indicating a willingness to discuss their experiences. We also contacted students whose names we received from staff or faculty members within the living-learning communities. Of the 19 students interviewed, nine were sophomores, six were juniors, three were

seniors and one was a graduate student who had been affiliated with one of the communities as an undergraduate. Fourteen of the students were female, and five were male. Eleven of the students still lived in their respective living-learning community, two were still affiliated with LBS but no longer lived on-campus, and six were "graduates" of the two-year ROAH program. Seventeen of the students identified as White or Caucasian, one student identified as African American, and one student identified as Indian.

Trustworthiness. Several steps were taken to ensure trustworthiness of the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility of the data collected was achieved through audio-recording and transcribing interview data verbatim, corroborating participants' responses with notes taken during the interviews, and sending transcripts back to participants to verify their accuracy. Dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba) of the data were achieved through the prolonged discussion regarding the interpretation of the data by members of the research team. Transferability of findings was achieved by including thick description (Lincoln & Guba) of the results so that readers can identify similarities and differences with the living-learning communities on their own campuses.

Limitations. We did not include first-year students in our focus groups. Because our interviews took place in October, we were apprehensive of first-year students' ability to provide in-depth description and meaning making of their environments after only living on campus for two months.

Analysis

There were five research team members (one faculty member, two full-time administrators, and two full-time graduate students), all of whom have worked or are working in residence life on the campus where the research was conducted or on other campuses in the United States. Throughout the analysis process, we discussed openly our own experiences in order to surface bias. We used a constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to analyze the data. First, each research team thoroughly read and coded transcripts independently. Then, two sub-teams consisting of 3 to 4 research team members met to discuss their coding; one sub-team focused on the ROAH transcripts and the other on the LBS and JMC transcripts. The sub-teams developed a group coding scheme through negotiation regarding the meaning of the text. The codes were then clustered into emergent categories revolving around students' perceptions of their living-learning communities (i.e., perceptions of faculty, perceptions of classes, and perceptions of help in the transition to college). After the categories were formed, the entire research team reconvened to discuss findings and sorted the categories into themes. The

research group again divided into sub-teams to discuss the emergent themes before reconvening to arrive at our overall findings.

Findings

The missions and foci of the living-learning communities we studied were distinct. However, despite these differences, the students we interviewed used similar language to describe the three communities and conveyed parallel perceptions that cut across the communities. Although the initial intent of our study was to understand what about the communities students valued, we discovered that specific elements could not be identified and isolated. Rather, students' described valuing the academic living-learning community as a whole, revealing the existence of a culture in each community that likely stemmed from the underlying values of the communities (which included the desire to bridge the academic and co-curricular experience to create a seamless learning environment). We did not enter the study with the preconceived notion that a culture existed within the communities, rather, the theory of culture emerged as we analyzed the findings. We use the word 'culture' to mean "the collective, mutually shaping patterns of . . . history, mission, physical settings, norms, traditions, values, practices, beliefs and assumptions which guide the behavior of individuals and groups . . . and which provide frames of reference for interpreting the meanings of events and actions" (Kuh & Hall, 1993, p. 2). Three main themes emerged from our focus group interviews, including students' perceptions of a culture within their living-learning community that promoted: (a) seamless learning (b) a scholarly environment; and (c) an ethos of relatedness among faculty, staff, and peers. It is important to note that although many of the participants described perceptions that painted a picture of a cohesive and supportive culture, one student described her feelings of estrangement from the culture. Those findings are also discussed.

Student Perceptions of Culture as Promoting Seamless Learning

During each focus group, students described how their respective living-learning community environments were seamless, encouraging their learning inside and outside the classroom and in formal and informal ways. By labeling their learning environment as seamless, we are suggesting that "what was once believed to be separate, distinct parts (e.g., in-class and out-of-class, academic and non academic, curricular and co curricular . . . experiences) are now of one piece, bound together so as to appear whole or continuous (Kuh, 1996, p. 136). Because of the different missions and foci of each community, students' descriptions of their learning reflected the essence of each community and were different across the communities. For example, students in ROAH depicted

learning as integrating originality and imagination into their academic pursuits, whereas the students in LBS described learning as a hands-on mechanism for solving real world problems, and JMC students described it as engaging in discourse around difference. Leela, a sophomore in ROAH, described how the program encouraged her to take academic risks. She stated,

> I graduated [from high school] with a 4.0 and I was all academic.
> . . . I think that ROAH challenged me in a new way because I
> knew that I was not gonna have problems with grades. . . .
> ROAH added that extra creative aspect. . . . I think of myself as
> a fairly creative person, [but] I'd kind of gotten into the focus on
> the academic side of school. ROAH kind of brought back the
> creative part of it and challenged me from that perspective.

