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The Importance and Best Practices for Implementation of Living Learning Communities in University Housing

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THE IMPORTANCE OF AND BEST PRACTICES FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF LIVING

LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN UNIVERSITY HOUSING

By

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Thesis Summary

At the University of South Carolina, the Office of First-Year Experience along with Housing and various other departments work to make freshmen's transition as seamless as possible. Using the characteristics of the Best Practice Model (Inkelas, Jessup-Anger, Benjamin, Wawrzynski, 2018), this study will compare the University of South Carolina's Living Learning Communities (LLCs) characteristics to those consistent with the Best Practice Model. More specifically, this study will focus on assessing whether the Rhodos Living-Learning Community (LLC) engages the best academic environment as compared to the "academic environment" level of the Best Practices Model. The data in this study was gathered through interviews with the faculty and staff of the Rhodos LLC at the University of South Carolina. Interview questions related specifically to courses for credit, faculty advising, academically supportive climate, and socially supportive climate. From those interviews, this study will conclude what practices are required for a successful LLC that promotes student growth and development, and how the Rhodos LLC at the University of South Carolina is creating an effective academic environment. Further, the research explored in this study will help to make recommendations as to areas of Rhodos' academic environment elements from the Best Practice Model which could be improved.

Introduction

The University of South Carolina has a deep and rich history of student engagement. In 2019, U.S. News ranked the University of South Carolina (UofSC) the top nationwide university for first-year student experience. Sexton (2019) reported that UofSC's University 101 course, established in 1972, is a major contributor to UofSC's top ranking. University 101 is a course for freshmen to take on how to be a successful student and provides a more seamless transition into college and independence. Another major contributor to UofSC's ranking is its Living Learning Communities (LLCs) on campus, ranking eighth among public universities. Each residence hall on UofSC's campus is home to an LLC, grouping students together based on academic majors or themes, and providing theme-specific programming and involved faculty that can assist in students' transition and success. At the University of South Carolina, the Office of First-Year Experience along with University Housing work to make freshmen's transition as seamless as possible and help to coordinate the living and the learning aspects of freshmen students' experiences.

However, the University of South Carolina is not the only institution making use of LLCs. In the late 1900s, universities began to rework the organization of their students' experiences, in part due to studies conducted in the 1980's by the National Institute of Education, the Association of American Colleges, and scholarly studies by Astin (1985), Boyer (1990), and Tinto (2000.) Institutions began identifying ways that they could bring together academic coursework and the learning occurring inside the classroom with student engagement outside of the classroom, allowing students' entire college career to be encompassed by one experience. These types of initiatives led to living-learning communities (LLCs): organized groups based on common academic majors, academic interests, and other passions living in a common residence

hall with exposure to faculty assistance through their informal advising and presence in the residence hall (Tinto, 2000).

One of the reasons that institutions expanded their efforts to include LLCs was because students participating in LLCs had greater gains in several areas. Pike (1999), in his report on the Effects of Residential Learning Communities and Traditional Residential Living Arrangements on Educational Gains During the First Year of College, stated "students in residential learning communities had significantly higher levels of involvement, interaction, integration, and gains in learning and intellectual development than did students in traditional residence halls." He concluded that there was a direct correlation between students' participation in LLCs and their involvement, interaction, integration, and gains from their first year as a student.

Living-learning communities are not a one-structure-fits-all endeavor. Tinto (2000) and Stassen (2003) both described different types of learning communities. Specifically, they identified five different types: linked courses based on students in a community, freshman interest groups that connect students to multiple classes, cluster courses that connect to a freshman seminar, coordinated studies that separate general education requirements by community, and federated learning communities. Each of these LLCs contribute to benefits for the students. The National Resource Center for First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (Keup, 2013) summarize these benefits into the following eight categories: a smoother transition to college, more open view of different people and learning about others, development of a connection or sense of belonging with the institution, development of academic skills, orientation to campus resources and services, a common first-year experience, development of critical thinking skills, and encouragement self-exploration or personal development.

This study will analyze research and describe the literature on LLCs and relate them to LLCs on UofSC's campus- specifically the Rhodos community. Using Inkelas Jessup-Anger, Benjamin, and Wawrzynski's (2018) Best Practices Model, I will explore the academic environment level of the model pyramid and compare the theory to Rhodos' programming. Finally, I will conclude what elements may be absent or weak and make recommendations as to how Rhodos may improve the LLC in the future to create a more effective academic environment for its students.

Literature Review

This literature review will begin by defining living learning communities and analyzing their various structures. This will be followed by a brief history of LLCs since their creation in the early Colonial period until today. Next, a list of benefits of LLCs to students will be described. Finally, the best practices model created by Inkelas, Jessup-Anger, Benjamin, and Wawrzynski (2018) for designing, implementing, and assessing LLCs will be presented. Their model will serve as the basis for evaluation of the Rhodos LLC.

Inkelas, Jessup-Anger, Benjamin, and Wawrzynski (2018) developed a best practices model in a pyramid structure similar to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Their model uses four levels that build off one another with assessment representing the mortar between the bricks. The levels defined are as follows: collaborative institutional infrastructure, academic environment, co-cocurricular environment, and intentional integration. These researchers posit that successful LLCs must have each of these elements developed in order to create an effective community.

Definition and Structures of Learning Communities

Many researchers have defined learning communities, with some focusing on co-registration, others detailing the creation of subgroups, and even others leaving a more open definition welcome to modifications and further research. Below is a summary of those definitions followed by agreed-upon sets of assumptions and common themes across all ideas of learning communities.

Tinto (1987) defined a learning community as a "co-registration or block scheduling that enables students to take courses together rather than apart." Astin (1985) argues that learning communities are "small subgroups of students… characterized by a common sense of purpose…

that can be used to build a sense of group identity, cohesiveness, and uniqueness that encourage continuity and integration of diverse curricular and co-curricular experiences" (p. 161).

Shapiro and Levine (1999) argue that the definition of a learning community is still not established and accepted by all researchers but have compiled assumptions that apply to all learning communities. These assumptions include:

- Organizing students and faculty into smaller groups

- Encouraging integration of the curriculum

- Helping students establish academic and social support networks

- Providing a setting for students to be socialized to the expectations of college

- Bringing faculty together in more meaningful ways

- Focusing faculty and students on learning outcomes

- Providing a setting for community-based delivery of academic support programs

- Offering a critical lens for examining the first-year experience (p. 3)

Schroeder and Mable (1984) specify six themes that are essential to learning communities. Each of these themes applies to residential learning communities, describing best practices for a successful and impactful community. These themes include:

- Learning communities are generally small, unique, and cohesive units characterized by a common sense of purpose and powerful peer influences.

- Student interaction within learning communities should be characterized by the four I's – involvement, investment, influence, and identity.

- Learning communities involve bounded territory that provides easy access to and control of group space that supports ongoing interaction and social stability.

- Learning communities should be primarily student centered, not staff centered, if they are to promote student learning. Staff must assume that students are capable and responsible young adults who are primarily responsible for the quality and extent of their learning.

- Effective learning communities should be the result of collaborative partnerships between faculty, students, and residence hall staff. Learning communities should not be created in a vacuum; they are designed to intentionally achieve specific educational outcomes.

- Learning communities should exhibit a clear set of values and normative expectations for active participation. The normative peer cultures of learning communities enhance student learning and development in specific ways. (p. 183)

Gabelnick,, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith (1990) explored the idea of a learning community more broadly, stating they can be "any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses- or actually restructure the curricular material entirely- so that students have opportunities for deep understanding and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise" (p. 19). Gabelnick et al., identified five types of learning communities which include linked courses, learning clusters, freshman interest groups, federated learning communities, and coordinated studies. Most researchers agree that learning communities identify with one of Gabelnick et al.'s five structures. Below is a description of each type of learning community, as labeled by Gabelnick et al. and discussed by others.

