

AN EVALUATION OF STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN RESIDENTIAL LEARNING
COMMUNITIES AT GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY: AN ANALYSIS OF THE
IMPACT OF THE URBAN COMMUNITY

by

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(Under the Direction of Erik Ness)

ABSTRACT

Learning communities are a current initiative at many colleges and universities that seek to organize students and faculty into smaller groups, encourage integration of the curriculum, and help students establish academic and social support. At urban institutions, the city environment also impacts the experience and expectations of students as it relates to their residential learning community. The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of the urban environment on student's expectation and level of participation in learning communities at Georgia State University. The participants were residential students during the 2010/2011 academic year involved in three learning communities: Atlanta Based Learning, Sophomores Achieving in Life (SAIL), and Living Green. Findings suggest that successful learning communities must take into account program design, benefits, student learning, staff involvement, accountability, and the urban environment. Findings from this study also yield suggestions to increase staff involvement, to improve programming options, and to broaden community support to increase opportunities for student engagement.

INDEX WORDS: Index term, Dissertation, Thesis guidelines, Graduate School, Student, Graduate degree, The University of Georgia, University Community Housing

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DEDICATION

It is without question that the two most influential people in my life have been parents. My father, the late Rev. Theodore R. Tyus' final prayer was to see me complete my doctorate; however, God had other plans for him. Mom continues to be the encourager she has always been. They planted a seed 51 years ago that now flourishes as a full flower. It is because of them that I am who I am. Dad, the dreamed was only delayed not denied. Our prayer has been answered.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

Thousands of students who attend college choose to stay on campus because they are intrigued by their perception of “dorm life” as it is depicted on television, movies, and sitcoms such as *Animal House*, *It's a Different World*, and *School Daze*. When residential students are asked why they live on campus, general responses include the following: it is convenient and closer to classes; they want to connect with others students; the social scene is exciting; it is a scholarship stipulation. Some students want to separate from their parents, or perhaps parents will only pay for college if the students live on campus. In various orientations, parents have stated that they feel there will be fewer distractions and fewer temptations if their son or daughter is living in supervised housing. Parents perceive on-campus housing to be safer than off-campus living, especially at colleges situated in large metropolitan areas. In most instances, on-campus housing at urban institutions is cheaper than the cost of city living.

From the housing professional's perspective, the reasoning for advocating on campus living is different. From the very beginning, housing students in dormitories was a part of the holistic training that would contribute to the student's personal development in becoming responsible, upright, and moral citizens (Brubacher & Rudy, 1968). Dormitories were part of the physical campus, and faculty members also resided in the same buildings, in part, to ensure proper student study and other social behaviors

(Brubacher & Rudy, 1997). During the early 1600s, campuses often consisted of one or two isolated buildings, and all student-related activities occurred within these buildings. The use of such building for purpose of educating and housing students laid a preliminary foundation for what is recognized today as the traditional campus. Academics, housing programs, and student activities were above all provided by the institution.

Once faculty removed themselves from campus and became immersed in teaching and research, the role of the housing professional became essential in carrying out the duties previously managed by faculty. This development placed a significant responsibility on housing administrators to design and implement programs that supported academic achievement, individual growth, and the social success of on-campus students. Thus, the duty of the housing professional was to develop programming models that would support the academic mission (Riker & DeCoster, 1971).

As housing professionals started to develop programming models for residential campuses, they did not limit themselves to faculty-in-residence communities. These models included gender-specific halls, themed housing or floors, honors colleges, floors for class levels, and floors with a specific focus in an academic discipline. While these programming models proved to affect the development of residents on traditional campuses, their impact on residents at urban campuses may have hindered the opportunities and resources of the city.

The founding of urban institutions dates back as far as 1787 with the University of Pittsburgh. Urban institutions are by definition located in large metropolitan cities. Students experience great exposure to diversity in these cities and the opportunities and resources provided by the city. Most urban institutions evolved out of meeting the needs

of the people in the communities where they are located. The GI bill also played a major role in the proliferation of the urban institution. In addition, urban institutions provided an educational opportunity for individuals who needed an alternative to most traditional four-year institutions. As urban institutions evolved, many expanded beyond their initial purpose. Some are now in categories with traditional campuses; they enroll thousands of students, are ranked as major research institutions, have outstanding athletic organizations, and are issuers of terminal degrees. There are 21 urban institutions across the country; of those, 16 provide on-campus housing operations for as few as 500 residents to as many as 7,500 residents and are not unlike traditional residential program that strive to build learning community to enhance student success.

This single case study examined Georgia State University (GSU), an urban doctoral-granting, research-intense institution, typical of other urban institutions. It is located in the Atlanta metropolitan area and exposes students to a diverse environment and the richness of the resources the city has to offer. The university evolved from a non-residential urban commuter campus into a leading research I institution and offers more than 250 fields of study through 55 accredited degree programs. In 2010, 6,596 graduate and undergraduates degrees were conferred in its 250 disciplines. The fall of 2010 ushered in more than 3,000 students to reside in seven residence halls, offering a choice of 12 learning communities that encouraged student involvement and promoted social learning opportunities.

Residential housing, established in 1996, has a current bed capacity of 4,000 students in six residence halls, with an institutional goal of reaching a bed capacity of 7,500. A significant component of residential life is twelve learning communities that

cover areas in leadership, city-based learning, academics, careers, retention, sustainability, healthy lifestyles, service learning, business, diversity, public policy, pre-professional development, and outdoor adventure opportunities. These communities were designed to assist residents in achieving academically, to enhance social interactions and peer networking, to support student/faculty involvement, and to provide peer group support and development.

Statement of the Problem

University housing at Georgia State offers many opportunities for student involvement in residential learning communities. Of the established learning communities, only a select few have been significantly sought out by residents. The communities selected most are loaded with activities that are academically based, interactive, fun, free, and focused on what the city has to offer. These communities require a signed contract from students that guarantees their commitment and full participation in a minimum number of activities, participation that is much higher in comparison to other learning communities. These communities always reach their maximum capacity and are often contested by residents who did not get the opportunity to choose one of the communities. Academically-based learning communities at GSU rarely reach occupancy capacity, as is also the case with communities that center on other areas of interest. While academically-based learning communities lack effectiveness at GSU, studies show that these communities are beneficial. According to Astin (1985), academic learning communities encourage continuity and integration of both the curricular and co-curricular experiences. Other researchers see curricular structures as the pathway for deeper learning (Kilpatrick, Margaret, & Jones, 2003).

While extensive literature exists in the area of learning communities, few studies specifically examine the effectiveness of residential learning communities situated at institutions in urban environments. A basic assessment of GSU's housing program is captured in the national educational benchmarking survey (EBI) every two years, but no specific studies have focused on how the urban environment affects the success of learning communities at GSU as related to student satisfaction, achievement, retention, and community differences. The questions researched for this study are as follows:

1. What are the differences of participants' levels of expectations between and among learning communities?
2. How does GSU's urban environment relate to student satisfaction with the learning community?
3. How do students perceive their learning communities as enhancing academic achievement, satisfaction, and retention?

Significance of the Study

This study could provide significant insight into the implementation of residential learning communities on urban campuses, especially at Georgia State University. Housing programs on urban campuses may find that what residents expect from their residential learning community experience is vastly different from what is typically offered on traditional campuses. The study could also provide a means of demonstrating the impact of the residential learning community on student outcomes and the institution's effort to increase student success.

My interest in this study stems from my 23-year career working in and developing residential housing programs at several institutions of higher education. Having served

as the Director of University Housing for the past seven years at Georgia State University with a focus on developing premiere programming for residential students, I became aware of three things: (1) students were more interested in the city and its offerings than in a program developed and presented by housing staff; (2) students were more interested in securing the premium rooms selected for specific learning communities over the core design for the program; and (3) students showed a lack of interest in the communities that staff thought would enhance their housing experience. This led me to believe that perhaps a greater focus on incorporating the resources of the city in the curriculum of the learning communities that were less frequently chosen by residential students would enhance student participation and the overall housing program at GSU.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The concept of residential learning communities and their associations with housing are by no means new concepts. This combination has been around since the inception of “the campus,” starting in 1636 with the Oxford and Cambridge models of residential colleges at Harvard College, involving live-in faculty members supervising students (Frederiksen, 1993). In this chapter, major strands of research are reviewed that enhance understandings of the concept of residential learning communities. An introduction to residential living through the lens of history is shared to offer a broader perspective for residential learning communities and the impacts of residential living on the college student. Learning communities are described and attention is given to the theoretical frameworks of involvement theory (Astin, 1984) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) as theories significant to residential learning communities.

A Historical Overview of Housing

Students have lived in dorms, currently known as residence halls, since the early 1600s. The model for campus housing was provided by Oxford and Cambridge, with their focus on the complete education and social development of the “gentleman scholar.” The model was a method of preparation and discipline to develop “privileged young men into responsible, literate elites committed to serving the colony and, later the nation” (Thelin, 1996, p. 7). Residential living under the British education system served as the

link that connected faculty and students to further moral and intellectual pursuits (Brubacher & Rudy, 1968). As a result, dormitories, though “spare barracks-like,” were erected in all of these early institutions (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997). The dormitories may have been considered inadequate to foster the well-knit social life characterizing the English residential college, but they were expected to become an integral part of the collegiate life, with the belief that a curriculum, a library, a faculty, and students were not enough (Brubacher & Rudy, 1968). The fellowship between faculty and students was nurtured by the common life in the classrooms and by daily social contact in the living quarters and dining rooms. Apparently this contact was perceived to be essential to form students’ sound moral character (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997). Religion exerted a powerful influence on these colleges, and a strict system of moralistic discipline prevailed, facilitated by the presence of resident fellows (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997).

Unlike Oxbridge, the early American colleges struggled because they lacked the financial resources to construct elaborate self-contained quadrangles, and educators feared that students’ disorderly conduct might arise from on-campus community living. American professors were usually married and lived off campus; and the challenges of student discipline added to the difficulty of applying the English residential system in its entirety (Blimling & Schuh, 1981; Brubacher & Rudy, 1997).

Despite the fact that the English residential model was not imported in its entirety to the United States, the tradition of residential living survived and endured, with Harvard becoming the prototype of all institutions that followed. This model remained entrenched in American colleges for 200 years (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997).

The next evolution in higher education, from the Civil War to the early 1900s, reflected the German model of education, which had no focus on housing. Student housing was not connected to the educational purposes of college and was, thus, considered the responsibility of the student. Students often found residence in boarding houses, and Greek letter fraternities, complete with chapter houses, became more popular. Faculty members left the confines of on-campus housing, and staff members including coaches and housemothers, emerged to serve in roles similar to that of the parent (Frederiksen, 1993). Going forward, most faculty regarded housing as separate and apart from the classroom and curricular interests.

In the early 1900s, there was a return to providing student housing as a result of the land grant movement and the opening of women's colleges, which were residential mostly from an impetus to protect students. Many reasons were given for the emphasis back to on-campus housing:

The new residential-based colleges, the overcrowding and inadequacy of rooming houses, the dissatisfaction of students and their parents with the quality of off-campus housing, and the increased interest on the part of students in extracurricular activities all resulted in a shift toward a policy of providing housing facilities and programs similar to the traditional residential university. (Frederiksen, p. 170)

Since 1965 enrollment in higher education has increased significantly along with the bed capacity to house students (Seidman, 2004). The newest interest in on-campus housing resulted in building dormitories that, according to Frederiksen,

were built to house and feed students and to maximize the number of beds constructed for the dollars available, with little or no regard for the quality of the students' educational experiences and personal development. Dormitories were designed for low-cost maintenance, not livability (p. 172).

Dorms were places where students simply slept and ate (Schuh, 1988) and did not provide the living-learning experiences for which they had the potential (Frederiksen, year). Ultimately, dorms were called residence halls, complete with a programmatic focus and intentional efforts to impact students' collegiate experiences. Frederiksen defined residence halls in this manner: "Residence halls...are designed to provide students with low-cost, safe, sanitary, and comfortable living accommodations and to promote students' intellectual, social, moral and physical development" (p. 175).