Although students described the culture as encouraging their artistic side and fostering growth, they also described the required first-year ROAH seminar course as boring and easy, perhaps a product of it being an introductory course. The students credited their involvement in numerous co-curricular activities (which were required by their seminar and encouraged by the peers in student-staff roles) as fostering their creativity. Furthermore, they reported that by their second year, they were highly engaged in infusing creativity into their coursework and co-curricular activities, with assignments encouraging them to get in touch with their inner artist by writing short stories, poetry, and other types of creative writing. Co-curricular activities too remained a prevalent part of the community where they could explore their interests in the arts.

In LBS, students also described a culture that promoted seamless learning. Becky, a sophomore, described the differences in learning she perceived between her classes in LBS and classes taken in the broader university. She explained,

> I took Chem 1 through LBS, and I felt like I learned a lot, not
> necessarily material, but how to figure stuff out. Now I'm taking
> Chem 2 through University, and it's so different. I'm not
> learning anything. [In] the labs for University . . . they give you a
> worksheet and you fill in the blanks with numbers. And here [in
> LBS] you . . . can make your own experiment which you would
> never think of doing that in the University [classes].

Emily, another sophomore, concurred with Becky's analysis, explaining, "I think it's because a lot of people in [LBS] want to be challenged, they have a higher desire to learn." Carrie, who was in a different focus group, also commented on

the differences in expectation she perceived between students in LBS classes and regular university classes, stating,

> I feel you get a lot more writing experience here [in LBS] because every single chem lab, bio lab, physics lab, you have full-length lab reports that are completely written out without a format. In university Chem 141, Chem 142, they are given a workbook and you fill in the blanks.

The promotion of seamless learning described by the LBS students was similar to that described by ROAH students in that it was embedded into their classes and co-curricular pursuits. Yet, the learning was different in that it focused on application of problem-based learning to students' scientific interests as opposed to being a mechanism by which students could tap into their creativity to explore the arts and humanities.

In James Monroe College, the discussion about learning centered on demanding classes, development of complex thinking, and engaging in dialogue across difference. Nicole, a sophomore, described her perception that JMC promoted discussions of difference. She explained,

> When you find someone who disagrees with you, or says something that is ignorant, you kind of teach yourself to converse with them, not just say, "Wow, they are just stupid; they don't know what they're talking about." You find different ways to maybe ask them more questions, to specify what they believe or tell them what you believe,   maybe not in hopes of changing their mind, but just letting them know that other people disagree with them.

Nicole also discussed how she believed JMC encouraged her to work hard, stating, "I like a challenge and Monroe really is a challenge. . . . I think living together, it just helps you, it makes it okay for you to want to work hard. I don't feel bad about studying late for classes because I know other people are, too." The other students in the focus group echoed Nicole's beliefs about learning to engage in conversation across difference and the presence of challenging classes. Mark, a sophomore in JMC, explained how his classes promoted thinking about issues from different perspectives. He explained,

> [The overlap between the classes] stresses the need to have a broader understanding of public affairs, just that no single approach will give you the whole perspective, and that things

that might seem opposed are not necessarily that way. Most people would say that political theory and social relations are pretty much directly opposed, but if you can see the similarities between the two, or at least the concepts that are common to both of them, you really then can appreciate that aspect.

Although the students agreed that the culture of JMC encouraged them to converse across difference and look at their majors from a broader perspective, we found that some students were disturbed by the debate-oriented culture. Latia articulated this point, explaining,

There have been instances where people in class have had an argument where someone was so offended that they got up and left class and then took that into their personal lives, too. . . . When someone makes a racist, - or a comment that someone perceives to be racist, - and they're serious and they do it in a classroom setting, and the teacher doesn't really step in and say anything, and someone feels offended to the point where they leave the class…to me that's the problem. When they're so offended that it went into their personal lives and they told their friends who told their friends, that sort of thing.

Throughout the focus group, Latia continually described situations where she or others were uncomfortable in the community because of interactions with peers crossing the line between friendly debate and personal attacks that sometimes had racial overtones. Her discomfort was heightened because it permeated the classroom walls and was brought back into the community. It was clear that the other members of the focus group did not share her perceptions of the culture as marginalizing, which may have been a consequence of their affiliation with the dominant culture. The interactions among the members of the focus group led the research team to discuss how the presence of a strong culture and an emphasis on seamless learning can lead to feelings of marginalization when members are not valued by the culture, or do not subscribe to the dominant values or norms of the culture.