Linked Courses

The linked course learning community structure connects two courses in which students co-enroll, encouraging those students to learn together (Tinto, 1987). Generally, the two courses chosen are interdisciplinary, creating commonality across the courses, but being different in

nature and subject. In other cases, knowledge learned in both courses can be applied to the other to increase background and furthered knowledge, allowing for more in depth study of specific topics rather than connecting two separate topics. (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Additionally, coursework for the paired courses are taught separately, but with coordination in the schedule of learning and connecting of topics across courses. Tinto (1987) recommends that in some cases, students be required to share their entire curriculum first-semester.
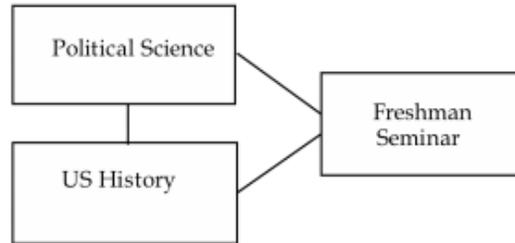

(Tinto, 1987, p. 3)

Learning Clusters

Similar to linked coursework, learning clusters bring courses together. However, learning clusters incorporate more than two courses, co-enrolling many students in most, if not all, of their courses together (Gabelnick, et al., 1990). Tinto (1987) specifies that learning cluster courses are taught "as separate, but linked classes" (p. 2), again with independent coursework for each course that may be integrated with others but is not required for learning clusters. In learning clusters, courses may be more similar in subject, such as political science and history as seen in the diagram below, where topics may overlap or can be used in coordinating coursework, but this is not necessary.

CLUSTER COURSES

Freshman Interest Groups

Although some lectures may hold hundreds of students at once, freshman interest groups allow students to break into smaller discussion sections based on common interests (Tinto, 1987.) Co-enrolling students in three general education courses required of all students, with a fourth class taught by one advisor or faculty member, creating smaller groups for discussion and furthered learning. By creating smaller subsections for the coursework, freshman interest groups can help students to transition into a larger classroom setting while allowing them to have small-group discussions to ensure that students are learning the information. These students can have access to more direct support rather than having the same mentor in a professor of a large class, allowing them to receive more individual assistance and again aid in their transition (Gabelnick, et al., 1990).

FRESHMAN INTEREST GROUPS
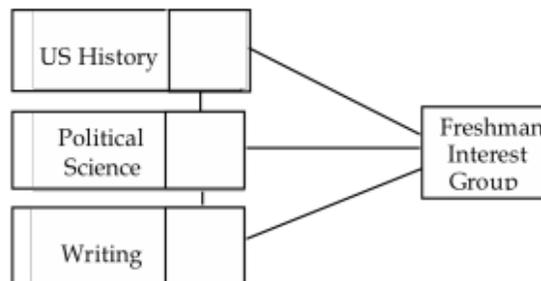
Federated Learning Communities

Different than the faculty member or peer leader found in freshman interest groups, federated learning communities have a "master learner" who completes the course alongside the students and holds discussion seminars with the students to aid in learning (Gabelnick, et al., 1990). To help the master learner learn at the same pace and on the same level as the students, he is required to be of a different discipline and must complete the same academic responsibilities as the students. The master learner can also help facilitate discussions and connections across coursework, cohesively linking together the separate coursework and helping to encourage synthetization, opinions, and points of view from the students (Kellogg, 1999).

Coordinated Studies

As described by Gabelnick, et al. (1990), Kellogg (1999) and Shapiro and Levine (1999), coordinated studies incorporates most aspects of a student's learning into one or two active sessions based on one interdisciplinary theme. This session would entail various teaching formats and require professors to attend all other parts of the session. Tinto (1987) recommends that students meet "as one large class that meets four to six hours at a time several times a week" (p. 2).

COORDINATED STUDIES

Communications
History
Writing
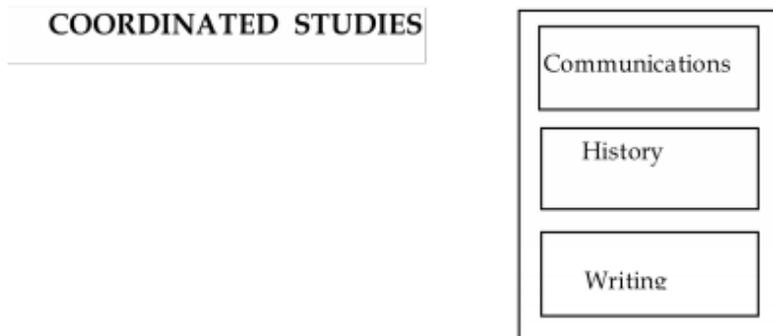
(Tinto, 1987 pg. 3)

Each of these structures are important to the creation of a successful learning community but may also be attached to the residential aspects of a student's life, creating an LLC. By incorporating residence halls and the overall housing aspect of first-year student, learning communities can then create an all-encompassing connected and cohesive first-year experience. This connection of residence life and learning communities has been explored through since colonial times, and a brief history is found in the following section.

Brief History of Living Learning Communities in the United States

Residence halls in America have a long history, beginning in Colonial times. The first residence halls were meant to follow the British residence hall model, where faculty and students interacted outside of the formal learning setting (Brubacher & Rudy, 1993). The American college aimed to follow the model, but in the 1700s, challenges began to arise in the form of bad behavior by students in the residence areas (Lucas, 1994). By the 1800s, there was controversy over funding being put towards the residence halls, with many viewing the dormitories as unnecessary and encouraging of bad behavior (Lucas, 1994). In 1876, Johns Hopkins University was created, following a German style of a research university where students were generally responsible for all aspects of their lives outside of learning, and faculty members were encouraged to partake in research (Rhatigan, 2000). With this division of responsibilities, a split became evident between faculty and students at these research institutions. To bridge the gap between student and academic affairs, President Eliot of Harvard University created a student relations position (Schroeder & Mable, 1994). In 1893, Rainey Harper, president of the University of Chicago, saw value in student housing options and built halls with their "own heads, counselors, and house committees" (Brubaker & Rudy, p. 337).

LLCs are not a new phenomenon. The first living-learning community to appear was the University of Wisconsin's democracy-focused program in 1927 (Smith et al., 2004; Inkelas et al., 2018). The University of Wisconsin "incorporated faculty who acted as a professor and advisor, a required curriculum, and a residential living experience" (Buell, Love & Yao, 2017, p. 90). Alexander Meikeljohn, the head of this experimental, two-year university, attempted to connect coursework to a deeper meaning. During his five-year experiment, the first year of students' academics was characterized by a study of Greek and Roman civilization. The second year consisted of interdisciplinary study of more modern civilizations, building from students' first-year knowledge (Lucas, 1994). These two years of study would help students find their "personal point of view" (Gabelnick et al., p.11) causing students to analyze their coursework and interact with their peers.

By 1928, wealthier persons, like Edward Harkness, donated funds for housing units at upper level universities (Rudolph, 1990). These units contained amenities that encompassed all of a student's life at the university and encouraged communities to be built in the units. Some universities attempted to replicate these units, but without proper funding it was difficult (Brubacher & Rudy, 1990). In 1944, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act was passed, allowing veterans to seek higher education before returning to the workforce (Schroeder & Mable, 1994). With this influx of students, universities had to quickly build residence halls, lacking many necessary elements and creating controversy again in the need for dormitories. With the influx of students decreasing by the 60s, LLCs began to rise, paralleling the expansion of higher education in general to encourage learning that was active and connected to real-life experiences. More institutions began focusing on innovative education that built communities of students and faculty (Buell, et al., 2017).

