

**BEST PRACTICES IN LIVING-LEARNING PROGRAMMING:  
RESULTS FROM A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY**

Karen Kurotsuchi Inkelas  
University of Virginia

Jay Garvey  
University of Maryland

Claire Robbins  
University of Maryland

Paper presented at the  
Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association  
April 16, 2012  
Vancouver, British Columbia

Contact information:

Karen Kurotsuchi Inkelas, PhD  
Associate Professor and  
Director, Center for Advanced Study of Teaching & Learning in Higher Education  
Curry School of Education  
University of Virginia  
kki5x@virginia.edu  
434-243-1943

## **BEST PRACTICES IN LIVING-LEARNING PROGRAMMING: RESULTS FROM A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY**

### **Introduction & Purpose of the Study**

Living-learning programs (LLPs), or academically-themed programs based in college residence halls to promote greater in- and out-of-class integration and subsequently facilitate deeper learning, have become extremely popular over the past 25 years as a way for higher education institutions to improve undergraduate education. A comprehensive review of literature on LLPs summarized prior research that linked student participation in LLPs to augmented academic performance, persistence (including degree attainment), and intellectual development (Inkelas & Soldner, 2011). The same literature review correlated LLP involvement with students' more positive perceptions of their transition to college, sense of belonging to their institutions, sense of community in their campus life, and overall satisfaction with college. Finally, LLP involvement was also linked to prosocial attitudes and behaviors including reduced binge drinking, appreciation of multiculturalism and diversity, and sense of civic engagement. With such laudable results from the empirical research, it is no wonder that the Association of American Colleges and Universities has designated living-learning programs (within the learning community category) as a "high impact practice," or a college activity recommended to facilitate a wide range of desirable student outcomes (Kuh, 2008).

LLPs of varying themes, missions, and sizes have sprouted up on hundreds of campuses across the United States (Laugraben & Shapiro, 2004). However, much of the above literature on LLPs focused mainly on the positive outcomes associated with LLP participation, and did not offer much insight into the specific elements of living-learning programming that led to the positive outcomes. Moreover, most LLP empirical inquiry was limited to local and idiosyncratic

assessments of individual LLPs, which led to limited generalizability in understanding how programmatic elements could be transferred to other contexts in order to broaden LLP impact. Instead, the primary source of scholarship on best practices in living-learning programs has come from the practitioner literature. That literature, reviewed below, was often written in a “lessons learned” kind of format, in which current or former LLP practitioners offered their observations and advice based on their own experiences. Some named specific living-learning programs as exemplars, but rarely provided any rationale for the criteria they used to select a certain program as a best practice. This omission led Inkelas and Soldner (2011), in their comprehensive review, to call for a LLP best practices model that was based on empirical and not anecdotal evidence.

For a little over a decade, the National Study of Living-Learning Programs (NSLLP) has been studying the contributions of LLPs on a wide range of student outcomes. Since 2001, the NSLLP has surveyed over 48,000 students in over 50 postsecondary institutions and 600 LLPs; it is also the only longitudinal study of living-learning programs, with a follow-up of 2,000 students four years after their initial LLP participation in 2004. However, the large-scale quantitative NSLLP research design was limited in its ability to provide a more nuanced, fine-grained investigation of living-learning effectiveness at the program level (Inkelas & Associates, 2004). To address this shortfall, the NSLLP researchers conducted a four-campus case study of high-performing LLPs in order to better understand the qualities of these programs that make them exemplars. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the empirically-based best practices for developing, implementing, and assessing LLPs?
2. How do students, staff, faculty, administrators, and other stakeholders articulate these best practices?

### 3. What conceptual model best illustrates these best practices?

Using the practitioner literature on LLP best practices as a foundation, the NSLLP researchers studied 13 living-learning programs on four campuses and emerged with an empirically-based best practices model for LLPs. This conceptual model can serve to augment the important but limited practitioner literature, and offer current and future living-learning professionals an empirically-based model from which to develop and maintain their work.