Student Perceptions of the Environment as Scholarly

In addition to their living-learning communities promoting seamless learning, the students described them as conveying scholarly values via their physical structure and the community norms and expectations that were fostered and passed along from year-to-year. These 'scholarly values' that students described included an emphasis on community learning, prioritization of studying and academics, and an expectation of involvement.

Physical structures. The physical structures of the living-learning communities play a key role in the promotion of a scholarly environment by perpetuating a value for community learning and supporting the physical presence of faculty and staff within the communities. The amenities within the communities and the values they espoused were mutually reinforcing. Carrie, a junior in LBS, illustrated her perception of how the structure conveyed the importance of academics. She stated,

> [Lillian Bounds] has help rooms for every subject, and there are T.A.s manning [*sic*] the help rooms after hours. So, you have professors, most of them are here until 5 or 6, some later, but there are always help rooms, with T.A.s who know what they are doing, until 10 or 11 at night, even on the weekends.

Other students in LBS commented on the prevalence of study spaces available to them in comparison to other residence halls. Hannah shared the following observation.

> There are a lot of places to study here [in LBS], there's all the West and East lounges and then there's the Lower Lounge, and [also] . . . study places on each floor. You would think it would be really common in residence halls [to have as much study space], but it's not, it's a pretty novel thing. They really encourage study groups and there's places to meet for people to study outside your room.

Sally echoed Hannah's observation, explaining that there are different types of study lounges depending on students' needs. She shared that her favorite study lounge was called "the morgue" because of the expectation of complete silence. Although there was no stated or official policy that those visiting "the morgue" maintain silence, students passed down the expectation from year-to-year.

The students in ROAH also talked about the amenities offered by the community as promoting a scholarly atmosphere, but instead of study spaces they discussed the presence of a comfortable, student-friendly, administrative office and a multipurpose room for co-curricular engagement in the hall. Amy, a sophomore in ROAH, discussed her surprise at how often faculty were available, recounting a story about walking by the office on a Friday evening and finding a faculty member there. Whitaker, a student staff member, also described the value of having an office within the building, explaining, "The fact

that the office is within the dorm is really important . . . the professors are gonna be there when you need to talk to them."

In addition to the availability of staff and faculty (which was fostered through the physical presence of offices within the buildings), numerous students mentioned how the physical spaces in the building, coupled with the means of making students aware of events were conducive to attendance at club and organization meetings. They explained how ROAH encouraged them to get involved, and if they could not find something they were interested in, to form their own group. Rich shared how the structure of the community promoted co-curricular involvement: "There's a lot of things that we do on our own with student-run groups and visiting artists and that sort of thing. You get a lot of exposure in ROAH, hands-on working, . . . exposure to writing or theater." Ambrose, a junior who had been involved with ROAH, echoed Rich's comments. "We have a lot of clubs [in ROAH] . . . Right now, you can go to the writers club...they'll meet [downstairs] and talk about writing and they'll write stuff like poems. They actually wrote some plays last year, some short one act plays that the ROAH Players actually performed. Players is another group, it's our own little theatre troupe." The presence of physical spaces for faculty/administrators and student organizations conveyed a message to the ROAH students that engagement in informal learning was important.

Students in JMC also discussed the convenience of having faculty offices and events within the building and their environment as promoting scholarly activity. Latia explained,

> I like the fact that you can network with people here pretty easily. Not just with other students but they have alumni who come in, they have a lot of programs here. And a lot of [the programs] are here in the building too, which is really nice. They get a lot of really cool speakers, like . . . last Friday; they had a talk with a potential faculty member for next year. It's nice that you get to be in on that sort of thing.

The students clearly described the various structures of their environments (including dedicated study spaces, meeting spaces, faculty offices, and high quality, in-hall programming) as conveying the importance of engagement with scholarly endeavors.

Community norms and expectations. The community norms within each of the living-learning communities played a key role in promoting a scholarly environment. In all three of the living-learning communities, students described

their perceptions that their living-learning environment was quieter and more conducive to studying than a traditional residence hall. Carrie, an LBS student, illustrated this point, explaining,

> You can come home on a Friday night, and while there are a
> couple of people who will be loud and drunk, 90% of people are
> going to be sober and studying . . . it means that it is quiet, which
> is really, really nice.