In the late 1900s, Inkelas, Soldner, Longerbeam, and Leonard (2008) identified three types of living-learning structures including "Small, limited resourced, primarily residential life emphasis; medium, moderately resources, student affairs/academic affairs combination; and large, comprehensively resourced, student affairs/academic affairs collaboration" programs (pp. 502-503). These delineated structures helped institutions to intentionally build LLCs with desired outcomes, aiding in the planning and setup of the communities. Moving forward, the structures and ideas of LLC composition evolved informed by subsequent research.

One of the evolutions in undergraduate education has been integrating previously disparate learning experiences into a cohesive co-curriculum. One of the mechanisms for doing so was the re-invigoration of the living-learning community. Tinto (1987) suggested that studies by the National Institute of Education, the Association of American Colleges, and individual studies conducted by Astin (1985), Boyer (1990), and Tinto, (1987) were instrumental in reviving the concept of LLCs. Prior to LLCs, students' experience in institutions were individual and myopic. Tinto posited that LLCs enhanced undergraduate education by linking and aligning a "show-and-tell" environment where students learn in the classroom, complete coursework outside of the classroom, and then present it to the professor and their peers with little peer or faculty interaction otherwise. Courses were also created separately from one another, even when a part of the same program, creating a disparate curriculum that did not build a peer group but rather "individual units."

Now, many researchers are conducting studies on the ideal LLCs and the benefits of these communities. With each study and advance in research, there are new opinions of the proper structure of a community, necessary elements, and projected benefits of programming and housing. Previously, LLCs were grouped by similar beliefs of students, but more modern LLCs

shifted focus towards grouping by common interests. By today, LLCs have become

commonplace and are diverse in their interests and studies. LLCs have become an essential part

of the "first-year experience" for many students, being incorporated into the overall idea of

higher education as an experience (Adams, 2014).

Benefits of Living Learning Communities

LLCs have proven to be beneficial to students. The National Resource Center for First-

Year Experience and Students in Transition identified eight major goals and outcomes of LLCs

in first-year seminars (Keup, 2013). These eight goals and outcomes provide the basis of the

benefits of LLCs. For the purposes of this research, studies on the benefits of LLC have been

categorized into the eight goals and outcomes.

Experiencing a smooth transition to college

LLCs are valuable in easing the transition from high school to college. For many students,

their freshman year is their first experience living on their own, which can be difficult to manage

along with the increased academic rigor associated with being a university student. Additionally,

classes are likely structured differently than in high school and many students are learning time

management skills for living and learning independently. By participating in LLCs, students can

become connected to other similar students and important faculty members who can help to ease

students' transition (Keup 2013).

Stassen (2003) wrote on the linked course design, discussing three examples in which

groups of students take the same first-year experience course. In all three examples, students

showed better grade point averages their first semester, higher first to second year retention rates,

and an overall better first-year experience. The article discusses how even without coordinated

faculty involvement, LLCs still had a positive effect on its students. LLCs helped not only with

students' academics and experience, but they also made it easier for faculty and campus leaders to provide necessary resources to the students and improve their first year academic performance. As a culmination of the individual benefits Stassen identified, students overall exhibited a smoother transition into all aspects of life as a university student. The students' first-year transition to college was improved specifically by the LLC easier.

Demonstrating openness to views different than one's own and learning about others

As stated previously in the federated learning community structure by Kellogg (1999), one goal of learning communities is to help facilitate discussions and the sharing of individual opinions, points of view, and analyses. Through LLCs, students can interact with many students who are both different from and similar to themselves. Because students who participate in LLCs have greater opportunities to connect and converse with students outside of class, they have more exposure to opinions and people different from themselves than if they had no interaction outside of coursework. Additionally, having students live together that are enrolled in the same coursework encourages them to work together on or interact about their coursework.

Pike (1999) emphasized that there must be a balance between differentiation and integration. Pike stated that students must have diverse experiences and challenges to help them find their community, providing a "parallel" between the differentiation and integration. Pike argues that a "broad range of college experiences influence students' learning and intellectual development' according to various researchers dating back to 1970 (Pike).

Develop a connection, or sense of belonging, with the institution

One of the most prevalent benefits of LLCs is the development of students' sense of belonging at their institution. Sense of belonging helps to build pride and success in students, as well as increase retention rates throughout students' college careers. For many institutions, their

students' pride in the school helps to bring new students to the institution and helps its students to be happier overall with their experience and education. Students who feel like they belong perform better academically and lead more interactive and engaged lives on campus (Keup 2013).

One of the studies conducted to determine the relationship between learning communities and sense of belonging was done by Ciston, Carnasciali, J Nocito-Gobel and Carr (2011). This study, which surveyed students in an engineering LLC at the University of New Haven, investigated student belongingness and extracurricular engagement. That survey explored factors such as immersion in community, friendships between other engineering students, collaboration on schoolwork, accessibility to faculty members, and numerous other aspects relating to a student's belongingness and academics. The researchers concluded that students in the LLC were more likely to participate in group study and coursework and more likely to become collaborative students overall compared to their non-LLC counterparts. These conclusions were valid both in courses as well as activities outside of academics. The study reinforced that the LLC was effective in creating a group cohesiveness, found overall positivity in the students' view of the LLC, and a positive effect on their sense of belonging and their ease of connection to major-specific faculty and activities. By grouping Engineering students together who were pursuing the same major of study and completing the same coursework, students felt like they belonged to their community and major. Further, students in the engineering LLC felt that their community was connected to their institution, building their sense of belonging beyond their LLC to the institution as a whole.

Develop academic skills

A third benefit of participation in an LLC is the students' improved academic skills. These improved academic skills resulted in improved grade-point averages, more interactive coursework, better perceived academic support from faculty, higher retention rates due to passing students, and many other benefits. The incorporation of faculty into the learning communities help students have more support, directly leading to improved academics. Additionally, living with other academically-focused students or students with similar coursework encourages students to work together and influences students to complete work outside of the classroom like peers around them (Keup 2013).

To explore the academic benefits of LLCs, Adams (2014) recorded interviews of six students to gain a better understanding of LLCs from a student's perspective and experience. The interview explored three major ideas: the students' perceptions of benefits in participating in an LLC, the students' perception of benefits due to living in a residence hall aligned with the community, and how the community affected students' application and admission to the university. Adams concluded that one major benefit of LLCs was academic support, with students feeling as though they were closer to fellow students and faculty that could assist with more academic concerns and success. Through this improved access to support, students performed better academically and felt more academically confident.

Another study that analyzed the academic benefits of LLCs was a study by Purdie and Rosser in 2011. They compared students in a FIG, some of whom lived in an academic-themed floor, students who lived on the academic-themed floor but were not enrolled in a FIG, and others who were in a virtual FIG without a living component. This study found that the students who participated in the residentially-based FIGs earned higher grades than either students in the academic-themed floor without FIG enrollment or the students in the virtual FIG. Additionally,

the FIGs with a residential component earned higher grades than those who were not residentially-based. Most significantly, this study used control groups that asserted that the students performing academically stronger were not those simply with higher academic ability, but all students. The freshman interest groups in this study consisted of about 15 to 25 students who lived on the same residence hall floor and were co-enrolled in four courses together with three of them for general education requirements relevant to the freshman interest group's theme, and the fourth course focusing on helping students with the transition into college. Purdie and Rosser further asserted that LLCs create the best academic environment possible, with students earning higher grades than both other types of first-year experience practices explored.

Provide orientation to campus resources and services

A valuable aspect of LLCs is their incorporation of faculty members into the lives of students in and out of the classroom. By assigning specific faculty members to assist with the LLCs, students often connect with the faculty member and view him or her as a connection to resources on campus and in the students' studies. By integrating academic into the living environment, academic resources were more accessible and visible to students (Keup, 2013). Adams (2014) found that one of the major benefits of participating in an LLC perceived by students was increased social interaction with peers and faculty. Because students see faculty, peers, and academic resources in both their classroom and their living quarters, students felt knowledgeable on types of resources available and therefore were more likely to use them.