At many institutions, the residential living experience is intentionally designed to impact students' cognitive and affective growth. Riker and DeCoster (1971) provided an early model explaining the combination of educational and management functions of a housing program, stating that "the housing program works to enrich the environment, both physical and interpersonal, and thus enhances the learning process. The residential community becomes an integral part of the university's educational objectives" (p.4).

During the 1980s higher education professionals started to push to maximize the learning that could take place in these residential facilities. Also during this period institutions started to develop living-learning programs in their facilities (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999).

The Impact of Residential Living on College Students

It has been determined that residential living has a significant impact on the success of college students. Astin's (1973, 1977) examinations of students who lived in residence halls and those who did not shows that on-campus residents were more likely to complete their baccalaureate degrees and gain admission to graduate school, to participate in more social activities, to be satisfied with their living environment, and to

have more positive self-images. Astin further asserts that residential students had more contact with faculty, did better academically, and interacted more with their peers. In a more recent study, Astin (1996) concluded that the one factor most associated with finishing college was having lived on campus during the freshmen year. First-year residents were more likely to participate in extracurricular activities, to earn higher grades, and to show slightly greater increases in artistic interests, liberalism, and interpersonal self-esteem. Research by Wilson, Anderson, and Fleming (1987) suggests that students who live on campus are more trusting and better adjusted. Studies also show such students demonstrate more initiative and are more independent from their parents than off-campus students.

Schuh (1999) also concluded that residence hall living had a positive impact on students' academic growth in four areas:

1. Students who lived in specially structured experiences, such as living learning centers, seems to earn better grades than those who do not;
2. Living in residence halls seems to improve student persistence to graduation;
3. Living in residence halls is also associated with increased intellectual development; and
4. Living in residence halls seems to be associated with increased cognitive development. (p. 7)

While most studies on the benefits of living in residence halls have focused on grades, the impacts described by Schuh are believed to be indicators of learning (i.e. grades, persistence, intellectual development and cognitive development).

The benefits of residential living have also been confirmed by Pascarella (1984) and Romanoff (2000). They suggested that residential students have significantly higher levels of faculty-student interaction, peer support, academic and social integration, and commitment. Research by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) indicates that “living on campus (versus commuting to college) is perhaps the single most consistent within-college determinant of impact.” Their finding confirmed that “living on campus maximizes opportunities for social, cultural, and extracurricular involvement; and it is this involvement that largely accounts for residential living’s impact on student change.”

Several studies of academic achievement resulting from residential living have provided mixed results. A review of these studies by Pascarella, Terenzini, and Blimling (1994) concluded that “living in a conventional residence hall is not likely to have an appreciable influence one way or the other on student’s academic achievement” (p.30), with the term *academic achievement* being defined by grades. The researchers did state, however, that they found evidence suggesting that living in a residence hall may impact general cognitive growth, such as critical thinking, which is not necessarily directly connected to the student’s grades.

Urban Institutions

Students who attend college in a city have at their discretion access to cultural and social venues that enrich their academic and college experience. Everything is nearby: the theater, museums, retail stores, professional sporting events, city teams, and an extensive assortment of dining options. When comparing urban institutions to those situated in rural or suburban areas, urban institutions have grown into their host communities while rural institutions more often are distinctly separate from their

surrounding communities. As reported in the *Insider's Guide to Selecting a College*, Hautanen (2011) suggests that urban campuses tend to attract students who are more culturally diverse and aware, and as a result, urban colleges typically represent a more diverse student body—socially, ethnically, and culturally.

Urban institutions are defined as those institutions that are situated in metropolitan cities as open campuses, without borders that isolate them from the local community (Elliott, 1994). The local community offers students the diversity of the city, social and career opportunities, and a richness of culture. The environment of the urban campus also poses greater challenges because of disparate service locations, safety and security concerns, increased expenses, and as of late, threats of terrorism. Elliott (1994) describes these challenges as inhibitors in building community in the urban institutional setting. Other challenges include limited space and “town-gown” relationships. Authors Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (1991) suggest that the educational advantage of the urban setting is the extent to which the institution, faculty, and staff have accepted the institution’s mission as an urban metropolitan university. Hautanen (2011) further suggests that the benefits of attending an urban college often extend beyond graduation as students take advantage of the network they have created by living and learning within an urban environment.

Learning Communities

Ample attention has been given to the concept of learning communities in higher education. Alexander Meiklejohn (Smith, 2001) introduced the concept of learning communities through the short-lived “experimental college” in the early 1920s. Under the direction of Meiklejohn, the freshman and sophomore experience was built on

“principles of connected and integrated learning” (Shapiro & Levin, 1999, p. 18). Along with Meiklejohn, John Dewey deemed education as “a purposeful, student-centered process that required a close relationship between teacher and student” (Shapiro & Levin, 1999, p. 17). As seen by Joseph Tussman, the undergraduate experience was best demonstrated by formatting the curriculum so that it would unite faculty and students in distinct communities (Johnson & Romanoff, 1999, p. 385). By the end of the twentieth century the concept of learning communities was not well defined, but it was one of the concepts most eagerly deliberated in higher education (Kezar, 1999).

Defining *community* is complex because the word has different meanings for different individuals. Boyer (1987) found that developing community fosters student growth and learning and improves retention. For the community of higher education, Boyer (1986) looks through the lens of six general principles and asserts that a community is defined as

A place where faculty and students share academic goals and work together to strengthen teaching and learning on campus;

A place where the sacredness of each person is honored and where diversity is aggressively pursued;

A place where individuals accept their obligations to the group;

A place where the well-being of each member is sensitively supported;

A place where the heritage of the institution is remembered and affirmed (p.7-8)

Often described as slow developing, community almost always has a history and a memory that is defined by its past and its memory of the past (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler, & Tipton, 1985). Other authors have made attempts at defining learning

communities. Gabeinick, MacGrgor, Matthews, & Smith (1990, p. 19), defined a learning community as

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 the opportunity for deeper 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.

Levin and Tompkins (1996) define learning communities as “curricular structures that promote academic success by emphasizing student-student and student-faculty interaction and interdisciplinary linkage of courses” (p.3). Astin (1985, p. 161) offers a slightly different definition of learning communities as “small subgroups of students characterized by a common component and uniqueness that encourage continuity and the integration of diverse curricular and co-curricular experiences.” Kilparick, Margaret, & Jones (2003) distinguish between two major components that define learning communities. The first component focuses on the human propensity to benefit from the synergies of individuals’ common interests and locations while sharing understanding, skills, and knowledge for shared purposes. The second component emphasizes the curricular structures as the catalyst for developing deeper learning (Kilpatrick, Margaret, & Jones, 2003). While Shapiro and Levin do not specifically articulate a finite definition, their summary of the characteristics of an effective learning community includes the union of small groups, curriculum integration, academic and social networks, unions with faculty, a focus on learning outcomes, academically supported programs, and an environment conducive for student to learn about college expectations.

Learning communities offer a setting that includes a social component to help students more easily transition into the college environment. “Powerful Partnerships: A

Shared Responsibility for Learning” (1998)—a document from the American Association for Higher Education, American College Personnel Association, and National Association of Student Personnel Administrators—highlights principles of and suggestions for strengthening learning. Two of these principles are closely tied to the concept of learning communities. The first principle holds that “Learning is fundamentally about making and maintaining connections: biologically through neural networks; mentally among concepts, ideas, and meanings; and experientially through interaction between the mind and the environment, self and other, generality and context, deliberation and action” (p.5). The second principle contends that, “Learning is done by individuals who are intrinsically tied to others as social beings, interaction as competitors or collaborators, constraining or supporting the learning process, and able to enhance learning through cooperation and sharing” (p.11). The connections and the social ties with other students and faculty are critical to the success of both the students and the learning community programs. As a result, learning communities represent a well-rounded approach to the educational experience that is not totally academics-based, but one that also embraces an environment conducive to social interactions and collaborations. It is the combination of these components that may lead to greater academic and learning success.

Goals and Models of Learning Communities

A variety of learning communities is addressed throughout the literature, and the goals of these communities are articulated by several authors. According to Evenbeck and Williams (1998), the goal of any learning community is to replicate highly valued personal relationships and experiences and to provide access to resources that will lead

students to fall in love with learning. Kuh (1991) suggests that at the core of every learning community is the attempt to foster student involvement. Authors Lenning and Ebbers (1999) found that learning communities follow one of four generic forms: (1) curricula learning communities where students co-enroll in two or more classes; (2) classroom learning communities where the classroom is the center of community building; (3) residential learning communities organized on campus so students taking two or more classes can also live in close physical proximity; and (4) student-type learning communities that take into account such groups as the academically underprepared, historically underrepresented, honors students, students with disabilities, and students with similar academic interests. Tinto and Goodsell (1994) also maintain that learning communities enhance the undergraduate experience: first, by the sheer design of the learning community, which requires students to take several courses together; second, by the requirement that students come together for some form of unifying experience; and third, by enabling students to form a community of learners in which both social and academic integration is possible (pp. 9-10).

In Kellogg's (1999) research on learning communities, she suggests the existence of five major learning community's models: Linked Courses, Learning Clusters, Freshman Interest Groups, Federated Learning Communities, and Coordinated Studies.

Linked Courses: Link a cohort of students with two common courses, one typically content based, and the other application based. The faculty may teach independently or together and may coordinate the syllabi to enhance the shared experience.

Learning Clusters: Similar to the linked course model but links three or four courses to one cohort, often serving as the students' entire course load. Learning clusters are usually based on a theme, historical periods, issues or problems. There may be a seminar component and planned social events, field trips or common readings.

Freshmen Interest Groups (FIGS): FIGS are good fits for large universities because many FIGS may be offered at the same time. FIGS are similar to linked courses as they link three freshmen courses together by theme. They are linked around academic majors and include a peer advising component.

Federated Learning Communities: This model is the most complex. Students participating in the model take their theme-based courses in addition to a three-credit seminar taught by a Master Learner. The Master Learner is a professor from a different discipline who takes the courses and fulfills all the requirements for the classes along with the students. This arrangement helps the student combine the material and approach learning as a connected and collaborative venture.

Coordinated Studies: Coordinated Studies most closely ties to the Meiklejohn model. Faculty and students participate in full-time active learning based on an interdisciplinary theme. The curriculum can last a full year and provides 16 credits per semester. The curriculum is team taught in set blocks each week.

Learning communities can be designed to support institutional goals and produce desirable outcomes (Lucas & Mott, 1996). Lucas and Mott (1996) suggest that learning communities help students understand how subject matters and issues are interrelated and cross over subject matters fields; help bolster student attrition; encourage higher levels of critical thinking; promote greater intellectual interactions and connections with other

students and faculty; expose students to diverse populations; provide faculty revitalization and encourage the sharing of knowledge between faculty; and provide a pedagogical style and organizational framework that is student centered.

In a study of learning community members conducted after completion of a learning community experience, Gabelnick and colleagues (1990) found that students who participated in learning communities felt an increased sense of belonging and friendship, increased interest in learning collaboratively, increased intellectual energy and confidence, increased appreciation of other students' perspectives, increased inquiry into the subject matter, greater ability to make connections across the curriculum, and new insights into their own inquiry for learning.

Review of Theory Concepts

Theories of student development provide an underlying framework to guide this examination of learning communities. These theories also offer an outline for institutions to guide their decisions and steps to aid students through social and academic developmental processes. Familiar to most is Maslow's (1968) hierarchy of needs model. This theory suggests that human beings are motivated by unsatisfied needs and posits that needs at the lower level of the pyramid must first be satisfied before the needs at the higher levels can be satisfied. Maslow identified five intrinsic levels, beginning with physiological, safety, belongingness-love needs, and then self-esteem and self-actualization. By eliminating the barriers or needs of the lower level of the hierarchy, individuals can reach self-actualization. However, according to Cheatham and Berg-Cross (1992), students develop in the enrollment phase, the phase of persistence in college once they started attending, through the phase of degree attainment certifying all

college requirements have been met. These researchers inject the importance of being able to recognize the individual tasks that students accomplish in each stage of this developmental theory. Following this concept, Chickering and Reisser (1993) proposed a theory that frames the competencies and challenges students face while in college. They identified seven vectors, which include developing competence, managing emotions, developing autonomy, establishing identity, freeing interpersonal relationships, clarifying purposes, and developing integrity. The framework of their theory also helps guide the development of university program and services.