Students conveyed that they held themselves and others more accountable for their behaviors in the living-learning communities for a variety of reasons. They reported feeling less anonymous than they might in a traditional residence hall and thus, did not want to embarrass themselves by acting inappropriately in the building. As a result, they speculated that they were more considerate of their neighbors than they might have been had they lived in a traditional residence hall. They also shared that they were more serious about their academics and expected others to be more serious, too.

In addition to the environment being quieter, students in LBS and JMC described it as highly collaborative, and explained that it was not unusual for acquaintances to study together for a test. Carrie described a strategy she used when she had questions before a test and did not know many of her classmates, explaining, "The day before any major test, if you locate your study lounge, it will be filled with students studying for that test, so you can meet random strangers who will help you study for your test." Students in ROAH did not indicate that their environment promoted collaborative studying for tests, perhaps because they only take primarily introductory writing classes together, which are less reliant upon exams. The community environment was enhanced and perpetuated not only by the structure but also by students' buy-in to the atmosphere created in the living-learning communities, which they described as quiet, respectful, and collaborative.

Student Perceptions of Culture as Promoting an Ethos of Relatedness among Faculty, Staff, and Peers

In addition to depicting the three living-learning communities as promoting seamless learning and a scholarly environment, the students also described having meaningful and fulfilling relationships with faculty and staff and feeling a sense of belonging among peers.

Meaningful, fulfilling connections with faculty and staff. As discussed previously, students in the three living-learning communities cited their appreciation of the convenience of having faculty offices in their residence halls. Beyond the close

proximity, however, the students described connections with faculty and staff where they felt they were more valued than they might have felt in a non living-learning environment. Sara illustrated this point, explaining, "Lillian Bounds doesn't let you down, they won't let you fail, they won't let you drop out. It's like they are there for you. Your professors are there for you. Whereas in University, you don't get that at all. . . . It's meant a lot." Sara went on to describe how her academic advisor, whose office was located in the community, called her when he saw a slip in her grades. She also gave several examples of faculty assisting her with academic concerns. When students discussed their interactions with faculty and staff, there was a sense of ease in their descriptions. They used phrases like "I just popped by the office when I had a question," and "I enjoy having them [the professors] right there" to describe how they connected with faculty and staff in the buildings.

In addition to interactions with faculty and staff in educational settings, several students mentioned how they had been to faculty members' houses, how faculty and staff sometimes attended their student organization meetings, and how co-curricular activities enriched their interactions with faculty. Roy, a student who worked in the ROAH office, recounted an experience he had while on a ROAH sponsored trip to Chicago, "We all went with Professor Smith and walked around Chicago, finding every comic book shop we could find, just sitting around talking about all the different comic books and the super heroes and getting all philosophical about it for a while. It was absolutely wonderful."

Sense of belonging among peers. Students described their relationships with peers as particularly supportive. Students across the focus groups discussed how they used their living-learning community affiliation as an icebreaker to make friends and also to feel comfortable with taking risks. Carrie explained,

> You get to meet a lot more people without as much work…As freshmen and sophomores, pretty much the people who are in your class, are in every single one of your classes. . . . You get to meet with them for study groups, they are your lab partners, you see them at dinner. . . . It's just that everyone here is doing the same thing you are doing; they've either taken the classes, are in the classes or will be taking them. They know people, and they know things to do, where to go. . . . It's [an] easy way to meet people who are interested in the same things you are.

Several students described peers as "family," "accepting," and "someone who has my back." The majority of students believed that the strong connections they made with their peers were fostered by their living-learning communities

because of the fact that they lived together, attended classes together, and had more than serendipitous happenings with one another outside of class. This product of proximity and the intentionality on the part of the university to create opportunities to interact ensured that students made deep connections with one another.

Discussion

Since we entered the study with the expectation that we might discover the elements of the community that students valued and instead found that these elements could not be isolated, we allowed the themes related to culture to emerge and then used them to help us better understand our findings. Our themes illustrate that, despite the differences in their focus and intended outcomes, the collaborative, comprehensively resourced living-learning communities in our study share underlying values (including the desire to bridge the academic and co-curricular experience to create a seamless learning environment) that contribute to students' perceptions that they are part of a culture that promotes seamless learning, a scholarly environment, and an ethos of relatedness among faculty, staff, and peers. If conceived of as a culture, living-learning communities may be viewed as organic and constantly evolving (Love, Boschini, Jacobs, Hardy, & Kuh, 1993), because culture is simultaneously product and process (Kuh & Whitt, 1988). As the latter, it "is constantly renewed and re-created as newcomers learn the old ways and eventually become teachers themselves," altering the culture subtly as they empress their own spin on it (Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 244).