Create a common first-year experience

As a part of many learning communities, first-year students are encouraged to take common coursework and have similar first-year experiences despite different majors of studies and academic focus. Connecting first-year students through LLCs and common courses helps

students to find commonality with each other, establishing a more standard first-year experience for students which provides students with the opportunity to experience college together and build relationships. Additionally, having the living component incorporated into learning communities allows students' experiences to be more connected in both their academic and non-academic lives. Students will not only have common academic experiences but they will also share learning to become independent and experiencing first-year activities through the institution (Keup 2013).

In 2003, Inkelas and Weisman compared three types of LLCs to a control sample to analyze the commonalities in students' first-year experiences. They concluded that students who lived in LLCs benefitted both academically and socially, as they were more likely to be involved in on-campus activities. Inkelas and Weisman concluded that LLCs help students to connect with others and to be surrounded by those interested in the same coursework, activities, interests, and faculty. Their research demonstrated that students were more engaged on campus and built their experience together. Students were able to bond further than the control group. Further, students interacted with one another through the entire first-year experience, encouraging relationships across common experiences.

Develop critical thinking skills

Through the incorporation of assignments discussions across coursework and peers in a community, LLCs can help to encourage critical thinking in students. As mentioned previously sharing and analyzing opinions, ideas, and points of view can bridge ideas among subjects and peers. Using the skills taught from one course in another course can help students to think more critically as to the importance of what students are learning in classes. Connecting courses through enrollment helps facilitate critical thinking in students and encourages them to find the

reason the courses are connected and apply their newly found knowledge in alternate setting (Keup 2013).

*Self-exploration or personal development*

For university students, their first-year experience is already crucial to their personal development and finding their independent selves. Students must learn to complete tasks on their own, both related to their academic and personal lives. This self-exploration is important to developing how the students will perform academically and after graduation. Surrounding students with constant influence from their community, students can become more engaged on campus and in their community, helping to develop them as students and future career holders. (Keup 2013).

Pike (1999) spoke on the theory of LLCs in residential living arrangements during the first year of college, specifically relating to students' personal development and self-exploration. Frequently referencing The Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, Pike discussed the importance of a seamless learning environment between in- and out-of-class experiences. LLCs create motivating environments that assist students in focusing on learning and education during college. Pike stated that a student's success in college is based on factors including "coursework, effort in studying, involvement in out-of-class activities, and interaction with faculty and peers," (pg. 269) and argued that it is important to develop students in their entirety, not only how they perform academically.

Theoretical Framework for Evaluation

Inkelas, et al. (2018) created a best practices model for LLCs. They used research from the National Study of Living-Learning Programs (NSLLP) team to create a stacked pyramid diagram, similar to Maslow's pyramid of needs. Their model contains four levels of the pyramid,

consisting of elements for a successful LLC. These levels include foundational infrastructure, academic environment, cocurricular elements, and intentional integration, as seen below.
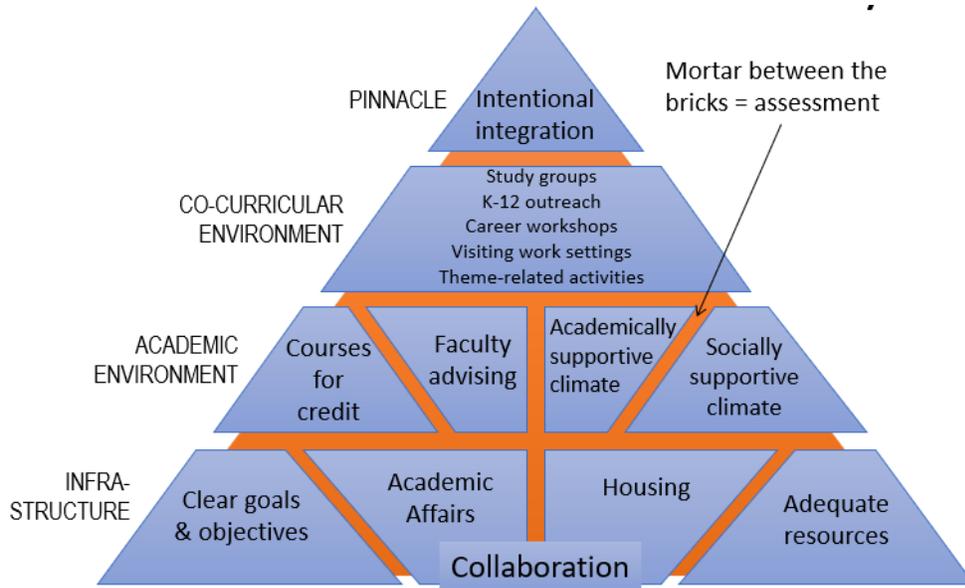
(Inkelas, et al., 2018, p.18)

Infrastructure

As seen in the diagram above, clear goals and objectives, academic affairs, residence life/housing, and adequate resources are the foundational elements of a successful LLC. The base of the pyramid must have "clearly articulated goals and objectives directly relating to the program's theme, collaborating between residence life and the relevant academic departments supporting the LLC, an adequate fiscal and human resources to productively run the program" (Inkelas, et al., p. 18). Clear goals relevant to the community's theme are important for the programming within the community. Additionally, there must be collaboration between student and academic affairs, developing relationships between students' academics and residence life/housing. Depending on the type of institution, faculty and student affairs may be fully integrated or have a parallel partnership based on the level of collaboration between the two.

Finally, there must be adequate "human, physical, and financial resources" (Inkelas, et al., p. 19). For human resources, there must be faculty and professional staff who can perform tasks such as "community building, discipline, administrative tasks, and co-curricular activities" (Inkelas, et al., p. 19). Physically, LLCs must have ample space for students to interact with one another, complete out-of-class work, dine, attend meetings and events, and offices for faculty and staff. Finally, there must be financial funding for the LLC. Institutions must have an adequate budget for LLCs to be created, otherwise their success is limited.

Academic Environment

As the pyramid is designed, LLCs can only establish an effective academic environment after creating a successful infrastructure. In the academic environment level of the pyramid, there must be "courses for credit from the LLC itself or co-lists with an academic department, academic advising performed by faculty members, and a residence hall climate that is academically and socially supportive" (Inkelas, et al., p. 20). Courses for credit allows students from an LLC to co-enroll in courses, encouraging them to make a smaller subgroup in larger lecture classes. This separation helps LLC peers to assist one another with classwork, motivation, and understanding. Inkelas et al. recommend that these common courses be either general education courses required of all students, or major-specific courses relevant to the theme of the LLC. Faculty involvement, including the teaching courses and advising students, is crucial to building relationships between faculty and students. Generally, the first-year students in these LLCs are less motivated to have a mentor-type relationship with faculty but encouraging advisement and other interactions aids in leading to "more sustained mentorship in the future" (Inkelas, et al., p. 20). Finally, the perception of academic and social support in LLCs by students is essential to facilitating more peer-to-peer interaction and improving students "transition to

college, sense of belonging, appreciation of diversity/multiculturalism, and commitment to civic engagement" (Inkelas, et al., p. 21). Connecting and creating a positive social and academic environment helps LLCs support academics and help them be more engaging for students.

Co-Curricular Environment

The co-curricular environment level of the pyramid consists of "formal, out-of-class activities that supplement and fortify the academic goals of the living-learning community" (Inkelas, et al., p. 21). These activities are relevant to the LLC's theme, improving students' knowledge, skills about, and critical thinking of said subject. The most common co-curricular activities identified are "orientation programs, group projects, team-building pursuits… cultural outings, multicultural programming, and study groups" (Inkelas, et al., p. 21). The four most successful activities are study groups, outreach to K-12 schools for tutoring, career workshops, and visits to work settings such as business, labs, and government buildings. These activities are important to establishing the theme of the LLC and encouraging students to interact more with that subject, with their peers, and as a developed student-learner.