Closely reflecting the theory presented by Chickering and Reisser (1993) is a similar concept from Upcraft and Gardner (1989). Their model of student development identifies six goals that students progress toward while attending college, including academics, interpersonal relationships, identity, career concerns, health, and philosophy of life.

The above theories appropriately address task recognition, vectors, or goals that students strive for as they evolve through their college experience. These learning communities are thought to help facilitate student movement through developmental stages outlined in the theories. However, Astin's involvement theory, defined as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 297), infers that students who participate more than the minimum in college activities achieve positive gains. One claim of the theory suggests that, "the amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program" (Astin, 1984, p. 298). In *Student Involvement: A Developmental Theory for*

Higher Education, Astin (1984) further clarifies what he means by student involvement. He states that involvement takes many forms, such as absorption in academic work, participation in extracurricular activities, and interaction with faculty and other institutional personnel. Astin (1984) further asserts that, from the standpoint of the educator, the most important hypothesis in the theory is that the effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement. In summary, Astin suggest that all institutional policies and practices—those relating to non academic as well as academic matters—can be evaluated in terms of the degree to which they increase or reduce student involvement. He sees all college personnel— counselors, student personnel workers, faculty, and administrators—as having the ability to assess their own activities in terms of their success in encouraging students to become more involved in the college experience. Further, he emphasizes that all faculty, from instructors to counselors, can work with the same goal in mind: unifying their energies into making the students more involved in the college environment and, therefore, more likely to stay in college and succeed academically. Specifically, Astin states “Instructors can be more effective if they focus on the intended outcomes of their pedagogical efforts: achieving maximum student involvement and learning” (p. 307). Thus, Astin’s (1984) involvement theory emphasizes student participation in the learning experience, which serves as a primary objective for residential learning communities and activities that extend beyond the classroom setting. Astin’s previous studies, centered on student involvement from an academic perspective, focused on faculty-student interaction as the main premise behind retention. However, from his later studies documented above, Astin (1984) dealt more

directly with the impact of involvement from the perspective of counselors and other administrators.

In *What Matters in College: Four Critical Years Revisited*, Astin (1993) stated that the peer group is “the most important environmental influence on student development” (p.xiv). He suggested that student learning and development likely was strengthened by intentional use of peers. Also, student-to-student interaction was identified as influential in the academic experience, as students tend to adapt their values and behaviors to be similar to those of their identified peer group. These intentional opportunities in extra-curricular activities and residential experiences provide additional out-of-the-classroom interactions between students, reflecting the concept of learning as a process of making connections (The American Association for Higher Education, American College Personnel Association, and National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 1998).

Learning communities are designed to offer intentional, structured experiences for students, not only encouraging involvement but also requiring participation in some communities. In learning communities, students ideally demonstrate involvement that represents the energy devoted to the academic experience on which Astin’s (1984) involvement theory focused. Perhaps, the true value of student involvement can be associated with other positive outcomes of the undergraduate experience. Fenzel (2001) found that students who reported being involved in one or more activities on campus also reported better attendance at classes, less binge drinking and illicit drug (i.e. marijuana) use, and a higher level of importance on performing community service.

Although student involvement is a central part of learning communities, student satisfaction is as important. There are not many studies that examine student satisfaction as an outcome of involvement in learning communities. There are the assumptions that students are satisfied with their experience if they continue to persist. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is a survey that collects information at hundreds of four-year colleges and universities about student participation in programs and activities that institutions provide for their learning and personal development. Institutions use their data to identify aspects of the undergraduate experience inside and outside the classroom that can be improved through changes in policies and practices more consistent with good practices in undergraduate education (NSSE, 2011). NSSE has published many studies related to my project on learning communities such as *Unmasking the Effects of Student Engagement on College Grades and Persistence* (Kuh et al., 2007) and *Faculty Do Matter: The role of college faculty in student learning and engagement* (Umbach, & Wawrzynski, 2004). Whereas these studies analyzing NSSE data, addressed student engagement and faculty involvement, the context fell beyond the scope of this project that speaks specifically to residential learning communities. Institutions must submit specific questions to both NSSE and EBI to gain data that specifically address the impact student involvement in learning communities.

GSU's housing division participates in EBI surveys every two years. In 2010, GSU specifically submitted the question "How satisfied are you with the living-learning community offered by University Housing?" and the results indicated that 34% were either very satisfied or moderately satisfied with their learning community. Few studies suggest that the presence of learning communities is linked to student satisfaction with

their college experience. Baker and Pomerantz (2001) reported that Northern Kentucky University learning community participants “indicated greater satisfaction with their university experiences than those students in the control group, as demonstrated by their responses to a nationally normed student satisfaction survey” (p. 122).

If students are involved and satisfied with their undergraduate experience, consistent evidence reports that students will succeed to graduate. Of most pressing concern to learning communities is whether or not there is a difference in student retention rates for students who participate and those who do not. Tinto (1987) reported that 41 of every 100 students who pursue higher education leave the institution without earning a degree, most departing during the first two years. Many studies examining the relationship between learning community participation and student retention have been conducted across the nation. For example, in a study of students at the University of Washington, Tokuno (1993) reported higher retention rates for FIG (Freshmen Interest Group) learning community participants than for nonparticipants. The difference in retention for the three years of the study was 8.4%, 2.9%, and 6.9% more students retained for FIG participants than for nonparticipants. The retention difference was statistically significant for two of the three years (1988 and 1990 cohorts).

Minnesota State University, a large public institution, reported that the freshmen-to-sophomore retention rate climbed from 69% to 79% in the five years following the inception of the university’s First-Year Experience “enhanced living and learning environment” (Reisberg, 1999). At a variety of smaller institutions, similar differences in retention rates for learning community participants have been documented. At the City University of New York’s Brooklyn College, for example, the return rate of students who

participated in learning communities was 73%, compared to the college's normal average of 59% (Bruffee, 1999).

As these studies show, the effects of learning communities are not tied to the size of an institution but more so to its intentional, structured experiences. These experiences can lead to student satisfaction, retention, and academic success.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The overarching goal for this study was to examine the impact of the urban environment on participant's expectations and satisfaction with residential learning communities at GSU.

This chapter three consists of several segments relevant to the methodology used in the study. The first sections provide a general overview of GSU housing program, motivation for the study, staff qualifications and responsibilities, and a descriptive summary of the learning communities selected for this study. The final section on research design outlines the processes used to collect and analyze the data. A case study approach was seen as the most appropriate methodological framework for this analysis. This single case study analyzed learning communities at GSU and the impact of its urban environment. The case study approach and qualitative data approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the phenomena surrounding the choice to participate or not to participate in learning communities in urban environments. Qualitative methods were employed for this study since the goal was to present participants' view of GSU's learning communities as it was experienced, fitting with Patton's (1991) definition of qualitative methodologies which "seek direct access to the lived experience of the human actor as he or she understands and deals with ongoing events" (p. 391). Marshall and Rossman (1999) reported that the qualitative research process "values and seeks to

discover participants' perspectives on their worlds...and relies on people's words and observable behavior as the primary data" (pp. 7-8). The primary focus of the study was to determine the levels of expectation students had of learning communities; to determine their satisfaction with their learning community; and to learn whether or not they perceived their participation in learning communities to affect their academic performance and retention.

The motivation for this study stemmed from my observations of unexplained phenomena. For example, we know from experience and extensive research in the literature that learning communities are successful at making students feel a part of the community; however, we do not know why academic-based communities are selected less often. We do not know why some communities are popular and others are not. We know that the two most successful communities have more requirements in terms of participation; we do not know whether requirements are really a driving force for increased participation or whether it is the urban environment that draws students to these communities. Answers to these questions could lead to changes in the program that would further enhance learning communities at GSU.

The research questions guiding this study were the following:

1. What are the differences in participant's levels of expectations between and among learning communities?
2. How does GSU's urban environment relate to student satisfaction with the learning community?
3. How do students perceive their learning communities as enhancing academic achievement, satisfaction, and retention?

Georgia State University Housing Program

Georgia State University's housing program currently serves more than 3,000 students in seven residence halls and nine Greek townhomes. The day-to-day living, education, and social programs of each residential area are managed by Area Coordinators, Residence Hall Directors (RHD), Graduate Assistants (GA), and Resident Assistants (RA). The overarching goal of residential life at GSU is to build a premier housing program that is engaging and growth oriented, supports retention, and enhances the out-of-class college experience for its students, both socially and academically.

A full-time housing professional with a master's degree, the RHD manages the operation of a residence hall for 350 to 450 residents. The RAs are student staff members who reside on an assigned floor in the hall. They are select individuals who have successfully exhibited levels of integrity, who have demonstrated great skills in leadership, and who serve as role models for other undergraduate residents. The RA's role is to establish a community that is conducive to academic success and to promote social and personal development. The RA is also responsible for organizing floor meetings and for disseminating information on events and activities taking place on campus. They are responsible for upholding community living standards that govern student behavior in the residence halls.

Learning communities are an integral component of university housing. Most residential halls host at least one or more learning community on pre-selected floors. The role of the housing professional is to plan, present, and assesses all programs and activities that "bring the learning community to life." Programs for learning communities are collaboratively planned by the RA and RHD of the hall where the community is

housed. The Freshmen Learning Communities (FLCs) are coordinated by the Office of Undergraduate Studies, and all new incoming freshmen are assigned to an FLC and qualify for most Living-Learning Communities (LLC) sponsored by University Housing. The Honors learning community is coordinated by the Honors College. Coordinators for the FLCs and Honors work collaboratively with housing professionals and assist with the logistics of securing classroom space and in planning of activities that are supervised by the housing staff.

Living-learning communities offer a dedicated and distinctive themed living option for residential students. They maintain a genuine sense of community and are supported by programs, conversations, and faculty interaction centered on the members' interests. All communities are carefully planned by University Housing staff and the members of the community. On the housing application, applicants are presented with an opportunity to indicate their interest in their first and second choices to reside and participate in a learning community. It is during the room selection process that they actually make a final decision and sign a contract for their permanent floor and room assignment for the year. While many applicants may prefer a particular learning community, the final assignment may be different from their initial preference choices. There are currently 12 learning communities housed on campus in the residence halls.

Table 1: Fall 2010-Spring 2011 LLC Requests

Living Learning Communities	First choice	Second choice	Allotted Space	Number of Participants by Contract
Atlanta Based Learning	177	84	50	47
Outdoor Adventure	85	63	50	28
SAIL	54	0	75	68
Service Learning	47	67	37	23
Living Green	41	59	45	3
Namaste	30	39	24	1
Residential Emerging Leaders	N/A	N/A	50	N/A
Honors	N/A	N/A	150	N/A
Global Business and Society	N/A	N/A	50	3
Intersections	N/A	N/A	28	4
Pre-Professionals	N/A	N/A	38	11
Public Policy	N/A	N/A	29	4

As shown in Table 1, only six of twelve learning communities identified by the housing department have been selected as either a first and or second choice of interest by students. Interest in five of six communities, with a first or second choice interest, exceeds the number of spaces allotted.

For the purpose of this study variation between learning communities is pivotal in determining which communities will be selected. The communities chosen for this study

are Atlanta-Based Learning (ABL), Sophomores Achieving in Life (SAIL), and Living Green (LG). The criteria selected to ensure variation was: (1) student demand, communities chosen most often; (2) academic content, communities with a class component; and (3) an urban connection, communities with activities intentionally designed using the city's resources.