Such fluidity and evolution of the culture was evident in how the themes were enacted in the communities. For example, embedded in the 'seamless learning' theme discussed by LBS students was a commitment to cater the classroom to students' individual interests by allowing them to 'create their own experiments'. Furthermore, inherent in the 'scholarly environment' theme discussed by ROAH students' was an awareness that in order to promote a value for involvement, the community might change to meet new students' needs by enabling them to form new clubs and to use the space within the building to support those clubs. Finally, within the 'ethos of relatedness' theme students discussed how in each of the communities received and acted upon messages detailing the subtle norms of the communities in which they lived. Students in ROAH described the involvement expectations they heard from student-staff, embracing these expectations because of the creativity that this involvement fostered. Students in JMC discussed their acknowledgement of importance of learning to engage in discussions with people who had differing opinions. In

LBS, students discussed how they relied on community studying in order to prepare for labs, tests, and final exams.

Several researchers identified different levels of culture that assisted us in framing our themes and explaining how the different facets of the living-learning communities are interrelated and interdependent (Dyer, 1986; Kuh & Hall, 1993; Lundberg, 1985; Schein, 1985). These levels are *artifacts, perspectives, values,* and *assumptions.* Artifacts are most obvious and "tangible aspects of culture, the meaning and functions of which may be known by members" (Kuh & Hall, 1993, p. 4). Artifacts include physical, verbal, and behavioral manifestations of the culture. Embedded in our themes are many examples of artifacts. For example, within the seamless learning theme, students provided examples of intentional integration of curricular and co-curricular pursuits (behavioral artifact). Within the 'scholarly environment' theme, they discussed the presence of faculty offices and study spaces in their residence hall environments (physical artifact), and the tacit expectation that students maintain an environment conducive to studying (behavioral artifact). Finally, within the 'ethos of relatedness' theme, students talked about the advice and support they received and gave to their peers in the communities (verbal artifact).

Perspectives represent the norms and rules shared by the community in a given context (Kuh & Hall, 1993). They define the acceptable behavior that governs the living-learning communities. As with the artifacts, there were perspectives embedded in each of our themes. Perspectives found within the 'seamless learning' theme included the expectation that ROAH students would infuse creativity into their academic pursuits, LBS students would engage in challenging coursework, and JMC students would learn to discuss their differences. Within the 'scholarly environment theme, student across the three communities described their perceptions of their living-learning communities as more quiet and orderly than the non-living-learning community environments. Furthermore, in LBS and JMC, students discussed the norm of students studying together and the expectation that there are always people to study with on the evening before a test. Finally, within the 'ethos of relatedness theme' students described the norms that guided their interactions with peers as familial and accepting.

Values are more abstract than perspectives, and generally reflect "the espoused as well as the enacted ideals of a group and serve as the basis on which members of a culture judge situations, acts, objects and people" (Kuh & Hall, 1993, p. 6). The themes, which spanned all three living-learning communities, are indicative of the values held by most members of the communities, including a value for seamless learning, a value for a scholarly community, and a

value for relationships. These values were not explicitly articulated, yet were embedded in virtually all of the students' descriptions of their communities.

The deepest level of culture, and the most difficult to identify are assumptions, which "are the tacit beliefs that members use to define their role, their relationships to others, and the nature of the organization in which they live" (Kuh & Hall, 1993, p. 7). It is possible that the students we interviewed were not aware of the assumptions underlying the culture of their living-learning communities, as they had only been immersed in the culture for several years at most. Latia, the student in JMC who perceived a racist and insensitive culture, likely may have felt marginalized from the strong dominant culture in JMC, which would explain why she experienced difficulty in many situations inside and outside the classroom as opposed to a few isolated incidents.

The different levels of culture found within each of our themes and present in the living-learning communities illustrate an important feature of the communities that is not captured in the existing literature. Instead of isolating different variables (e.g., number of hours of informal contact with faculty; amount of time spent studying with peers) to explain the outcomes of the communities, which many existing quantitative studies have done, it is important to consider how the connections between the elements might influence student outcomes. For example, students discussed their one-on-one interactions with faculty outside of class as communicating a message about the scholarly nature of their living-learning community, but they also discussed how this message was conveyed by the presence of faculty in the building during the evening hours, being able to stop by faculty offices spontaneously on their way to the dining hall, and having faculty at their club meetings.