Pinnacle

The pinnacle of the pyramid is intentional integration, which can only be reached if all other levels are created prior. Intentional integration is the collaboration between various levels and blocks of the pyramid to create one cohesive LLC. This integration allows the LLC to be able to increase the success, importance, and teachability of events and programming. With intentional integration, LLCs can connect aspects throughout the pyramid to have more impactful and successful events and programming within the LLC.

Mortar

The mortar between the bricks of the pyramid is assessment. Effective assessment gathers data to evaluate whether the program's efforts "align with the program's goals and objectives and integrate with the program's other elements" (Inkelas, et al., p. 23). A strong assessment program should specifically include "the effectiveness of the discrete elements of their program, the extent to which the (LLC) program's elements are aligned with the program's goals and objectives, and the level of integration of the various elements to form a cohesive program" (Inkelas, et al., p. 23). With appropriate assessment, LLCs are able to evaluate their success and modify their curriculum to better integrate and connect practices in LLCs.

Incomplete Pyramid

Since the best practices model is built in a pyramid formation, all elements of the model must be present in order to reach a successful LLC. However, often it is the case that not all elements are present or effective, creating an incomplete pyramid. The most common vulnerability for academic partnerships is lacking a balance between academic and social environments, which leads to lacking coursework for credit, low faculty involvement, ineffective co-curricular activities, and impossible integration. When a community lacks co-curricular activities, students are unable to connect their learning to real-world experiences, reducing critical thinking skills and not allowing for integration. Without intentional integration, there is a lack of collaboration overall between all parts of the pyramid, with disparate pieces not knowing or understanding the efforts of others, thus reducing the LLC's effectiveness overall. Finally, if an LLC lacks an assessment component, it becomes difficult to sustain an LLC due to lack of accountability and ineffective use of resources. Overall, LLCs must contain all elements of the pyramid and execute the elements well, otherwise the LLC will lack upper-level elements and be difficult to sustain.

Conclusion

LLCs connect classroom and extracurricular experiences by integrating student's academic and living affairs into one cohesive experience. Communities may belong to one of five structures including linked courses, learning clusters, freshman interest groups, federated learning communities, and coordinated learning. Although the concept of residence halls and LLCs have changed since they began in colonial times, there has been extensive research and trials to determine their need and development. Through their manifestation, LLCs today are shown to have numerous benefits including a smoother transition into college, more open views by students of others, students' sense of connection with the institution, better academic skills, more use of campus resources and services, better critical thinking skills, advanced self-exploration and personal development, and a common first-year experience. By following the best practices model pyramid, there are four essential levels to building a successful LLC including infrastructure, academic environment, co-curricular activities, and intentional integration.

Based on this review, much research exists on LLCs, their benefits, structures, and best practices. However, there is a lack of evaluative efforts on existing LLCs to assess their adherence to best practices and ensuring that predicted outcomes are occurring. This study will evaluate the adherence of an LLC to the elements stated in the academic environment tier of the pyramid, exploring where it may be missing elements.

Method

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into the Rhodos faculty-led living-learning community at the University of South Carolina. The Rhodos community is an interdisciplinary LLC focused on information, computing and design. The communtiy's residence hall also houses the Makerspace- a unique workspace containing various technologies and resources relevant to the community's theme. Specifically, this study seeks to understand the strength of Rhodos LLC academic environment of the Best Practices Model: Living Learning Communities presented by Inkelas, et al. (2018). This study will attempt to answer the following questions:

1) What is the structure, type, and rigor of courses are offered for credit in the Rhodos LLC?

2) How do the assigned faculty and staff develop advising relationships with students?

3) How does the Rhodos staff create an academically supportive climate in the LLC?

4) How does the Rhodos staff create a sense of belonging to the LLC?

Qualitative research is an umbrella term for several research strategies that share the characteristics of soft data that cannot be adequately explained by statistics. It is also used to investigate complex topics, the understanding of behavior and context, and data collected through sustained contact with people (Bogdan & Bicklen, 1998). Creswell (2018) identified five different types of qualitative research: narrative research, phenomenological research, grounded theory research, ethnographic research, and case study research. This study is considered case study research because it is a bounded system (Creswell), and the research questions seek to understand why and how events are occurring without controlling the events (Yin, 2003). A case study generally focuses on fully understanding contemporary events (Stake, 1995).

Participant Selection

Four faculty and staff members were selected for this study. They are current faculty and staff who support Rhodos LLC. They were chosen based on their direct involvement in the LLC, and they are the four members who supervise the LLC and the residence hall. The interviewees consisted of the Residence Life Coordinator of the residence hall, the Faculty Principal of Rhodos, the Assistance Principal of Rhodos, and the Business Manager of Rhodos.

Data Collection

Faculty and staff interview questions focused on only the academic environment level of the best practices model, consisting of four elements: courses for credit, faculty advising, academically supportive climate, and socially supportive climate. The questions were as follows:

Courses for Credit

- Structure of courses - Can you tell me about the structure of the courses offered in Rhodos? Are the courses linked? How many pairs are offered? How many credits are these courses worth?

- Content of courses – what courses are offered? How were the courses selected? How do the courses relate to Rhodos?

- Rigor of courses – How would you compare the rigor of the courses selected for Rhodos compared to other courses?

- Do you teach any of the Rhodos courses? Which ones?

Faculty Advising

- How would you describe your interactions with students? Transactional? Transformational?

- How often do you meet with students? What are those discussions like?

- What are the topics covered when you meet with students?

- How do you begin to establish the role of mentor for the students?

- What are your conversations like that are more casual in nature (and less about Rhodos specifically)?

- What role does having offices in South Quad play in the ability to talk with students in Rhodos?

Academically Supportive Climate

- How often do you talk with students outside of class?

- Do you structure activities in the residence halls that encourage students to study together – especially for the Rhodos courses? How does that work?

- How do you see Rhodos contributing to students' ability to interact with people different from themselves?

- How does the maker space help facilitate an academically supportive climate?

Socially Supportive Climate

- How does Rhodos help foster a sense of belonging in students? What are the signs that this is happening?

- South Quad doesn't have much common spaces on the floors, and it is an apartment-style residence hall. How do you think those physical structure impact students' ability to get to know one another?

- What role does social media play in building a socially supportive climate?

- How do you view Rhodos in helping students appreciate cultural differences?

- What role do you see Resident Mentors playing in helping to form a socially supportive environment?

Biases

As a researcher, I have several biases. The first is that I am a student member of the Rhodos LLC, and I have experienced the programming and educational efforts first-hand. The second is that in addition to being a resident of Rhodos, I also serve as a Resident Mentor, where I have planned and implemented programming and educational efforts. I may view those efforts more favorably because I am responsible for planning and implementing them. As much as I will attempt to be objective in my analysis of the qualitative data, I cannot completely eliminate it because I am the data collection instrument (Merriam, 1998). The third is that I have never served as full-time faculty or staff, and I may not completely understand their points of view.

<center>**Findings**</center>

The purpose of the study was to compare and contrast the elements of the academic support portion of Inkelas et al.'s Best Practices Model for LLCs. From the four research questions below, interview questions were developed using the four elements of the academic support section of the PBM for LLCs, including courses for credit, faculty advising, academically supportive climate, and socially supportive climate. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1) What is the structure, type, and rigor of courses are offered for credit in the Rhodos LLC?

2) How do the assigned faculty and staff develop advising relationships with students?

3) How does the Rhodos staff create an academically supportive climate in the LLC?

4) How does the Rhodos staff create a sense of belonging to the LLC?

Since there were only four faculty members of the Rhodos community to interview, most information was included in the following sections. In cases that faculty members asserted different opinions than the others, those opinions are still included but stated in separate paragraphs or statements.