## **Prior Perspectives from the Living-Learning Literature**

### **Practitioner-based Literature**

As mentioned above, the early practitioner-based LLP literature focused mainly on a best practices approach, garnered from a “lessons learned” philosophy and the authors’ own experiences or other programs they found to be meritorious (Bergman & Brower, 2008; Garrett & Zabriskie, 2003; Gruenewald & Brooke, 2007; Hummel, Murphy, & Zeller, 2008; Inkelas & Longerbeam, 2008; Inkelas, Soldner, & Szelenyi, 2008; Inkelas & Soldner, 2011; Laufgraben, O’Connor, & Williams, 2007; Pike, 1999; Schoem, 2004; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). In synthesizing the above literature, several common themes emerged.

**Vision, mission, and objectives.** Several authors advised LLP practitioners building new programs to develop their programs around a vision, mission, and clear set of objectives. Gruenewald and Brooke (2007) suggested that new LLPs articulate a central mission and related learning outcomes. Similarly, Hummel, Murphy, and Zeller (2008) recommended that developers of new LLPs identify shared goals and initial learning outcomes, but these authors also advocated a core commitment to inclusive community-building, the value of personal responsibility for one’s actions, and participation in a range of learning experiences. Schoem

(2004) also encouraged LLPs to: (a) provide a common space for scholarly community building; (b) facilitate deep learning; and (c) act as a catalyst for innovative teaching and democratic education.

**Campus leadership and support.** Strong LLPs should also have the support of key leaders on their campuses. Schoem (2004) articulated the importance of “champions,” or leaders who can advocate for the value of an LLP to an institution. Similarly, Laufgraben, O’Connor, and Williams (2007) identified support from senior leadership as critical to LLP success. Schoem (2004) and Laufgraben et al. (2007) both suggested that institutional leaders should recognize and reward successful work in LLPs to advance their importance. Hummel et al. (2008) emphasized the importance of conceptual and financial support, recommending three potential sources: (a) Academic Affairs for pedagogical and curricular consultation; (b) Student Affairs for strengthening community and facilitating connections between curricular and co-curricular learning; and (c) external sponsors for financial support and development.

**Academic and Student Affairs partnerships.** In addition, because LLPs are organized around an academic theme but are housed in residence hall, they represent the kind of programming that requires integrated collaborations between Academic and Student Affairs. Several authors perceived and described characteristics of strong partnerships. For example, Gruenewald and Brooke (2007) recommended transparent communication and equal roles in supervision and funding. Along similar lines, Laufgraben et al. (2007) identified shared values and mutual support from campus champions as central to effective Student and Academic Affairs partnerships.

**Faculty involvement.** Despite variation in faculty roles, many authors contend it is important for LLPs to have robust faculty involvement in various facets of programming.

Teaching courses (Bergman & Brower, 2008); mentoring and advising students (Inkelas & Longbeam, 2008; Inkelas, Soldner, & Szelenyi, 2008); taking part in co-curricular programming (Bergman & Brower, 2008); and participating in the LLP's advisory council or steering committee (Shapiro & Levine, 1999) are all common forms of faculty involvement. However, recruiting and retaining faculty in these roles can be a challenge for LLPs. As remedies, authors have recommended implementing collaborative governance systems among faculty and Student Affairs staff, along with easing faculty members into their roles through familiar work, such as advising and teaching (Bergman & Brower, 2008). In addition, to avoid the clash between LLP work and the faculty reward structure at research institutions (e.g., Laufgraben et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2004), Schoem (2004) recommended recruiting tenured or non-tenure stream faculty who seek intellectual community and thus may find LLP work rewarding.

**Peer interaction and residence hall climate.** Another core practice among LLPs is the cultivation of a healthy climate in which peers interact. Schoem (2004) contended that because undergraduates in LLP settings spend time together both academically as well as socially, they form a community. Further, they learn to interact with diverse peers and perspectives, uphold community standards, and manage conflicts (Schoem, 2004).