Although Outdoor Adventure (OA), in addition to ABL, met the high student demand criterion, 57% more applicants selected ABL as a first or second choice of interest for participation. In addition, residents who signed contracts to participate in ABL filled 94% of the beds allotted for the community. The Atlanta-Based Learning community clearly had the highest student demand. ABL's core program design also incorporated opportunities offered by the city, which aligns with the third criterion: urban connection. SAIL was the only community that met the second criterion: a class requirement. Residents who chose to participate in SAIL were required to register for CPS 2500, a one-hour academic credited course approved to count as credit toward degree completion.

As range was taken into consideration to determine whether a community was selected or not, selectivity ranged from 0 applicants who were interested in a particular learning community to 261 applicants who indicated interest. Living Green was among the communities at the lower end of the range with the fewest applicants expressing an interest in which to participate. Because LG has more contracted individuals, it was seen as a more viable choice for the study in that it might yield more participants for the focus group as opposed to Namaste. There were six communities in which residents showed no interest as a first or second choice of interest. Although these learning communities were

designed to add depth to learning and involvement, the perception was opposite of what staff anticipated.

Atlanta-Based Learning Community (ABLC) was selected most often and is located in the Commons residence hall, building C, floor 8. Building C is one of four residence halls in a complex for 2,000 students. Floor 8 consists of 50 residents. However, 177 students expressed an interest in this community, and 47 of the 50 spaces were contracted. Building C houses 350 residents and operates under the auspices of nine RAs, one GA, and the RHD. The goal for ABLC is to explore the culture and community of GSU's campus. Through activities such as walking tours, site visits, panel discussions, and civic engagements, students explore urban, community, and social issues in Atlanta while making connections to their academic courses and their own life experiences. Participants also incorporate sights and sounds that Atlanta has to offer to increase appreciation for arts and culture in the surrounding community.

SAIL fell near the mid-range of the scale for selectivity by the students. It is located on floors 13 and 14 in the Lofts, a free-standing residence hall housing 450 residents. There are 68 active participants in SAIL, with a building staff of 14 RAs, one GA, and the RHD. The SAIL community combines services, programs, and curricular and co-curricular activities that encourage a solid transition for sophomore students to achieve junior status and advance their future educational and career aspirations. The community offers a foundation to explore the specific academic experiences and opportunities GSU has to offer, addressing the needs of sophomores and providing appropriate services and programs that promote success. All students participating in SAIL are required to enroll in and complete CPS 2500 (Career Development and Life

Planning). The SAIL community is only offered to freshmen for their coming sophomore academic year.

Living Green was the first choice of 41 residents, but only three residents actually contracted to live in the community. This community was designed for students who have an interest in minimizing their negative impact on the environment. Areas of focus include water conservation, energy conservation, the 3R's (reduce, reuse, recycle), and environmental education of Georgia State University. Living Green is located on the floor 6 of building C in the Commons. Out of 45 spaces made available for participants, it was only requested by six residents, and of those six only three signed the agreement to participate. It has been suggested that this community be cancelled for the upcoming academic year.

Research Design

This study was designed as a single case study of learning communities at Georgia State University. The use of focus groups was particularly fitting for this study because, "This method assumes that an individual's attitude and beliefs do not form in a vacuum: People often need to listen to others' opinions and understandings in order to form their own" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 114). Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) agreed, stating that focus groups "allowed respondents to react to and build upon the response of other group members" In effect, "this synergistic effect of the group setting may result in the production of data or ideas that might not have been uncovered in individual interviews" (p. 16).

Data Collection

Data collected for this study involved focus groups, interviews, published information, and data specific to GSU published by EBI. Community participants and RAs were chosen because this study focused on student satisfaction; therefore, the perceived difference between learning communities and their participation is important in gathering information, evidence, and outcomes associated with student learning and involvement.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are small groups selected from a wider population and sampled, as by open discussion, for its member's opinion about emotional response to a particular subject or area (The American Heritage Dictionary, 2000). These groups were useful because they gave me the opportunity to observe and understand participants' perspectives and ideas, as well as affording me the opportunity to explore participant's experiences and reflections about their learning communities. They were constructed based on pre-set group criteria: not more than eight to ten members per group and no more than 90 minutes per session. This range provided enough different opinions to stimulate a discussion without making each participant compete for time to talk (Morgan, 1997).

RHDs and RAs helped to solicit volunteer participants for the focus groups. During the weeks prior to the suggested dates for interviews and focus groups, Residence Hall Directors (RHD) and their Resident Assistants (RA) posted flyers and talked with floor members about the opportunity to provided feedback about their learning community with the director of housing. Students in these communities were sent a letter

describing in details the purpose of the focus groups and the process by which the groups would be handled. Each focus group was held in the student floor lounge of the learning community. Participants who wanted to volunteer reported to the lounge at 7:00 p.m. on the date scheduled. Focus group participants were current residential GSU's students living on the floor assigned for that community. Some were members of a community council and others were select representatives who had additional responsibilities for their learning community. These representatives served in positions titled as spirit builder, floor monitor, and social chair. All participants, regardless of position held, were able to reflect on their residential experience.

The ABL community consisted of 14 participants, 11 females and 3 males. The participants were made up of freshmen and sophomores. Community members engaged in dialogue for about 90 minutes. Those who attended the focus group for SAIL were 7 females and 4 male sophomores. SAIL is restricted to sophomore residents only. In additions to questions asked in ABL, the questions for this group included other questions to cover the involvement of the learning community council. Observations were documented concerning body language and the air of barely contained civility among participants in this group. It was noted that participants seemed divided by members on the council board and the other community members.

Similar to ABL and SAIL, the focus group for LG engaged in dialogue about their experiences in their community. Participants in the group were all freshmen and sophomores. The group consisted of 11 female and 2 male participants. This group engaged in dialogue for approximately 80 minutes. They were a very interactive group and were very engaged throughout the process. Given that this community was in least

demand by students through the assignment process, this group was also asked if they were initially aware that they had been placed on the Living Green learning community floor.

A semi-structured interview format was used; structured questions, using an open form allowed me to be flexible and ask follow-up questions to probe for additional useful information. This process also allowed me to explore the same topics with participants while being flexible with the wording of questions and the order in which they were asked (Gall, Gall, & Borge, 2003). See Appendix C for Focus Group Protocol.

Interviews

I conducted interviews with two members of the RA staff (both sophomores) to see if they were aware of the topics or issues that students from their community might raise. Each individual RA interview lasted one hour and included questions about how RAs were involved and how they felt the community impacted their students. Both RAs indicated during their individual interviews that attendance at some events was a problem. They stated that some residents who signed-up for events failed to attend after tickets had been purchased for them. They also indicated that professional staff did not participate as often as expected. The RAs were most concerned that students chose some learning communities just to secure desirable housing and that participation contracts were not enforced. The RAs suggested that residents would voice their opinions about the requirements of their community contracts that were not enforced. A semi-structured interview format was used to allow for flexibility while probing for additional information (Gall, Gall, & Borge, 2003).

Archived Documents

University Housing at GSU store data pertaining to residential learning communities by the academic year. I reviewed the published information on learning communities at GSU because it provided a rich description of each learning community selected for this study which included the design and the proposed learning outcomes.

Surveys

The EBI instrument surveys undergraduates across the nation directly about their educational experiences and provide a lens through which the national undergraduate experience can be viewed. Data that pertained to GSU housing and the learning communities were captured in Educational Benchmarking, Inc (EBI) survey for 2010. This information served as additional institutional data to inform the focus groups and to accentuate triangulation. A total of 2037 residential students responded to four questions related to the study. Some of the questions addressed programming, learning communities, and satisfaction. The questions were: “How satisfied are you with the Living-Learning Communities offered by University Housing?” “How satisfied are you with the availability of community space in your building?” “How satisfied are you with the Hall Council Programming in your building?” “What type of programming would you be most likely to attend (choose 1)?”

Both interviews and all three focus group sessions were recorded and transcribed in their entirety in order to maintain accuracy in record keeping and to assist in validating data analysis. Transcripts and audio discs were stored in locked storage files. Aggregate results as reported in the EBI were compared to data collected through the focus groups

for this study. All participants were undergraduates and resided in campus housing on learning community floors.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed to get an understanding of the student's perceived differences and similarities in perceptions of their learning community from multiple vantage points. All participants were current members in their communities and participated on a volunteer basis. The interview and focus group transcripts were analyzed and interpreted using the constant comparative approach. In the work of Glaser and Strauss (1967), constant comparison has been judged important in developing a theory that is grounded in the data. Tesch (1990) also identified comparison as a primary analytic technique. This method of comparing and contrasting is used for practically all intellectual tasks during analysis: forming categories, establishing the boundaries of the categories, assigning the segments or categories, summarizing the content of each category, finding negative evidence, and so on. The goal is to discern conceptual similarities, to refine the discriminative power of categories, and to discover patterns.

- a. Organize Data—I transcribed audio data into written documents and reviewed all the data from participant's interview transcript. All the information was categorized and assembled into types of data.
- b. Data Review—I read through transcriptions, text from documents, listened to transcribed interviews, and wrote notes in order to gain a basic understanding of the data to identify emergent themes.

- c. Data Coding—After review, I coded the data. Coding is a process of organizing material into concepts for the purpose of later bring meaning to those concepts (Creswell, 2003).
- d. Interpretation—After completing the data coding, I gave meaning and demonstrated understanding of the information collected by identifying themes and constructs in the data. To complete the interpretation process, I identified connections that emerged from the data. Information was clustered in a clear and logical manner as I made meaning of data and findings to make suggestions for promising practices.
- e. Validation of Findings—I used triangulation (using different data sources of information to explain themes) to ensure truthfulness of the data, interpretations, and findings. My methods included document comparison and member checking (taking the data, analysis, interpretations, and conclusion back to participants in the study). This process allowed me to ensure credibility and accuracy of the data findings.

The inductive data analysis attempted to identify common themes and emerging patterns. The data was coded to uncover into as many themes as possible. Twelve themes emerged from the data analysis:

- Community feel / home feeling
- Know personally / close friend / know neighbor
- Opportunity / great experience / great activities
- Involvement / networking / climbing ladder
- Planning and schedules

- Location
- Wasted funds
- Levels of authority
- Consequences / punitive / enforcement
- Student leader development
- The urban environment
- Gender imbalance (other mentioned once but unique to the study)

The analysis was repeated and refined to develop categories to capture themes most important to this study. These themes were: program design, benefits, urban environment, student learning, accountability, and staff development. Two overarching categories emerged: (a) program elements; and (b) student development were later summarized in chapter five.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is important to establish in this study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as indicators of trustworthiness. Prolonged engagement, referential adequacy, triangulation, negative case analysis, and member checks are activities that indicate credibility. Typically, dependability is assumed when credibility is established.

The study sought to maximize trustworthiness through member checking by debriefing interviewees at some period following interviews and during the analysis process to ensure my understanding of the data gathered. For example, I met with one of two RAs interviewed in the study a second time. I reviewed what I had noted as

comments that were stated during the initial interview. I asked if I had captured what was stated in an accurate manner. She affirmed. In each of these cases, participants agreed with the interpretation of the report and the supporting theoretical perspectives. Participants in each focus group were also offered the opportunity to view transcripts and to add comments for accuracy and completeness. Every effort was made to provide thorough description of the study to inform theory and practice. Dependability and confirmability have been established through an audit trail that includes data discs, interview notes, case analysis forms, case reports, and data from national publications.

I used triangulation in this study to establish credibility. Schwandt (1997) stated, “Triangulation is a means of checking the integrity of the inferences one draws.... The central point of the procedure is to examine a single social phenomenon from more than one vantage point” (p. 163). Using multiple data sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 1997) was one way in which triangulation occurred in this study.

Triangulation of data was carried out through the use of focus groups, RA individual interviews, document reviews, and data compiled through Educational Benchmarking, Inc. (EBI) survey. With regard to credibility, Bogdan and Biklen (2003) wrote on reflexivity and the researcher’s role. They maintain that researchers must acknowledge who they are within the context of their research, stating that “no matter how much you try you cannot divorce your research and writing from your past experiences, who you are, what you believe and what you value. Being a clean slate is neither possible nor desirable” (p. 34). Therefore, it was my responsibility to identify who I am within the context of this study on learning communities at Georgia State University.