Research Questions

Courses for Credit

The first research question asked about the structures, types and level of rigor of the courses offered for credit in Rhodos LLC. Data for this question was culled from interviews with the faculty principal of Rhodos LLC, the assistant principal of Rhodos LLC, and the Business Manager of Rhodos. The Residence Life Coordinator for South Quad, the building where Rhodos is located, was not asked this question due to the nature of his position.

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There are several structures for coursework in Rhodos. The Faculty Principal stated that "the ideal for these courses would be a cohort that takes the classes together and lives together, but that only works if everyone agrees to do it, which has been a challenge." As a Rhodos fellow, students are not required to take courses, especially since many majors have tight coursework schedules. Some of the courses have sections for only Rhodos students and some courses have seats saved for a certain amount of Rhodos students but in a larger lecture setting. In many of the common core classes, the lectures are large and cannot be made into sections exclusively for Rhodos students, but have a smaller group of Rhodos students within the large lecture, which allows students to have peer to peer support and provides more academic support through the Rhodos faculty. Many of the Rhodos courses are linked. For example, a media arts class is paired with an entrepreneurship class and a computer science class is paired with a speech class. Students take both classes in the same semester and with the same group of students. Most of the class pairings are major based, so that students take either two classes relevant to a specific major or a major course paired with a core course. Some University 101 sections are designated for only Rhodos students, but students also have the option to a general University 101 section not related to the community.

The Rhodos community offers many options of courses for Rhodos students specifically, from media arts to entrepreneurship to computer science. The courses are meant to relate to the general theme of the community (information, design, and computing) or are Carolina Core (general education) courses that all students must take. Some course examples are algorithmic design, digital media art fundamentals, and computer science. In addition to major-specific courses, there are Carolina Core Rhodos sections including English 101, Chemistry 111, Math 141, and Speech. Many of the Carolina Core courses were chosen by an outside faculty member

responsible for analyzing data for the incoming Rhodos class. He determined which courses had the greatest number of requests, and to the extent possible, he incorporated the theme of information, computing and design. The content for the Carolina Core course is chosen by the department, but with major specific courses or courses taught by Rhodos faculty, the content is catered more towards the community. Additionally, there are University 101 classes offered in the fall semester only for Rhodos students, often convened in the residence hall, overlapping the University 101 content with the theme of the living learning community. These classes often have final projects or curriculum that incorporate the Rhodos Makerspace- an area specific to the community for residents to use that contains devices and equipment relevant to the theme of the community. In Rhodos-specific University 101 courses, professors often incorporate the theme of the living learning community through assignments, projects, and curriculum that takes advantage of both the residence hall and the unique opportunities in the Makerspace. Each professor who teaches a Rhodos University 101 section can reach the learning outcomes for the course, while at the same time creating assignments and further teachings germane to the theme of Rhodos. For example, the Faculty Principal and Business Manager both taught sections of the University 101 course and required final projects and assignments in the Makerspace. The Business Manager's University 101 course had a mid-term with teams of three and "had them come up with an idea and follow through using the Makerspace and Rhodos resources."

The rigor of the courses offered in Rhodos was relatively the same as non-community specific courses. Although there may be more opportunities for students to learn new skills or discuss information, design, and computing topics with the Rhodos faculty, the curriculum itself is more rigorous *per se* than a non-Rhodos course. More specifically, if the coursework was more rigorous than regular sections, students might avoid those courses. The University 101

courses are not rigorous in general because the purpose of the courses is to help students

transition from high school to college. The Business Manager stated that in the Rhodos sections,

there is the opportunity for a "more creative outlook" on various assignments and exposure to

resources, but nothing requires more time, thinking, or rigorous effort than any other University

101 course.

Faculty Advising

The second research question asked how faculty and Rhodos LLC staff developed

advising relationship with students. Because of the nature of this question, the Residence Life

Coordinator (RLC) was not asked this question. In general, faculty interactions with residents are

transformational, but there are some occasions when interactions are simply transactional.

Faculty rarely encountered a student coming to ask for help solving a problem; however, on

occasion students would come to Café Rhodos with a specific inquiry. Café Rhodos is an event

held on Fridays at a consistent time mid-day that has all faculty and staff members of Rhodos in

the makerspace for students to get a snack and drink, interact with things in the Makerspace, and

connect with faculty and staff members. The Assistant Principal asserted that "what usually

happens is… its less common for a student to come to us and say I have this problem will you

help me solve it because I've noticed… there's a dynamic of… you're the old, I'm the student,

and there's a sense of nervousness," describing how there is a challenge in building relationships

with students when viewed as older or more professional. Being visible aided in encouraging

interactions, and the Faculty Principal stated that he tries to be in his office as little as possible

but rather in the residence hall, on the patio, in the Makerspace, or other areas that he may run

into students. Additionally, the Business Manager and Faculty Principal had visibility and

interactions with their University 101 students during class, outside of class, in an office setting,

and throughout the residence hall. The Faculty Principal reported that interactions related to his University 101 course were individual office hours, coming up with ideas for assignments, and receiving feedback on projects and ideas. However, all faculty members asserted that in general, any relationship built with the students took time and developed over the course of the year, requiring frequent interactions and building trust.

Most interactions with students were cyclical and did not occur in an even flow. As identified by the Assistant Principal, during times of higher stress like mid-terms and exams, there was an increase in student interactions, but otherwise it was somewhat unpredictable who would interact and when that would occur. Interactions occurred at building events or in meetings that were scheduled through conversations at building events, although not always. These events may be sponsored by Hall Government, University Housing, Rhodos, or non-sponsored casual programming. The Faculty Principal reported that interactions rarely happen in his office or during scheduled times, and rather occur when walking around campus, in the Makerspace, or before and after programming.

In terms of the content of the interactions, many times students came to faculty with questions about academics and living independently. Specifically, as the Business Manager identified, students often interacted when concerned with changing their major, managing their time, finding extracurricular activities, or inquiring about how to live with others for the first time. Often, students would begin by asking questions about the Makerspace or tools within it which would evolve into talking about more opportunities in the Makerspace which began to foster a relationship between student and faculty. Additionally, some students would ask about career options, which classes to take, and how to learn more skills related to their major and the opportunities in the Makerspace. As mentioned previously, times of higher stress increased

interactions with faculty, and students may come with conversations about within or beyond the classroom stress, seeking guidance from faculty members as mentors.

Over time, the faculty members were able to establish roles as mentors to the students through their status as media professionals and consistent interactions with students. Having exposure and visibility to the students during events and at Café Rhodos helped students approach the faculty and build trust that evolved into the mentor/mentee relationship. Answering students' questions, talking about academic and social issues, and having more casual interactions helped to show genuine interest in the students which grew into a relationship and eventually a mentorship. Faculty find it difficult initially to break the pre-conceived notion that faculty members are unreachable on a personal level, and it takes time to encourage students to view the faculty members as equals and mentors. Creating casual interactions, like Café Rhodos and the Magic Garage, on a predictable schedule is essential to developing relationships between faculty and students. One difficulty mentioned by the Faculty Principal is that each year is a "reset" and the faculty is tasked with starting over with all new residents. One challenge is that Rhodos "[does not] have a big continuing group" so all the residents the faculty connects with are gone after a year. Since building the relationship takes time and continual interaction, it is difficult to maintain the mentorship role with students after they leave the residence hall.

Having an office in the residence hall for the faculty and staff of Rhodos was significant to the effectiveness of the community. A "home base" helped to establish Rhodos as an identifiable thing, with a specific place that people can go to for assistance, advice, or information. Because the offices for Rhodos are located in the students' residence hall, it is accessible to the residents, there by increasing their exposure to the faculty members and to the ideas that they present. However, at the other end of the spectrum, the offices may feel too

formal for some students' conversations. The offices were a tangible representation of the faculty and staff associated with the LLC. For the Faculty Principal, the office is more of a formality and place to hold things, where more of his connections and work with residents happens in the building and on the campus as a whole.