**Integration and assessment of LLP activities.** Finally, several authors asserted that periodic reflection on program activities is essential for overall effectiveness and continuous improvement. Given that LLPs, by their very nature, seek to fuse the in- and out-of-class experience, Schoem (2004) and Hummel et al. (2008) recommend that programs seek to integrate students' academic and social experiences. The extent to which these spheres combine for students in a "seamless" fashion, is the extent to which the authors contend that the programs

are being successful. Moreover, Schoem and Hummel et al. asserted that programs seeking continuous improvement must conduct regular and formalized assessments. Hummel et al. and Gruenewald and Brooke (2007) contend that assessments must be localized and should focus on assessing the program's abilities to fulfill its vision and objectives.

### **Critique of Practitioner Literature**

The practitioner literature on LLPs is an invaluable resource for both practice and research, but it is not without its limitations. First, a lack of precision in naming and defining LLPs makes it difficult to search for literature, articulate practical differences (if they exist) between programs with different names, and construct clear and appropriate definitions of LLPs (Inkelas & Soldner, 2011). Second, despite worthy attempts to construct a comprehensive typology of LLPs (Inkelas, 2004, 2007; Schoem, 2004; Zeller et al., 2002), there is no universal mechanism for determining how many program types exist, let alone how to distinguish among those types in practice (Inkelas & Soldner, 2011).

Finally, the "best practices" literature is written by veteran LLP practitioners who seek to share the lessons they have learned from developing and implementing LLPs on their campuses. Although some practitioners have conducted empirical studies, most of the practitioner literature is not empirical and is thus vulnerable to two serious shortcomings. First, the "best practices" literature typically describes LLPs with strong reputations, yet even the most reputable programs may not have achieved their intended goals or vision. Second, a program may be engaged in best practices in one area, yet not all of its programmatic efforts may be effective. Consequently, practitioners who seek guidance from a "best practices" model risk copying the ineffective programmatic structures along with the effective ones. Without systematic assessment or

guidance from empirical literature, the “best practices” literature is an insufficient guide for LLP practice and research (Inkelas & Soldner, 2011).

### **Empirical Literature**

A nascent but growing empirical literature on LLPs has corroborated some of the best practices linked above. For example, both Garrett and Zabriskie (2003) and Pike (1999) reported that LLP participants had higher levels of faculty interaction than non-participants. Similarly, both Pike (1999) and Inkelas, Vogt, Longerbeam, Owen, & Johnson (2006) found that LLP students interacted more frequently with their peers on both academic and social matters than students who did not participate in a program. Finally, several NSLLP studies found that the climate was more positive academically and socially in LLPs than in traditional residence halls (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Inkelas, Johnson, Lee, Daver, Longerbeam, & Vogt, 2006). For a more comprehensive review of the empirical literature on LLPs, see Inkelas & Soldner (2011).

However, like the practitioner literature, the empirical literature on LLPs is not without its limitations. First, a significant portion of the empirical studies investigate only one program or institution, which greatly challenges the generalizability of their findings. Second, selection bias is a pervasive threat to the validity of many empirical studies; since nearly all LLP participants elect to participate in their programs, differences in motivation between LLP and non-LLP students may be the factors affecting their outcomes, and not any programmatic influences. Finally, much of the empirical literature includes analytical shortcomings, such as using single-level techniques when the data is clearly nested (e.g., student level, LLP level, institutional level), the assumption of parameter invariance among LLP and non-LLP groups without prior testing, and a heavy reliance on student self-reports (Inkelas & Soldner, 2011).



In summary, although both the practitioner and empirical LLP literatures offer some guidance for professionals and researchers, the promise of a comprehensive, empirically-driven best practices model for LLP design, implementation, and assessment remains elusive. We sought to fill this gap through the present study, which investigated empirically high-performing LLPs to identify best practices at the program level.

