

Residential Learning Communities: Jewels on the Flagship

By: Cal Bergman, Associate Director of Residence Life – Academic Programs

UW-Madison will be launching its 6th residential learning community in August, 2008. The Entrepreneurial Residential Learning Community (supported by the Kauffman Foundation) will join:

- Bradley Learning Community
- Chadbourne Residential College
- International Learning Community
- Multicultural Learning Community
- Women In Science and Engineering

20% of residence hall students have the opportunity to participate in one of these most transformative experiences on campus. The power of our residential learning communities comes from the way that we integrate the academic and social experiences in the day to day life of students. This takes the form of exclusive for-credit seminars as well as more intentional out-of-class activities. More information can be found at <http://www.housing.wisc.edu/assignment/communities/learning.php>.

In *How College Affects Students*, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) meta-analyze 20 years of empirical research and over 2,600 studies and conclude that living in college residence halls versus off campus is perhaps the “single most consistent within-college determinant of impact.” They go on to explain that “this is not particularly surprising because residential living creates a social-psychological context for students that is markedly different from that experienced by those who live at home or elsewhere off campus.”

In a recent study on first-year student grades and retention by our Office of the Provost, we found similar positive effects among students living in University Residence Halls:

- Freshmen who live in University Housing are more likely than their off-campus peers to achieve “above average” (GPA above 3.20) first semester and first year grade-point averages.
- The positive academic effects of living in University Housing are evident for many sub-populations of freshmen including Wisconsin residents, non-residents, women, men, and targeted minority students. There are positive effects on grades and retention for freshmen in each of these groups.
- There are positive effects on grades and retention for students who live in residential learning communities compared to students who live in University Housing but not in a residential learning community.

By participating in the 2007 National Survey of Living-Learning Programs, we extended our understanding of the positive effects of our residential learning communities. The study measured many college environmental features and many student outcomes. In

comparing our residential learning community students (L/L) to our other residence hall students (comparison), as expected, we found that our residential learning communities contributed to many positive effects (significance was found among 18 environmental features and 21 student outcomes). Some highlights include:

- In relation to students in the comparison group, students in the L/L sample reported having more discussions about socio-cultural issues with their peers.
- L/L students reported having more course-related faculty interaction and faculty mentorship than students in the comparison sample.
- L/L students reported more strongly agreeing with the statement that the resident hall climate is academically and socially supportive.
- Students in the L/L sample reported having more positive peer diversity interactions.
- More L/L students than comparison sample students reported that residence hall faculty and staff were influential in the pursuit of their major.
- L/L students reported experiencing greater ease with their academic transition to college than students in the comparison sample.
- L/L students reported higher critical thinking/analysis abilities.
- L/L students reported more confidence in college success, writing courses, academic skills, and test-taking skills.
- Students in the L/L sample reported more diversity appreciation than students in the comparison sample.
- L/L students had a higher sense of civic engagement than students in the comparison sample.

We invite you to share the “secret” with incoming students about these jewels on our flagship!

References

Inkelas, K. K., et al (2007). National Study of Living Learning Programs; UW-Madison Customized Report.

Milner, J. & Huhn, C. (2006). The “Housing Effect” on First-Year Grades and Retention; Academic Planning and Analysis, Office of the Provost, UW-Madison.

Pascarella, E. T. & Terenzini, P. T. (1991). *How College Affects Students*; Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, CA.