Implications for Practice and Research

There are practical implications for living-learning community administrators and faculty and research implications for those who study them embedded in acknowledging these comprehensively resourced living-learning communities as cultural phenomena. First, students' descriptions of the interplay between the structures of the communities (classroom/residence hall) and their members (faculty/staff/peers), illustrated the seamlessness with which they experienced learning. For such seamlessness to occur, collaboration must occur among all entities. Faculty and student affairs professionals must work together to create learning experiences within and beyond the classroom. Collaboration may not take place spontaneously, but rather requires that everyone is aware of the mission of the community and acts in ways that are congruent with it. Even as far back as 1937, the Student Personnel Point of View (American Council on

Education, 1937) specified that one of the critical roles of student affairs professionals is to support the academic mission of the institution. Students in our study articulated the important role that physical space (i.e., study lounges, space for club/organization meetings, faculty offices) played in their community. Although students did not explicitly credit student affairs professionals with allocating physical space, we know that student affairs professionals often play a role in advocating for the space needs of students. A specific recommendation for student affairs professionals is to advocate for creating physical spaces in the residence halls that reinforce a value of learning (e.g., faculty office space, classroom space, space to showcase students' academic accomplishments and learning, or protecting study space). Such advocacy may take place when working on the design of a new residence hall, or when deciding what to do with existing space. Protecting space for learning might happen by encouraging student government to rethink the purchase of a television for a floor lounge; or, having housing administrators develop a different plan for dealing with a housing crunch. Too often, the solution to overcrowding at the beginning of an academic year is to assign students to temporary public spaces that otherwise might be used for studying or community building. By the time students are assigned to a permanent space, the critical period for developing habits and norms has passed, and the likelihood that students will use these spaces for scholarly reasons is diminished.

Another implication of understanding living-learning communities as cultural phenomena is the need to acknowledge the powerful role that students play in shaping the communities. The constant presence of students in the communities, coupled with their role in perpetuating the artifacts, perspectives, and values (Kuh & Hall, 1993) make them central players who can "reflect or refute the central ideals" of the living-learning community as a whole (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. 84). The participants in our study discussed how their peers served to endorse and perpetuate the scholarly culture of the living-learning communities. They discussed upholding the norms and rules of the communities by holding themselves more accountable for their behavior because they recognized it was a scholarly environment and felt more accountable to their peers. Without students' input and endorsement, the culture of living-learning communities will not be sustained. Consequently, faculty and administrators must continually provide opportunities for student input and involvement in shaping the long-term and day-to-day operation of the living-learning communities.

A third implication of acknowledging living-learning communities as cultural phenomena is recognizing that some students living within the culture might be marginalized, or might not subscribe to the values and beliefs of the culture.

Latia's description of her experience in the living-learning community environment illustrates this point. Kuh and Whitt (1988) explained that "at worst, culture can be an alienating, ethnocentric force that goads members of a group, sometimes out of fear and sometimes out of ignorance, to reinforce their own beliefs while rejecting those of other groups" (p. 15). It is important for faculty and administrators in living-learning communities to recognize the potential pitfalls of a strong culture by soliciting opinions and seeking input from all students, not solely the student leaders who likely feel at ease in the culture. By identifying students who are unhappy or unsuccessful in the living-learning communities, administrators, and faculty can explore factors contributing to their feelings, thereby identifying and surfacing how existing practices may alienate or privilege different individuals or groups of people.

Future research implications are also realized from the current study. First, because the focus of our study was on academically-based, *collaborative* living-learning communities, additional research should include less extensively resourced communities or those with a weaker collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs because these communities are more common than collaborative communities. Also, by examining how students describe and make meaning of their experiences within these smaller or less comprehensively resourced communities, it is possible that inferences may be made about the role of resources and student/academic affairs collaboration in creating students' perceptions of a culture. In addition, similar studies should be conducted at liberal arts or institutions that are smaller than the large public land-grant university where the current study was conducted to explore whether the unique characteristics of smaller institutions yields a different snapshot of living-learning community living or influences students' perceptions of culture.

The current study sought to explore what students perceived and valued about their academic living-learning community environments. Although living-learning communities have been acclaimed for their potential to reinvigorate undergraduate education, little research exists that examines what students believe is important to the success of these endeavors. Our findings revealed that what students value about these communities may not work in isolation from the integrated whole. Rather, students described their living-learning communities as cultural phenomena, which promoted values of seamless learning, scholarship, and an ethos of relatedness among faculty, staff, and peers.

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