### **Methodology & Data Sources**

The qualitative methodology used in this study is the multiple case study (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2008). We began our study with the development of “theoretical propositions,” or *a priori* assumptions informed by prior literature that researchers can use as a way to bound the analysis of the data collected (Yin, 2008). We outlined 10 theoretical propositions, inferred from the practitioners’ best practices literature:

1. Effective L/L programs must be supported by a formal, institutionalized partnership between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs.
2. Effective L/L programs have champions and allies at multiple levels – from students to staff to faculty to senior administrators.
3. Effective L/L programs must be supported by robust funds and adequate physical space (special floors, lounges, common rooms).
4. Effective L/L programs delineate responsibilities, regularize communication, and provide intentional training for their stakeholders.
5. Effective L/L programs include faculty involvement (with more than one faculty member) that is meaningful, and integral to the functioning of the program.

6. Fundamentally, effective L/L programs should be composed of students who share common interests.
7. Effective L/L programs articulate realistic, measurable, and attainable learning outcomes that are aligned with the respective institution's mission.
8. Effective L/L programs attend to both the academic and the social aspects of undergraduates' lives.
9. Effective L/L programs facilitate intentional programming that is connected to their respective foci and includes a strong and clear academic component (including structured study in a classroom setting).
10. Effective L/L programs stimulate intimate peer-to-peer and peer-to-faculty interaction through curricular and co-curricular activities that enhances student learning and development.

Because we wished to study exemplary LLPs, we used the 2004 and 2007 NSLLP survey data to help us identify which programs included students with the strongest average outcomes on a number of factors, including the transition to college, cognitive development, and sense of belonging. In addition, because the NSLLP consisted of over 600 different LLPs encompassing 41 different themes, we felt it important to compare LLPs of similar themes (i.e., comparing apples to apples) across the four campuses in our case study. Because some of the more popular LLP themes included Honors programs, Civic Engagement (i.e., community service learning) Programs, International and/or Cultural Programs, and Women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (W-STEM) Programs, we chose campuses in the NSLLP that included those types of LLPs as part of their offerings.

Based on the above criteria, we selected four campuses for the case study. “Mid-Atlantic University” is a mid-sized public research university near a city center in the Mid-Atlantic with a substantial minority student enrollment, 17 percent of which is African American. A residential campus, Mid-Atlantic has a substantial Housing division, but there is a fluid movement on- and off-campus by its students. Mid-Atlantic University hosts eight LLPs on its campus, and this study examined its W-STEM, International, and Honors programs. “Midwestern University” is a mid-sized public residential university in a small town in the Midwest known for its curricular innovation. Midwestern University offers 15 LLPs, and the two that the NSLLP studies included the International and the W-STEM programs. “Southern Mid-City University” is a large public university in the Southeast in a mid-sized city. Its Housing division is quite large, and includes 13 LLPs. We studied Southern Mid-City’s Honors, Civic Engagement, and W-STEM programs. Finally, “Southern Rural University” is a mid-sized public university in a rural setting in the Southeast, but not in the same state as Southern Mid-City. Southern Rural University also hosted 13 LLPs, and our study included their Civic Engagement and W-STEM programs. In addition, due to our gatekeeper’s efforts, we also studied additional LLPs at Southern Rural with foci in the transition to college and business majors. All site visits occurred in the spring of 2008, and each site visit lasted two or three days each, with three NSLLP researchers conducting each site visit.

Prior to each site visit, respective institutional and LLP websites were thoroughly consulted. A gatekeeper was identified at each site, typically a senior Housing/Residence Life administrator who had oversight over all LLPs on his/her campus. This gatekeeper obtained various documents we requested, such as mission statements, internal correspondence, organizational charts, etc. He or she also arranged our site visit schedule, including individual

interviews with key staff, focus groups with LLP participants, and observations of meetings, classes, and other events germane to the LLPs. Semi-structured protocols were developed for all interviews, focus groups, and observations, and all data collection interactions were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. In addition, site visit researchers took fieldnotes and recorded overall impressions immediately following each visit.