Academically Supportive Climate

The third research question asked how the Rhodos staff created an academically supportive environment in the LLC. Generally, conversations with students were concerned with academics. The faculty and staff were able to connect students with specific resources and assist them with finding ways to study, complete homework with peers, and interact with similar students. One of the bigger challenges for the community is making the students aware of the various resources e and helping them access to them. In the past, Rhodos coordinated with the Student Success Center by bringing tutors to the residence hall for courses that students were seen studying frequently. Now, they are shifting to a more technological focus so that students can attend from anywhere, meeting the student where they are. Beyond creating academically supportive activities, the greater challenge is encouraging residents to attend programming or engage with the community. Rather, the faculty have found it more beneficial to meet the students where they are and reduce programming that is bound by space and time. Making programs virtual and flexible, having consistent events that encourage residents to come when they are available, and bringing more programming to the residents are the strategies that encourage engagement. One of Housing's educational priorities is fostering academic progress and enhancing the academic support for students. Housing's assistance comes in the form of collaborating with Rhodos to spread awareness of resources and bring support to the residents.

Overall, since Rhodos is an interdisciplinary LLC, there is an opportunity for students to interact with different people based on majors, passion, and background. A great diversity of talent and skills exist in the community, and when the students interact, they are able to learn from one another. The Residence Life Coordinator specifically noted that students learn from one another while working in diverse groups on a project. He said, "it's not even really a thought right now because they're already working together on their project," so their interactions occur more organically and have students unconsciously experiencing those interactions. By keeping the theme of the community general with the central question "what are you making," students can come together over a common idea or interest and it creates diversity in how students approach the question. The Makerspace has a staff consisting of Rhodos fellows who work hours in the Makerspace office, and these students represent most every type of diversity. Students are comfortable approaching other students, the faculty, and the staff since the group is diverse and encourages conversation. The Makerspace staff and their connections to the faculty help other students learn more organically from one another, serving as an example to fellow students. From a housing perspective, the Residence Life Coordinator identified that housing's programming has a unit on diversity and inclusion. These programming efforts target educating residents on their sense of self and their knowledge of others, as well as how to break barriers and interact with more people effectively.

The Makerspace provides Rhodos with a unique opportunity to provide a visible space for students to interact and complete academic work. Not only can students use the space for studying, collaborative projects, and conversation, but they can also apply the skills they learn in class or learn skills not relevant to their courses (but relevant to a student's interests). As stated by the Residence Life Coordinator "always keeping [the Makerspace] open to students, come

down [to the Makerspace] and study whenever [they] want," where students have the Makerspace as a general area open to them for academic use. The Makerspace is a project-based learning environment, which allows students to develop an idea, execute it, and learn through that problem-solving process. The Business Manager stated that the space offers an "outlet for creativity and self-exploration to try things outside of class", and "allows students to really learn things on their own and find their interests and figure out how to learn things and critically think on their own." Many of the tools in the Makerspace can be used for in-class learning, and the space allows students to add an element of creativity to projects given in courses, encouraging students to enhance their academics and coursework. Additionally, the Makerspace is an area where students can just interact with other residents. The faculty found that during times of high stress or more academically-focused periods of the semester, it was more important to refrain from programming and have the space open for students to study and engage in academic coursework.

Socially Supportive Climate

The fourth research question asked how the Rhodos staff created a socially supportive environment. The Rhodos LLC helps to encourage a sense of belonging and increased interactions with other students in the community. Rhodos fellows feel as though they belong to the community over time, through interactions with the faculty and staff, other peers, and technology in the Makerspace. With the Makerspace, students feel attached to something tangible, and it provides a space for students to meet others and identify with the community. Engagement is a challenge that limits the social support of the community. The faculty focuses on getting students to attend an event and connecting with those students, and then they encourage them to continue coming to future events over time. The proximity of having the staff

on site, having tangible equipment and material in the Makerspace, and collaborating with Resident Mentors and housing fosters the sense of belonging to the community. Students show signs of this sense of belonging when they begin to feel more comfortable talking about their status as a Rhodos fellow and begin to thrive in their studies. Through claiming the identity of being a Rhodos fellow, students begin to interact more and contribute more to the community. Contributing to the community includes activities like working on the Maker Staff, being a Rhodos Returner, or engaging more with makerspace tools. However, not all students desire to connect to the community, and that presents a different challenge. As stated by the Residence Life Coordinator, there is a "struggle with the identity aspect of the community" with it being new and having students that are not necessarily tied to the Rhodos theme. For some residents, they selected the community because of the apartment-style configuration, and they may distance themselves from the community or push away people and activities. To combat this, it is crucial that the faculty of Rhodos encourages and facilitates residents going beyond the usual people that they associate or spend time with and mix groups of residents to encourage one community.

One challenge that the residence hall faces is the apartment-style layout of students' rooms. The Assistant Principal said, "if they have everything they need in their apartment, they don't have to leave it ever," explaining the challenge of getting students to come to events, interact with peers, and leave their apartment. This style of residence hall reduces the visibility of the faculty and staff and makes it harder to form relationships with and between students. Additionally, at UofSC students can choose their roommates. Thus, in an apartment-style setting, if residents have their friends and all essential amenities in one location, they have little need or desire to leave their room, making engagement in the community difficult. One way that the Faculty Principal combatted the difficulty of the apartment-style setup was hosting a cooking

class in his University 101 course in the apartment of one of his students. It presented an example of inviting residents into one another's apartment and bringing Rhodos programming into residents' spaces. Overall, the faculty must have larger events in the main spaces for the whole building encouraging building interactions rather than hosting several smaller programming efforts that reach less students.

The Faculty Principal, however, had a different view of apartment-style limitations and identified that, although it may be difficult to have residents leave their space, there is an opportunity to use students' apartments for programming and encourage students to invite one another into their spaces and interact through their shared space. The Faculty Principal asserted that although the apartment-style of the residence hall may be challenging, there are more opportunities to utilize residents' personal spaces and encourage interaction between residents in their own spaces. Compared to common spaces in other residence halls, the apartment space available to residents in Rhodos' residence hall is greater, containing the availability for the same type of interactions, just in residents' personal spaces.

The Rhodos faculty use many social media platforms for a variety of purposes. The Facebook page is catered towards students' parents, while the Youtube channel is more educational. The Instagram account is targeted toward current and future students. The goal of the community's Instagram is to offer a mix of things that appeals to students they already have while also showcasing Rhodos to future students. Instagram is showcases the opportunities Rhodos has for future students, while at the same time advertises what is available to current students. Instagram also offers a way to simplify information and send it to all residents in an easy to understand manner.

More specific to the residence life aspect of the LLC, the Resident Mentors are an essential element in nurturing the social environment. Resident Mentors' programming, including community gatherings, is significant to fostering. Resident Mentors are charged with helping students grow into a community at the hall or floor level. Residents then can see this smaller subset as a mini community within a community. Resident Mentors "allow housing to get things done on a smaller level," as stated by the Residence Life Coordinator. The Resident Mentors have a unique relationships with residents because they are closer in age to the students and are having a "parallel experience" to the students. The Assistant Principal identified that the Resident Mentors assist in the peer-to-peer mentor relationship. Resident Mentors can be student leaders for the Rhodos learning community, engaging in opportunities and encouraging residents to as well. Resident Mentors can act as an example showing that the LLC is a "Rhodos family" and can reach the students more easily than the Rhodos faculty and staff. Resident Mentors have training on the residential elements of the LLC, from knowing the building and rules to attending to student's affective needs.