My qualifications for conducting this study include my academic training and the responsibilities of my position. I am in my seventh year as Director of Housing at Georgia State University, with more than 20 years of experience in residential life. I am an insider with complete access to all data pertaining to residential life at GSU and am ultimately responsible for ensuring that quality programs occur within housing. Finally, as director, I was motivated to conduct this study in order to develop a premier housing program in which the students' housing experience positively affects their development. In order to avoid bias, this study did not focus solely on the positive factors influencing residential learning but it also identified the negative factors that interviewees disclosed in an effort to improve their residential learning community experience.

Although I am aware that my students are very comfortable with participating in the focus groups, I covered in-depth the subject of confidentiality to assure them that their identity and statements would be held in the strictest confidence. The intent was to establish an interview environment that encouraged freedom and openness concerning the participant's residence hall experience. I followed the IRB protocol approved for this study.

Limitations of the Study

This single case study focused on learning communities at one leading urban institution, Georgia State University. The study did not attempt to generalize findings for other urban institutions with residential learning communities. This was an exploratory study with undergraduate students who lived in a residence hall, and it may not be representative of all students who reside on campus at GSU. This study did not focus on differences other than those between and among learning communities, nor did the study

take into account race, ethnicity, or gender, which may make a comparison difficult with other urban institutions with vastly different demographics. The researcher plays a major role in developing the residential learning communities for Georgia State University.

CHAPTER IV.

FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine how the urban environment impacted GSU students' expectations of and satisfaction with their residential learning communities. The literature provided insight on the urban environment and the opportunities made accessible to students on urban campuses. The insight suggested that the makeup of the urban environment can add significantly to the student's college experience, more so than the rural environment in which most traditional campuses are situated.

The research questions guiding the study were as follows:

1. What are the differences in participant's levels of expectations between and among learning communities?
2. How does GSU's urban environment relate to student satisfaction with the learning community?
3. How do students perceive their learning communities as enhancing academic achievement, satisfaction, and retention?

Data were gathered to answer these questions, and the findings are presented and discussed in this chapter.

For the purpose of this study, an analysis was completed on the data collected through the 2010 EBI report on GSU learning communities and on residential retention data maintained by university housing. Focus groups were conducted with participants from Sophomores Achieving in Life (SAIL), Atlanta Based Learning (ABL), and Living Green (LG) learning communities. This study also captured data from individual interviews conducted with Resident Assistants from the learning community floors. Six themes emerged from the EBI report, data on residential retention, focus groups, and individual interviews. Those themes were: (a) program design, (b) benefits, (c) urban environment, (d) student learning (e) accountability and, (f) staff involvement.

Educational Benchmarking and Residential Retention Findings

The EBI survey was distributed to 3,249 residential students. The number of students that responded was 2,037. These questions solicited participant's responses on their satisfaction with their learning communities and on their preference in programming. Of the number that participated in the survey, 71 were participants from either SAIL, ABL or LG. Of the 55 participants that resided in the SAIL community, 35 (67%) responded to the survey. Thirty-one participants out of 44 (70%) from LG responded and 5 (1%) out of 46 from ABL completed the survey. While the response rate for ABL was considerably low, higher response rates from participants in SAIL and LG communities suggest that the data in review should be considered in determining student satisfactions with their learning communities. These findings also indicate that overall, 46% of all students responding were either slightly satisfied, moderately satisfied or significantly satisfied with the living learning communities offered by University Housing. Thirty-eight percent were neutral while 17% gave responses of dissatisfaction.

Where the survey focused on satisfaction with community space, the findings revealed that 59.4% of those responding reported either being slightly satisfied, moderately satisfied, or significantly satisfied with their community space. Twenty-two percent reported as neutral and 18% gave responses of dissatisfaction.

Responses solicited on Hall Council programming indicated that more than 50% of the respondents were slightly satisfied, moderately satisfied, or significantly satisfied with Hall Council programming. Thirty-seven percent reported as neutral and 12.7% of respondent expressed dissatisfaction.

Respondents were asked about their program preference. The findings depicted 40.9% preferred to participate in cultural/intellectual programs; 16%, community services or social justice; 11.4, wellness or intramural; 10.7%, diversity; 8.8% social; 7.5%, academic preps and support; and 4.6% on career prep and job search programs. These findings suggest that on average, students are in general, neutral to satisfied with their learning communities by 83.4% and that their interest in programming leaned toward activities that centered on community service, social justice, cultural intellect or diversity by more than 67.6%. Students showed little interest in academics or career planning by choosing these program options least often and at a rate of 12.1%. More than 42% of those participating in the EBI survey indicated their preference for such benefits of having a printing service readily available to them than in having increased faculty involvement.

The housing data base was used to track retention rates of residential students (meaning students who returned to housing and matriculated the next year). The data revealed that retention rates of students in learning communities are higher than that of

the overall retention rates of all students who returned to on campus housing. The 2010 learning communities selected for this study yielded an average return rate of forty-eight percent (48%). On average, nearly half of those who participated in learning communities returned to campus and matriculated in the fall 2011. From SAIL 26 of 55 participants (47%); from ABL 25 of 46 participants (54%), and from LG 19 of 45 (42%) returned to GSU for Fall 2011. Whereas, the overall retention rate for all students who returned to on campus housing was forty percent. These findings support the research literature on the positive impact of learning communities on retention and student satisfaction. Residential students who participated in learning communities returned to live in campus housing at an 8% higher rate over those returning and did not participate in a learning community.

Program Design

As it relates to the research questions, the findings from this study suggested that students have varying expectations within each learning community and that expectations vary among all three. Interest in the urban environment was embedded in all groups. There was little interest by students in having learning communities connected academically, nor was it shown to have impacted retention. However, students looked for satisfaction in what interested them and matched their interests with those the learning community offered. Relevant data about the communities was influenced by various factors. An analyses of each community's description provided information that aimed to influence participation and to establish the uniqueness of each community. However, the data shows that the core curricula established for each community was not necessarily the draw that influenced students' choice to participate. Many sophomores chose to

participate in SAIL because of the floor's physical location, its guaranteed housing, and the opportunity to secure a premium single room over the uncertainty of being placed on a wait list. One participant remarked,

Being completely honest, I just really needed housing and SAIL was available in the area I wanted to be in.

I'm also in Honors and I thought there would be more rooms in the Loft. I stayed there my freshman year. I just did not want to go to the Commons or anywhere else, and so the only ones [rooms] that were available were for the SAIL program, and honestly, I didn't read the contract but I got the room.

The objective of SAIL was to assist in the retention of sophomores whose return rate to GSU from the previous year was low. The curriculum designed included a number of quality programming opportunities. Participation in SAIL required enrollment in the CPS 2500 Career Development and Life Planning class in which students participate through an off-campus overnight retreat. The retreat was designed to assist each individual student in (a) identifying their strengths and developmental needs, (b) opening lines of communication, and (c) assisting students to develop an appreciation for other community participants.

The program design for SAIL attracted many participants more so for the amenities not offered in other learning communities. Securing premium housing was an important objective for those choosing to participate in the community. SAIL was designed and strategically placed in the Lofts, the most popular residence hall for upper classmen. The city views were phenomenal and the rooms were the largest premium single spaces on campus with fully equipped kitchens.

One participant stated:

I commuted my freshmen year to campus, and it was just a very overwhelming and intimidating experience for me. And, like, I chose to live on campus this year. I looked at all the communities, so I chose SAIL, because the rooms were bigger and you could choose to have a single studio apartment in the Loft dorm.

There were several participants in the focus group that remarked on SAIL having the best view of the city from their assigned rooms and designated floors. In addition, SAIL's placement in Lofts hall was viewed as a "plus" because the Lofts was in close proximity to the General Classroom Building (GCB).

Another community member remarked:

Everybody know the Loft dorm is the best dorm. But you kinda can't get in very easy cause everybody want to live here. Your dorm room is way, way bigger. You don't have to share your space if you are in SAIL and you can see a lot of the city from my room. Since I was going to be a sophomore, I got in the community to live in the Lofts.

Program components included activities for career advancements and programs that engaged participants in the gratifying resources of the city. One student who chose SAIL had this to say, "Well, my friend was in SAIL and she told me all about her experiences. It just seemed really fun, and so I was like, "Well, I'll check it out," and it has been really fun." Another student stated, "I was told that it [SAIL] was just for sophomores, I read the little contract, and I was like, o.k., I am a sophomore and I liked it."

Another student recounted,

Well, I stayed in the Lofts my first year, but it was like everybody lives in their room. I didn't know anybody, and I felt like SAIL would be a way to actually meet the people. Like, I couldn't tell you more than two people's names that lived on our floor the first year. We do stuff together. It's like we are all kinda the same now 'cause we are all sophomore. I know more people.

The program design of ABL was a major factor in students' decision to participate in the learning community. Floors designated for ABL were assigned in the Commons with no additional incentives. The data made known the expectations of students who chose to participate in ABL. Several students articulated similar thoughts when answering why they chose to participate in ABL. One student stated,

My expectation in signing up for Atlanta-Based Learning was that about once a month I would get with my RAs, go outside, see what Atlanta had to offer. And it was fun because I went from everything from a Hawks' game, to the Fox Theatre including a terrible taping of *America's Got Talent*, but anyway. So, I got to have fun, and I was thinking that I was just going to be bored the whole time, learning all this about Atlanta's history, and that wasn't the case.

Another student mentioned a different ABL-sponsored event, "I was able to go to Allen Ivy...Alvin Ailey—that was pretty good. I could not have gone on my own. Couldn't afford it."

In comparison to SAIL and ABL, several participants who were assigned housing in the Living Green community stated that their placement was by happenstance. They described their placement as "random" and as occurring "spontaneously," and "amazingly." Their floor assignment was also in the Commons with no incentives. Eight of 12 students in the focus group did not choose to be in the community. The initial impression of one student was captured as in the following quote,

I didn't know that this was the Living Green floor until like the day I moved in. So, I figured that our RA was going to be like a health nut, and that she was going to be in our rooms to check if we left lights on or left the TV on. I thought it was going to be really negative 'cause she was going to be on us about conserving energy.

One of the students who intentionally chose the Living Green community stated, “I wanted to promote environmental awareness and in the sense of building communities with your fellow residents and friends so...I choose to live on the third floor.”

The location of the Living Green community was a point of contention for most members in the community. Several individuals mentioned that much more consideration should be given to the location of Living Green because it was so far from the recycling dock. The community was housed on the sixth floor of building C. To reach the recycling area, residents had to push bins down very long corridors, wait for an empty elevator and travel down another long corridor to reach the loading docks. The task of recycling became arduous for some students.

The intended curriculum for the Living Green community was designed to encourage student involvement in campus campaigns for a more sustainable Georgia State University. The priorities were to initiate and engage students in recycling in the residence halls and to heighten their awareness and actions towards energy conservation by creating habits that supported these goals. The data indicates that, while the participants within the community developed sustainability habits, the apex of the community centered on supplementary group activities with a twist of living green intertwined. One student pointed out,

Well, I know the Braves’ game; we were living green because we were walking. And that helped the community because we’re not using a bus to, you know, pollute the air—we walked. That was an eye opening experience.

Participants in all three learning communities used a variation of descriptors to describe the impact of their community environment. The characterization of their community embraced concepts of relationships as demonstrated through their use of

relational words such as family-like, home feeling, close knit, close neighbors, bonded, and personal friends. One principle documented by The American Association for Higher Education, American College Personnel Association, and National Association of Student Personnel Administrator states that “Learning is done by individuals who are intrinsically tied to others as social beings, interaction as competitors or collaborators, constraining or supporting the learning process, and able to enhance learning through cooperation and sharing” (p. 11). One student from SAIL remarked,

I chose SAIL because I like a community feel. Like, two floors...and we did everything together. And, I feel like I know my neighbors as more than [a] neighbors...and as friends and I just like that aspect of it.

A member of ABL described it this way,

I'd recommend ABL 'cause, like, I made, like, one of my closet friends...but some people are scared to talk to people, so like, by being in the community you get to know people around you. And then if you're, like, living on one of these floors you get to know more people outside of that. It's like a good thing for you, finding friend and networking too.

For some participants, their perception of their ability to develop closeness was hindered by the absence of a TV. Students looked for similarities in their communities that replicated the contentment of their home environments. One student remarked,

I just feel like that [TV] would bring us like together as a community, like, a lot. Because I've been to other schools and, like, all their community rooms have TVs and everyone's just chilling and watching TV. It's just like watching TV with your family.

Benefits

It appears that one expectation students had for participating in a learning community was that it would provide them with benefits that are both intrinsic (family, involvement, leadership and interpersonal skill development, friendships,

relationships/connections to others) and extrinsic (job connections, networking, resume booster/experience, access to services). More than half of the participants, in all three learning communities, saw participation as an opportunity. They recognized that their experiences were unique compared to other residential students on campus. An ABL participant stated,

We visited the World of Coke and that was a really good learning experience, 'cause it's really fun and you get to see the 4D movie, and you get to try all the different flavors of Coke, and you really do learn a lot. I learned that you don't drink the flavor from Italy—it's really nasty, like seawater and acid. Going to Coke was a good idea.

Another student remarked,

The learning community, you know, it takes you places like the Cola-Cola Museum or factory. Usually, you may not chose to go there on your own, but this gives you an opportunity to go with people on your floor to socialize and get to know these people, which helps you do better in school and build relationships.

These unique experiences were also shared by participants in the SAIL communities.

They spoke of their satisfaction with their social interactions, employment connections, and the quality of the activities in which they participated.

A SAIL participant injected:

There are a lot of people that I wouldn't have gotten to know, and if not for SAIL, there are some opportunities I wouldn't have gone after. For instance, like applying for the RA position; some people have their friends in SAIL and their RA backing them up for the RA position. I can get a reference from my RA 'cause of being in the community she knows who I am.

Learning communities for some residents exceeded expectations. Preconceived notions centered on, at best, mundane and uneventful activities. But the experience proved otherwise.

One member from LG stated;

I didn't know either that I was going to end up on the Green Floor, but my previous experience the learning communities has been not as proactive, so I didn't really expect much. What we did was way beyond my expectation of actually getting involved. "Cause normally, it's just for the name, like, for...at least for the ones that I've been in—it was pretty inactive. But, I was pleasantly surprised at the amount of stuff that we ended up doing.

The learning community, for some, was a substitute for those who found other student organizations intimidating. Learning community participants felt it was more difficult to break through the social bureaucracy to secure a position in major student organizations such as the overarching Student Government Association. Participation in their learning communities afforded them opportunities to get involved in non-intimidating and safe environments. In the learning community, students saw themselves as the same as others on their floors. They felt that the learning community shielded them from competitive rejections. Unlike many other organizations on campus, the community served as a supportive, safe haven, which encouraged their participation. One student commented on the difficulties faced when considering other campus organizations in comparison to participating in a learning community.

...it's really hard to break into other organizations. Like, you know, you have these elections for all these different positions, and it's really hard, like, trying to climb that social ladder. But SAIL is a lot easier, because not only, like, do we work together, we socialize together. So it feels really from the beginning, like we're all on the ladder and developing as leaders together, as a person...it was easier.

Across all focus groups in each learning community, networking was a general expectation for many participants. They saw their participation in a learning community as their bridge to obtaining a Resident Assistant (RA) position. They felt they would have

a better chance at the RA position if they shadowed their RA and secured a letter of recommendation. Some participants were looking for opportunities to connect with well-known individuals in the Atlanta community. Others wanted to be able to note on their resumes, their involvement in community service and civic engagement activities.

One member remarked,

Yeah, I can say, just being on SAIL Council, it's like a leadership opportunity, and it's kind of a stepping stone to other leadership opportunities. I know like several other people in this room—we were on the SAIL Council, and now we're RAs. So, you get to meet people in certain positions and just the experience that you gain from it is really beneficial.

Urban Environment

Whether by the community's core design or by the student's innate fascination, thoughts of being involved in an urban setting was a primary focus for most students across each of the three learning communities selected for this study. Depicted in the data were more than 31 references about the city of Atlanta. Participants made reference to the city as a primary reason for their choosing to attend GSU. Atlanta was referenced for the number of quality activities one could choose to participate in, which included professional sporting events, the Aquarium, the World of Coke, museums, and cultural educational centers. Students remarked on their civic engagement opportunities and the homeless culture of Atlanta. Their experience with the homeless was as important as their in-class participation at GSU. The city was described by participants as a "learning laboratory." Astin (1993) asserted that "students learn what they study" (p. 231), and access to the city of Atlanta allows students to study and learn from the environment. One student in ABL described her encounter with a homeless person;

I encountered a homeless lady, she was like, “I take Master Card, VISA, I was like—unh, unh—you’re just going to get these pennies that I have and then I tried to give her a free coupon from Chick-fil-A where I worked but she didn’t want it. I was like “you don’t want food?” That’s one of the things you learn just being downtown. Sometimes you don’t know if they really need help or if they are being shiesty. You have to decide if you need to help or not.

Participants made reference to the city as “their campus” and described in detail their perception of its uniqueness in comparison to traditional campuses in remote areas. Their responses varied when asked how effective their learning community would be if GSU was located elsewhere. Some felt their communities would not be effective because the affect comes from what the city has to offer. One student from ABL replied,

It would be boring. I mean the point of the community is to get into downtown and do stuff like the Fox Theater and the Phillips Arena and all of the other stuff that happens in the community.

A member from SAIL remarked,

A lot of our community service projects that we did with SAIL were right downtown. We did feeding the homeless. Just this past weekend, we went to an elementary school to help tutor kids, and see the school, it’s just...we have more things accessible to us with being downtown. At the same time transportation would be a little bit harder if we were not in this (urban) setting.

As documented in the literature (Astin, 1984), students who participate more than the minimum in college activities achieve positive gains. These finding suggest that learning community’s participants recognize their opportunities to participate as unique and beyond what would be accessible on a traditional campus.

Another ABL student said,

I think one of the reasons I picked GSU is because of the location. Like, they have other good schools, but it’s just like the location is bad. I feel like we have all of downtown as our campus. We have Atlanta, it has a lot to offer. If this [community] was in another university, I probably wouldn’t be here.

While the urban environment seemed to be a major reason why students choose GSU and their learning community, they also found themselves challenged by the same. A few participants in this study reported that the urban environment can be a major distraction from their studies and their involvement in activities offered in residence halls or by student associations on campus. Because the city has so much to offer of interest to students, their interest and involvement in the city can lead to feelings of disconnect from the campus and their college experience. One participant from ABL explained the disconnect by remarking,

Since we are downtown, it seems we are all living our own lives and have so much going on that we really don't feel like we need each other here. But if this [learning community] wasn't in a city or town-based community, then I feel like we'd feel more connected to everybody else that was in our community.

Student Learning

One emerging theme centered on the classroom experience. Of the learning communities selected for this study, only SAIL had a required class expectation. SAIL required participants to register for the CPS 2500 Career Development and Life Planning class, which students described as a repeat of what was covered in their Freshmen Learning Community (FLC). Five participants in the focus group expressed concern with the requirement, and others were concerned with how this requirement affected their HOPE hours. Under new legislation, HOPE can only pay for 127 credit hours. Any credit hour beyond 127 becomes a financial obligation for that student. Participants were concerned with the potential impact of the credit used for SAIL if additional hours were needed to complete their degree programs.

Participants in the focus groups were very knowledgeable about learning communities and understood that learning communities are traditionally assisted by common classes in which they all would attend. Neither ABL nor Living Green has a classroom component. One theme that emerged from all groups was the consistent reference to their Freshmen Learning Community (FLC) as if their current residential learning community was the extension of their FLC experience. When asked if their residential learning community has had any impact on their academics, participants responded from a perspective about their FLC instead of the current learning community.

A reflection by one participant was:

I think my FLC for sure [impacted her academics], because by doing that, I just met so many new people cause you just had the same class with everyone so you'd see their faces so much that you'd get to know them. So, the FLC for sure I would say yes. I'm not sure about this learning community.

Another student reflected on not having participated in a FLC and said that he was currently taking classes with a mixture of people. He had no connections with familiar classmates and felt there was no impact for him academically. Most participants did not attribute any academic progress to their involvement in their current learning community. Academic progress, if any, was credited to their experience through their FLCs.

Accountability

The fifth theme to emerge from the focus group data of all three learning communities dealt with participants' frustrations over the planning and preparation of activities or the lack of activities. While a number of quality activities were coordinated, executed, and paid for on behalf of all participants, the preparation process left much to be desired. Participants stated that on more than one occasion, short notice by the

Resident Assistant inhibited their ability to attend various programs. They argued that the short notice failed to consider students who are employed or had other commitment and would need to make alternative arrangements. Some activities were posted the day the activity was to occur. Participants suggested that the RA preplan during the summer and have a posting of events, times, and dates available for residents at their opening floor meetings. Students saw planning events as a common responsibility of the RAs and the housing staff. Supported by many others in the focus group, one student suggested,

The RA could assist with participation by pre-scheduling all events that are going to happen during the semester. That way, people know ahead of time, they can make plans to attend or not. This calendar would eliminate the problem of attendance and it should be posted where everyone can see it.

One RA admitted that there were times when she forgot to post information concerning activities in the LG community.

According to Astin (1984), participation and energy investment produce positive results in student learning and personal development. Activities planned by RAs provided opportunities for learning community residents to experience a level of involvement with their programs that required higher investments of physical and psychological energy than would have been invested had community members chosen not to participate.

Embedded within the theme of insufficient planning was the concern over the amount of money wasted when residents failed to meet participation commitments. Wasting programming funds surfaced as a central issue for participants in each focus group. Many examples were given that described occurrences where large sums of programming money were spent to buy tickets to events according to sign-up sheets. For

most major activities, such as professional sporting events, tickets were nonrefundable.

One student recalled,

I went to the Coca-Cola Factory. Tons of people had signed up saying they were going and only five people showed up. It happened for a Hawks game...there were so many extra tickets and we were like stopping people and saying like, "Do you want to go to a Hawks' game? Nobody wanted to go. The tickets did not get used. We could have used that money to do something else.

Participants' frustrations with wasted funds were attributed to the absence of consequences for participants who did not adhere to learning community rules. Members from both ABL and SAIL stressed that, without the implementation of consequences, learning communities would not be taken seriously nor be effective. According to Astin (1984), "The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement" (p. 298). The practice of offering special housing privileges and social and educational events through the learning community and the "policy" of planning these events suggest a commitment to the benefits produced by student involvement. More than seven participants in the focus group for SAIL questioned the validity of the contract for SAIL. These participants strongly suggested that non-participants be "kicked-out" of the community as they reneged on their commitment to be involved. According to one participant,

I feel like we should be held more accountable for that contract. Everything was listed in that contract and well, "Well, why isn't their contract being enforced?" well, what's the point of having it being that this is supposed to be a learning community. People are just here as some have said, just for the housing and they are not participating.

Three other members chimed in with "I know that's right." Another participant stated,

I think that the community should be shown in a different light, because I know that a lot of people kind of see it as another program or an organization. But this is different and should not be seen as an everyday program. Other organizations are

trying to make a name for them but we are trying to be a community so we should enforce the rules.

Issues of non-participation also elicited strong responses and suggestions from ABL. Members of this community felt that the consequence for signing up for an activities and failing to participate warranted having students reimburse the amount of the ticket. Students in these two communities were unyielding in their opinion concerning reimbursement of funds and participation. They took a personal position when stating that these trips were paid for with money that they paid to attend GSU. One respondent stated,

I know its Georgia State's money, but, like, we still pay for that. Our money goes into that, so if you sign up for something and don't go—that's like you not going to class but you're still paying for it. Only now you may stop somebody else from going on the trip.