Discussion

Each section of the academic environment has been ranked on a scale of weak to strong. This ranking system allows comparisons across the sections and suggests recommendations based on which areas are in the most need of improvements.

Courses for Credit

The courses for credit element of the academic environment in the Rhodos community is ranked as strong, being the strongest element of the LLC's academic environment compared to the other three. The Rhodos courses available for students have been well-developed by the Rhodos faculty and staff team. There are a variety of courses for students to choose from, ranging from major-specific to core to theme-specific courses. There are also several course structures present in the community, including the linked course structure and the unique University 101 course that groups together Rhodos fellows and develops content based on the community's theme and available resources. Additionally, the Faculty Principal and Business Manager teach sections of the University 101 course, allowing closer connections to the Makerspace and the community's theme as well as greater visibility to the community's students. The faculty principal also teaches major- and theme-specific coursework, showcasing his expertise to the students and more closely connecting the theme to the students' coursework.

Faculty Advising

The faculty advising portion of the academic environment is ranked as relatively weak, offering potential for improvement but not performing as the weakest element of this LLC's environment. Although courses represented a great opportunity for interactions with students, the faculty and staff of Rhodos develop their role as mentors through consistent and visible programming events, across campus, and in their offices. Faculty and staff invest time, effort,

and energy to being present at different events around the residence hall. The faculty and staff's focus on building relationships over time and acting as professional mentors leads to advising their students informally. However, since engaging students in programming efforts is a challenge for the community, especially with the apartment-style makeup of the residence hall, it is difficult for faculty members to be visible to residents who do not engage. Without a majority of the students interacting with the faculty members in programming and events, the faculty's ability to build relationships with non-engaging students is limited. A second reason this element of the academic environment is rated as weak is because the faculty and staff seem to offer little encouragement for beyond the classroom experiences like study abroad, undergraduate research, and internships.

To strengthen the faculty advising element, the following recommendations are suggested: The first is to increase faculty visibility to non-engaging by faculty members being present by engaging virtually, as well as Resident Mentors' smaller student gatherings. Encouraging students to engage with the community is a challenge for most LLCs, but to increase the visibility of engagement opportunities with students, Rhodos faculty could increase visibility by engaging more in social media, being seen on the larger campus' virtual engagements, and offering more opportunities for students to engage electronically. The second recommendation is to create encouragement for students to explore beyond the classroom experiences such as study abroad, undergraduate research, and internships. Providing information on how students can get involved beyond the classroom and Rhodos will help the LLC to have a more sustained effect on the students, as well as connect the faculty to students in a mentorship and advising role.

Academically Supportive Climate

Compared to the three other elements of academic environment, the academically

supportive climate sector of the environment is ranked as relatively strong, ranking as one of the

stronger elements of the community while at the same time having capacity for enrichment. The

Makerspace offers a physical environment that encourages peer-to-peer interactions and

application of content learned in the classroom, which can foster an academic focus in students.

The strongest aspect of the academic environment in Rhodos is students' ability to interact with

students of various majors, the opportunities for project-based learning, and the potential to

deepen critical thinking through the Makerspace. Because the community is interdisciplinary, the

students' have great potential to interact with different people, which helps students to formulate

their own identity and opinions. However, because not many academic resources are physically

brought into the residence hall, there is an opportunity to enhance the academically supportive

climate. Increasing accessibility of University resources to students would be beneficial, but as

stated by faculty and staff, it can be difficult to coordinate due to outside forces. Since the

residence hall lacks sufficient common spaces for small student gatherings, it may be

advantageous to increase the physical environment devoted to students' academics.

Rhodos could strengthen its academically supportive climate in two ways. First, that the

spaces available to students be devoted more consistently to academics, including the

Makerspace and the classroom. The classroom, located across the hall from the Makerspace,

should offer study times that are consistent and specific, as that structure would further enhance

the academic aspects of students' lives. The second recommendation in this area is to bring more

academically supportive resources into the residence hall, which might include providing

information posted in the residence hall (including the Makerspace) which would encourage

students to take advantage of campus services like tutoring, supplemental instruction, career

services, and academic advising. Rhodos could hire past Rhodos fellows as tutors to help current students in their coursework.

Socially Supportive Climate

The weakest element of Rhodos' academic environment is the socially supportive climate. Rhodos' socially supportive environment is challenged by students' non-engagement in the community. As it is a new community, Rhodos is still developing its identity, so recruiting genuinely interested students into the community is important, otherwise, students will feign interest in the them as a method to secure an apartment-style accommodation. Having students who are not committed to the theme of the LLC has diluted the overall strength of the community. The students who are authentically interested and engaged in the community have a strong sense of belonging to the community, interact frequently with the community, and have created strong social community with each other. However, the remainder of the students are not supported as strongly socially, as they have little interaction with programming and opportunities in the community. The Resident Mentors and Housing department have a positive influence on the students' sense of belonging and interactions with the residence hall, but there is opportunity for improvement in the collaboration between the Housing efforts and those of Rhodos. Students may find they feel connected to the university and are socially supported through their hall-mates and Housing resources, but there is potential to integrate the housing community building efforts with Rhodos efforts to reach the non-engagers.

Recommendations to improve the socially supportive environment center around improving student's sense of belonging to Rhodos through programming and resources. Students have found a sense of belonging to and pride in the community because they interact with each other and with technology in the Makerspace. Increasing student engagement in the Makerspace

should help more students feel a sense of belonging, which in turn will encourage more engagement as well as elevate the visibility of faculty members. Taking heed to this recommendation will enhance the relationships between students and faculty in Rhodos. One way to encourage engagement is to require students to complete projects in the Makerspace to earn the title of Rhodos Fellow. Another idea is to create a point system that rewards students for attending programs and events, which could also culminate with a Rhodos Fellow designation. Another recommendation is that University Housing coordinate its programming efforts with Rhodos efforts so that Resident Mentors will be invested in both efforts. By role modeling engaging behavior, Resident Mentors may encourage residents to connect with one another to find commonality with other community members. Resident Mentors endorsing Rhodos events and organizing their own programming goals to align with the theme of the community while also encompassing Housing's requirements will aid in establishing the all-encompassing experience for the students.

<center>**Conclusion**</center>

In conclusion, the Rhodos community is a relatively effective academic environment for students. Because Rhodos has just completed its second year of existence, the community has the ability to strengthen elements of the community as defined by the Best Practices Model (Inkelas, et al., 2018). The elements of the Best Practices Model that have the most room for improvement are faculty advising and socially supportive environment. Rhodos' strength lies in the courses for credit element. The Rhodos community is unique because of the Makerspace located in the residence hall which contributes to and enhances every sector of the academic environment. The emphasis on project learning, critical thinking, and students pursuing interests germane to information, design, and computing provides students the opportunity to incorporate their within-the-classroom learning with their beyond-the-classroom interests. As the business manager stated, the emphasis on production rather than consumption, especially with the resources in the Makerspace, creates an environment for students to deepen their learning.

The Best Practices model could be used to evaluate other LLCs, either at UofSC or at other institutions. Evaluating LLCs at other institutions, using this model, would create a method of benchmarking LLCs nationally. This evaluation process can help evaluate the quality of LLC programs within institutions, providing a more consistent experience for freshman students at that institution. This study only evaluated the academic environment level of the Best Practices Model, but in order to have a complete picture of the elements, future studies should evaluate LLCs on all levels and elements of the model. Doing so would reveal the quality of all elements and provide a roadmap of where to direct resources for improvement. Utilizing the Best Practices Model would be useful when developing new communities, encouraging creators to begin with the foundation and develop through the levels, with evaluations through each decision to

compare ideas back to the model. Most importantly, studies like this one help to evaluate LLCs

and recommend modifications over time for continuous improvement. With each incoming

freshman class, the students and needs change, thus continuous improvement is crucial to the

success and sustainability of LLCs.

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