Their suggestions for eliminating wasteful spending included such tactics as denying students the opportunity to participate. They felt this would incense community members into wanting to exercise their right to participate in programming. They were attempting to use reverse psychology to increase student involvement.

Some participants argued that if individuals had to pay they would not sign up. They stated that most residents would not risk losing their money. It was noted by members of the SAIL council that participation increased significantly for activities where residents participated in the planning. Pot luck dinners brought out the greatest number of student participants. It appeared that residents were more committed to attending this type of program when they brought and paid for the dishes they prepared. This suggests and supports Astin's (1984) theory that involvement provides opportunities for students to achieve positive developmental gains. Further, those responsible for

planning activities may consider doing fewer structured activities and more casual events that require members of the leaning community to have an active role. This approach involves less time for planning on the part of staff and may also increase social learning opportunities of the community. One council member recounts the potluck event,

You have big turnouts for certain events and then there's no turnout for other events or whatever. Like, I'm talking about the potluck. Like we had the potluck and I was amazed at how many people spent their money to cook food and actually cook for everyone, you had the whole SAIL community down in the first floor lounge with green beans and corn and chicken. But you know, they didn't come and eat this free pizza and drinks we provided.

Staff Involvement

The sixth theme identified in the data addressed the effect of staff. Staff referred to by participants included council members, Resident Assistants, and the Director of Housing. Graduate Assistants, Residence Hall Directors, and Area Coordinators were not mentioned as having any involvement with the learning communities. This disconnect was extremely telling as these are the levels of staff most responsible for overseeing the programmatic aspects of each learning community.

Participants of SAIL gave their candid opinion of their council leadership in the presence of a council member participating in the focus group. Council members were perceived to have attitudes and did not include community members in decisions on what the community would be involved in. Community participants stated that more training was needed and more time should elapse before the election of council members. The opinion of one focus group participant suggested,

We don't know each other. We don't know about people work ethics, capabilities or what they will bring to the table. We just met three days before elections. Like, we just ...we don't, know us, so choosing council leaders is, that's a very difficult thing to do. I don't know how that can change. I don't know if you (director)

consider like waiting on a process or what. I honestly have no suggestion, but it's just very difficult for a group of new people to decide we want you, you, you, not you...get real we just met three days ago at the aquarium.

More than one participant in the focus group conceded that the council's approach toward members of the community was a deterrent to student involvement. Participants remarked that council members displayed poor attitudes when their programs were poorly attended. One participant informed the council persons in the group that "I came because you came to my room, and I don't want you to be upset with me when you see me the next time." Participants concluded that more training was needed for council members to be effective in their positions. They perceived most council members as ineffective communicators and found that their non-verbal body language suggested anger. Participants also felt that the council was oblivious to issues that really constituted problems for SAIL. One person stated,

I really don't think you understand the problem. I think the problem is people...everybody doesn't put SAIL as a priority, so the events are kind of like, if I had nothing else to do, I would come, you know. Because I'm bored, I'll show up....

SAIL council members felt overwhelmed with the amount of time spent planning activities only to have no one show up. They gave accounts of knocking on doors asking people to participate in their programs. They also referenced having to compete with programs sponsored by the RAs and Hall Council, which they felt impacted their ability to get participation. Working with their peers was a part of the responsibilities of elected council members. Learning how to interact while being inclusive was an expectation from participants that surfaced during the focus group.

Neither ABL nor Living Green had an elected council board. RAs were accountable for coordinating programs in these communities. In both learning communities the RAs were acknowledged for contributions to their communities. They were praised for the programs they choose and in some instances are criticized for a lack of planning. One member from the Living Green community commented on the commitment of his RA,

So if you don't have an RA that's backing it [programs], then it's not going to go through. Like we have an RA who pushed the Green Floor and Living Green, but if you have other RAs who are in charge of it, but don't really care, they're just there doing it 'cause that's their job, then it's not...you're not going to hear about it.

One difference of effectiveness between RAs and council members, in respect to programming, is the two week extensive training RAs receive. Their training covers all aspects of their job responsibility, including programming, community building, effective communication, and ways to have an effect on those with whom they interact. An excellent reflection of a RAs skills by a participant indicated that the RAs have the ability to connect with the community on a personal basis:

We had really good RAs. It's like they actually made an effort to get to know you. One day Ashton came into our room and sat down and talked to us like she was a real person. So that's really good when your RAs have like a personality and like you and get to know you.

SAIL council members, on the other hand, attended an overnight retreat that focused primarily on teambuilding and personal goal setting, which was the extent of their training. Participants in learning communities felt that staff members who lacked training had a noticeable impact on their community. The data reflected very few

accolades regarding staff effectiveness although one participant stated that “they do do a lot of work.”

Given that several levels of staff have oversight responsibilities for each learning community, participants were asked who they held most responsible for the success of the community. The response was varied among focus groups. Some felt that community development was a major responsibility of the RA. They saw the RAs as the people who should have the best handle on the community because of their presence on the floor. Members of the SAIL community felt that community development lies with members of the SAIL council because they petitioned for council board positions and agreed to serve in those roles. Participants of Living Green were the only ones who saw the responsibility for the success of their community as being shared by the RA and members of the community. One member of Living Green stated,

You really can't hold anyone as the only person responsible for the whole community. I think what you get out of Living Green is what you put into it but you know, if you want to make friends, take advantage of the programs that we provide then you are going to have a good time. But you gotta do something yourself.

Several remarks were made that indicated that the Director of Housing should be the person designated to hold people accountable for enforcing the contract participants signed to live in a learning community. Participants felt that no other level of staff held authority equal to that of the director.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this single case study was to examine, through focus groups and interviews how various issues impacted student participation in three learning communities at Georgia State University. This study was guided by the following three research questions: (1) What are the differences in participants' levels of expectations between and among learning communities? (2) How does GSU's urban environment relate to student satisfaction with the learning community? (3) How do students perceive their learning communities as enhancing academic achievement, satisfaction, and retention? In seeking to meet the purpose of the study and answer the research questions, I conducted a qualitative study and compared the data collected from the Atlanta-Based Learning, SAIL, and Living Green learning communities. These communities were selected because they were most appropriate to address the research questions in this study.

Research findings from this case study were discussed in Chapter IV and the themes identified were (a) program design; (b) benefits; (c) urban environment; (d) student learning; (e) accountability; and (f) staff involvement. The discussion in this chapter captures these themes and organizes them under two main topics for discussion: program elements and student learning. Chapter V provides a discussion about the key research findings with implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

Program Elements

Program elements, as defined for this study, are those components that address the design of the learning community, the location of the community, and program implementation.

The curricula for learning communities selected for this study were intentionally designed with distinct purposes. The purposes were to evoke curricular and co-curricular learning, to enhance engagement opportunities, to assess learning outcomes of student involvement, to affect growth, and to enhance the overall college experience. As noted in the review of the literature, at many institutions residential programs are designed to impact growth. Riker and DeCoster (1971) provided a model explaining that the combination of educational and management functions of a housing program works to enrich the environment, both physical and interpersonal, and thus to enhance the learning process. As stated in the literature review, Tinto and Goodsell (1994) maintain that learning communities enhance the undergraduate experience, first, by the sheer design of the learning community; second, by the requirement that students come together for some form of unifying experience; and third, by enabling students to form a community of learners in which both social and academic integration is possible (pp.9-10).

ABL offered students the opportunity to enhance their campus experience by exploring the city's culture and the community in which the campus is situated. A similar curricular component was embedded in SAIL with its intended purpose of addressing the needs of sophomores by providing appropriate services and programs to promote career and academic success. Different from ABL or SAIL, the design of LG was intended to engage students in campus sustainability initiatives that could also be

implemented within their residential environment. However, the findings suggested that the intentional curriculum and purpose for these communities did not fully coincide with the prevailing interest of participating residents. Students were more interested in what the city of Atlanta had to offer than the programming done in-hall by the residential life staff. As a result, students developed a revised program design and incorporated activities that were of more interest to them. In Chapter IV one student described participation in a Braves game as “living green with a slight twist.” Students walked to the game and were able to attest to no adverse impact on the environment in support of sustainability. These actions suggested that students are going to do what they desire and enjoy most. Their initiatives indicated that learning communities designed for urban environment may be strengthened by involving students in planning activities that are to be incorporated into the curriculum and that support the learning goals.

Elliot (1994) wrote that the local community offers students the diversity of the city, social and career opportunities, and a richness of culture. He describes these offerings as inhibitors in building community in the urban institutional setting. Because students are most interested in the activities offered by the city, incorporating interconnecting learning goals among communities permits the inclusion of the students’ interest and the learning outcomes sought by the intended design.

Research question one centered on expectations and differences between and among learning communities. The expectations and the differences are salient to the fact that both SAIL and ABL have become well-established learning communities within housing at GSU. There are higher levels of participant expectations for these communities, but also more stringent requirements. Students in SAIL are required to

take a credited hour and to attend overnight retreats. SAIL members also expect to have prime housing with spacious living accommodations. ABL is chosen as a first and second choice for participation more than any other learning community offered in housing. The mere name of Atlanta Based Learning set an expectation that opportunities will exist for participation in activities associated with the city. While sustainability is vital for the environment, recycling opportunities are not of interest to most residents. Many residents who ended up in Living Green did so by happenstance. These findings suggest that learning communities that were selected most and had higher levels of participants were indicative of the differences between and within learning communities. The findings indicated that students were much more satisfied with the communities that had urban-based activities infused in the structure. Those learning communities that did not, found creative ways to infuse the activities while adhering to their core curricula.

Location of learning communities proved to be as important as or more important than any other component of the college experience. Housing at GSU is limited and can be nearly impossible to secure. The most popular residence hall on campus, situated closer to the activity hub of the city, and the general classroom building, cannot accommodate all requests for assignments. Students compete for the opportunity to reside in a particular high-rise facility that is centrally located on campus, offers more spacious living accommodations, has single bedrooms, and provides an extraordinary panoramic view of the city. Students seek housing in this facility whether they must sign up to participate in various programs or pay a higher cost for a premium bed. There is an inherent satisfaction about learning communities, in housing facilities, that are centrally situated within the urban environment. Findings from this study suggested that students'

housing preferences and the location of their assignment took priority over the curriculum, purpose, and design of any given learning communities. Students desire to have their basic needs met. This finding pointed to the need for staff to perhaps reacquaint themselves with Maslow's (1968) theory of the hierarchy of needs and to incorporate its tenets in future program ideas. His theory suggests that an individual's most basic physiological needs must be met before that individual will desire or pursue higher-level needs. The findings of this study affirmed this research. If the desire of the program is to have purpose and curriculum as the student's most central reason for participating in learning communities, then the placement of learning communities should be reconsidered. Kilparick, Margaret, and Jones (2003) support this suggestion, as they note that humans benefit from being connected to individuals with common interest in locations they enjoy.

With regard to program implementation, the findings of this study pointed out unenforceable processes that impacted the purpose of each community and the participant's satisfaction. Student participation was relevant to the success of the community. The expectation that non-participants be removed from the community was impeded by the lack of available bed to enforce involvement requirements. One aspect of a definition for community as defined by Boyer (1987) is that community is a place where individuals accept their obligations to the group. Therefore, if there are individuals in the community that are not participating and if bed capacity is an issue, staff has to take on the responsible to hold participants accountable for involvement requirements to maintain the integrity of the community. The findings also pointed out SAIL participant's reluctances to register for the required course. Participants articulated that

the course curriculum for SAIL closely reflected that of GSU's Freshmen Learning Community and perhaps was a waste of a credit hour. Conceivably, staff should reconsider implementing learning processes if they duplicate requirement requisites being effectively implemented in academic affairs. Program purpose should add depth to the experience of the learning community. The required credit class created anxiety for many recipients of HOPE and, for some, jeopardized their financial support for the completion of their degree programs. Seeing that there were no distinct differences between the class curriculum for SAIL and that offered in the FLCs suggests that the community would be better served by eliminating this curricular requirement for SAIL. From the findings I found that learning communities at GSU do not necessarily enhance academics, as conceptually associated in the literature when Astin (1973, 1977) asserted that residential students did better academically.

Student Learning

Students develop through both curricular and co-curricular experiences. The learning process is enhanced by accountability and staff involvement. Accountability makes reference to effective planning and preparation which strengthen the experience for both the professional and the para-professional participants. Given that the aspect of learning is primarily embedded in the curricula of each community, learning can be enhanced by effective planning and by infusing what interest the students most. The findings from this study seem to implicate that our students are most interested in what the city has to offer through the richness of its culture and the community. The findings further suggested that students who chose institutions in urban environments intentionally did so for the benefit of connecting urban living and learning with their college

experience. The findings overwhelmingly suggested that students seek opportunities to participate in Atlanta-based activities above all purposes established for current learning communities. Thus, switching over to an interest-based learning community curriculum aligns with an initial program objective of enhancing learning through student engagement and involvement.

Student learning intersect within frames of student development. The findings suggested that students have learned that benefits and rewards are increased through their participation and involvement in their learning communities. Students become recipients of intrinsic rewards, for example, through the development of new and healthy relationships. Gabelnik and colleagues (1990) found that students who participated in learning communities felt an increased sense of belonging and friendship, increased intellectual energy and confidence, appreciation of others, greater ability to connect, and new insights into their own inquiry for learning. Astin's (1996) study also concluded that participation in extracurricular activities improved grades and increased artistic interests, liberalism, and interpersonal self-esteem. As learning community members, students also experience extrinsic benefits that come in the form of free and unique activities, networking, references, resume assistance, the RA position, and other student leadership opportunities. The study by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) supported the notion of extrinsic benefits. They suggested that residential community students have significantly higher levels of faculty-student interactions, peer support, academic and social integration, and commitment.

RAs and community council members are student staff members who support the implementation of learning community initiatives alongside other professional staff. Discussions centered on staff involvement suggested that more support from professional staff members in the learning community is desired and that students notice the impact of its absence. In other words, the absence of higher-level administrators impacts the value of the learning community. This was further evidenced by references to the director, whom students perceived as the only person with the authority to effect change in learning communities and to address the challenges associated with change, especially in terms of contracted commitments. Therefore, I found the reference to my position to be significant and noted that students measured the value of their community by the level of involvement they had with persons in higher-level positions. This finding suggested that the value and legitimacy of a learning community can be enhanced by the involvement and incorporation of symbolic gestures that are supported by me as the director.

Powerful Partnerships: A Shared Responsibility for Learning (American Association for Higher Education, American College Personnel Association & national Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 1998) suggested that connections are foundations for learning and that learning is positively influenced by interactions with both faculty and others professional. Learning communities serve as positive vehicles for curricula and co-curricular learning. As a result, learning communities afford the opportunity for student, faculty, and student affairs professionals to be connected. This connection represents a well-rounded approach that is tied to academic success and personal growth.

According to Evenbeck and Williams (1998), the goal of any learning community is to replicate highly valued personal relationships and experiences and to provide access to resources that will lead students to fall in love with learning. In order for this to occur, staff must be equipped to foster these relationships. Students in leadership positions are vital to the design and curriculum of learning communities, it is important that professional staff recognize that RAs and community council members are also student learners. Higher-level leadership support is needed to engage continuous learning for participants and student leaders involved in learning communities. Findings showed that a number of RAs and council members struggled with managing basic programming and communication challenges. These training needs were also challenges for community participants and were evidenced by the number of suggestions from participants about how council members specifically could enhance their interactions with community members. Further, the findings suggested that some RAs were deficient in skills needed to effectively plan and implement programs of interest. It should be noted that the difference in position preparedness among RAs and community council members is that RAs are required to participate in extensive training, and community council member are not. The impact is critical, and training needs to be designed to encompass all students who hold leadership positions to prepare them to succeed.

Findings suggest that student staff need professional guidance in order to be successful in their position just as residential do. To affect the success of learning communities, and the student staff within, professional staff accountability is needed. Such accountability ensures that students in leadership positions gain as much from professional guidance as other students in learning community environments.

Professional development opportunities centered on learning communities would augment staff knowledge of learning communities and would further their understanding with regards to the value of effective learning communities.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the above findings, several issues can be explored further. A follow-up study should be conducted to determine if the results from this study would replicate similar findings if conducted at other urban institutions of varying size. A study of this nature might reveal how or if size of urban settings impact student satisfaction or program expectations in learning communities. Students participating in learning communities situated in smaller urban cities may not have access to resources afforded students in larger metropolitan cities. Thus, these students may be affected more by programming offered by housing professionals. An additional study comparing learning communities with faculty involvement and those without may yield information regarding which actually influence participation most, faculty involvement or the richness of the urban environment.

The placement of learning communities and the success of those communities were found to depend on student satisfaction with the location of the community, especially in urban environments. Students are more prone to seek placement in communities that are in more desirable facilities. Housing programs may consider having all learning communities located in these areas. A study might examine if students are inhibited in their learning when anxiety over securing housing is present. A future study would be valuable if it compared participant satisfaction with learning communities placed in highly sought housing facilities and those placed in less desired

housing. An assessment of learning cannot yield accurate results if there are too many variables that distract students from the goals of the learning community. As the findings indicate, students will not have the capability to focus on learning goals of a community if they have is anxiety over housing opportunities.

Recommendation for Practice

The finding of this study revealed promising practices, especially for urban institutions that choose to fully utilize the urban landscape within their metropolitan environments. I found that students at GSU were less interested in programs that did not incorporate activities that occurred in the city. They used creativity to restructure programming that addressed their interests. The literature indicates that learning communities are a powerful tool for enhancing involvement, success, and satisfaction. In order to maximize the potential of learning communities, programs should give consideration to the goal of the program and develop the appropriate program curricula. For example, if the goal is to promote civic engagement, the curriculum should include civic engagement activities. For urban institutions, the city in which you are situated can be used as your learning laboratory.

Student affairs professionals in urban environments should embrace the idea of a new paradigm that establishes what constitutes successful programming. The findings of this study suggested that the quality of the experience, not the number in attendance at a program, encourages learning and promotes involvement. To ensure that students' interests are considered, we should engage students in the planning process. Practitioners seeking to enhance programs in urban areas should make a concerted effort to build support and partnerships with constituents in the city and consider incentives for their

participation in learning communities. Powerful outcomes of learning community participation can increase interactions with partners of the city outside of the residential hall. To capitalize on this potential and increase the likelihood that the interaction will occur, it will be necessary to build that interaction into the curricula and perhaps reward city partners for their important role. For example, recognition of city partners at major events on campus is a manner in which city partners can receive recognition for their support of students at college in their cities. Students should be closely involved in developing these programs.

It seems that the placement of communities in housing at GSU should be driven by the popularity of the residence hall that coincides most closely with the interests of the students. As a result, staff members who oversee the implementation of learning communities will find it easier to infuse the curriculum and purpose in popular housing than to manage students who are dissatisfied with their housing placement. Learning communities placed in Loft housing seem to create more positive interactions among students who are not focused on housing placement.

The study findings suggested that students do not readily make the connection that their communities have been structured to further their learning, learning that traditionally starts with a curricula designed for implementation in the classroom. Activities planned for learning communities at GSU are most often seen as events designed to enhance social interactions to build floor community. This perception is further ingrained by the absence of a classroom component as a central part of the community's core design. To assist residents in making the connection that associates learning with planned activities, staff should consider a curriculum design that

incorporates pre- and post- activity dialogues to measure preexisting knowledge and post-activity learning. I presume that establishing a method for measuring learning outcomes will add validity to learning that occurs in interest-based communities not directly associated with an academic discipline. Themes emerged from the findings that suggest an alternative curriculum with a structure that interconnects student's interest and residential learning community goals may also increase student satisfaction and retention.

Professional staff should take a more active role in programming beyond planning. Students value the opportunity to be involved with staff at various levels. We should consider creating the use of symbolic gestures to add a sense of value to programs. As we seek to reform the housing experience, we must keep in mind that reforming requires reworking roles and relationships, structural change, and re-organizing programming so that learning communities can be appropriately supported.

Professional staffs members who oversee learning communities have an important role to play in training and developing student leaders. Based on comments from participants in this study, some student lacked the training needed to be effective, and the absence of professional staff often left student leaders without support. It was a trial-and-error approach for the student leader.

Professional staff must remember that student council members and RAs on learning community floors are "paraprofessional" staff and accordingly require training and supervision. Formal feedback should be collected by learning community professional staff and provided to hall council members and RAs throughout the semester and year so that they can use that feedback to improve their role and job performance.

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APPENDIX A: INVITATION LETTER

Date

<<insert name and address here>>

Dear <<insert name>>:

I am a graduate student at the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia with research interest in college student development. I am now writing to request your participation in a research study dealing with residential learning communities at Georgia State University.

The general purpose of our study is to explore why students are active in their residential learning community. Specifically, I would like to better understand what influenced your decisions to actively participate in a learning community such as community involvement, leadership opportunities, networking, faculty interactions, life experiences, academic success and career development. Ultimately, through a better understanding of how learning communities are viewed in light of the urban environment, this study may have practical implications for other urban institutions with residential learning communities. They may reconsider the curriculums they have established for learning communities on their urban campuses.

As an undergraduate student, I am most interested in capturing your perspective on your participation in your learning communities at Georgia State University. If you are willing to participate and your schedule permits, I would like you to participate in a focus group on during the month of June or July in Atlanta, Georgia at the Lofts residence hall. The focus group session will not take more than 90 minutes. Pizza and an assortment of refreshments will be provided.

If you choose to participate, reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private and confidential. With your permission, an audio tape of the focus group will be recorded to help remember what was said during the session.

If you should have any questions about this research study, please feel free to contact me by email at madelaroche@gsu.edu or by phone at 404-906-0847. You may also contact my dissertation advisor, Dr. Erik Ness by email at eness@uga.edu or by phone at 706-542-05713.

Thank you for your consideration to participate in this research study. If you would be willing to make the time to participate, I would be truly grateful as I know your perspective will add value to the study. Again, if you are willing to participate and time permits, please e-mail me your available time preference at madelaroche@gsu.edu. I will also be able to offer further explanations if you have any questions about the study. Again, thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Marilyn De La Roche

APPENDIX B: FOLLOW-UP EMAIL

Dear [insert name],

I am a graduate student at the University of Georgia. I am writing to follow-up on a letter that I sent you last week in hopes of interviewing you for my study on learning communities at Georgia State University.

Basically, I am interested in student participation in residential learning communities at Georgia State University. Based on the residential floor roster, I understand that you reside either in SAIL, Living Green or the Atlanta Based learning communities being looked at for this study and I am hoping for your participation as a part of a focus group as a way of helping me understand student participation in learning communities. I would like you to participate in a focus group on either, June or July, at the Lofts residence hall. If you are willing to participate and your schedule permits, I would greatly appreciate your participation in the focus group session during your selected date at 6:30 p.m. The focus group will not take more than 90 minutes and refreshments will be provided.

I am here-by attaching my initial letter and hope to hear back from you on the date you will be open to participating in a focus group session. Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you and to talking with you.

Sincerely,

Marilyn De LaRoche

APPENDIX C: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

- Why did you choose to participate in ABL? (SAIL or LG)
- What did you like about your learning community?
- What was most challenging about your learning community?
- Were you satisfied with your learning community?
- Given an opportunity, what would you change?
- What programs were most successful?
- Why did you choose to run for a position on the SAIL council? (SAIL only)
- What do you think were the challenges of the SAIL community? (SAIL only)
- What influenced or impacted your community most? (RA interviews)
- What did you find most challenging? (RA interviews)
- How involved were your residents? (RA interviews)
- How did you get your residents to participate in programming? (RA interviews)
- What would you change about the structure of your community if given the opportunity? (RA interviews)
- How have we included the urban environment in your LC curriculum?
- What have been the benefits of participating in a LC?

Follow-up Response Questions

- Why was so much money wasted?
- Who should hold students accountable for not fulfilling their contract obligations?