Analysis of the data followed Stake's (2006) procedures. First, the NSLLP research team divided into four sub-groups and each sub-group coded all of the data from one particular case. Initial codes were based upon the original theoretical propositions, but additional codes were added when noted. The sub-groups met weekly to compare and collapse codes as well as discuss emergent findings. Each sub-group then created a rubric for the original theoretical propositions, indicating if the individual case exemplified the proposition to a high, medium, or low extent. Using this culled evidence, each sub-group wrote an individual case study report for each school. Then, to conduct the cross-case analysis, the sub-groups shifted from a school, or case, perspective to one that focused on particular theoretical propositions. Each of these sub-groups evaluated the evidence for one to three theoretical propositions and wrote short descriptions of how the propositions were similar or different across the multiple cases. Finally, the theoretical propositions were examined as a set, and overarching conclusions were drawn.

Several procedures were implemented to develop trustworthiness of the analytical procedures (Creswell, 2008). First, both the individual school reports and cross-case theoretical proposition reports were edited by NSLLP research team members who were different from the authors and who did not have an intimate familiarity with the site. Second, when possible, evidence was triangulated among the interview, focus group, observation, and documentation

data. Finally, the gatekeeper at each institution was sent a copy of the individual school reports and asked to provide feedback as a form of member checking.

## **Results**

### **Theoretical Propositions**

We begin our summary of the cross-case analysis results with a synthesis of the findings regarding the 10 theoretical propositions. We particularly highlight the similarities and differences in the propositions among the LLPs studied at the four sites. Due to the volume of data and the number of theoretical propositions, the section below provides broad brush strokes in terms of our findings. In a subsequent section, however, we go into greater depth about some of the more surprising or noteworthy findings.

**Academic Affairs – Student Affairs partnerships.** We initially theorized that effective living-learning programs would be supported by a formal, institutionalized partnership between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs. Overall, creating and maintaining partnerships remained a challenge across all the institutions. Each institution approached partnerships between Student Affairs and Academic Affairs in a unique way that reflected the larger institutional culture and context. We expand upon this theoretical proposition in greater detail in a subsequent section, under “Surprising Findings.”

**Champions.** We also theorized that effective LLPs would have champions and allies at multiple levels, including among students, faculty, and administrators. While champions were identifiable at all four institutions, there was considerable variation in the roles played by these individuals and in their relevance at the institution-wide and program-specific levels. At three of the four institutions studied, high-level administrators were specifically mentioned as influential

allies for their LLPs. Faculty members were also mentioned as champions, particularly of individual LLPs at Mid-Atlantic University, Midwestern University, and Southern Mid-City University. The other group most frequently identified as champions of LLPs were, unsurprisingly, staff in residence life and housing and LLP-specific staff. Few areas of distinction were noted among the institutions. The most apparent was that although we had theorized that champions would include individuals from multiple levels, students were not often identified as champions.

**Resources.** Resources for LLPs were examined across three domains: financial, space, and staff. Financial support was the most salient and discussed resource among all constituents. Most comments related to financial support were framed around specific living-learning programs, rather than the entire entity of programs at a school. Whereas some programs had robust financial resources, other programs were scarcely funded. In addition to discussing the volume of funding, sources of financial support were also highlighted; while most LLPs garnered funding from Housing or Residence Life Programs, they were differentially funded by academic sources, which tended to lead to the disparity in total budgets. Space allocation (e.g., rooms large enough for social gatherings, availability of computer labs) was more salient for students rather than staff, although both mentioned the importance of space distribution. Personnel resources were not readily discussed, although a few comments were made regarding specific programs.

**Structure.** Although we understood that LLP structures would vary widely when we developed theoretical propositions, we theorized that effective LLPs would purposefully train, designate responsibilities, and maintain routine communication with living-learning stakeholders. Areas of responsibility within LLPs were discussed from a variety of lenses. Most responses focused on delineation of roles among paraprofessionals (i.e., student staff such as

RAs). Many programs ran with relatively small staffs, and the uneven balance between numerous responsibilities and few personnel may have fostered an unhealthy working environment for some living-learning staff. Discussion of effective communication included dialogue across Student and Academic Affairs stakeholders, as well as across staff levels (e.g., from LLP directors to hall directors to RAs). Although not highly discussed, several comments were made in regard to staff training for LLP. All responses related to training overwhelmingly emphasized the insufficiency of training for staff. Although residence life staff received training for residential living in general, no schools or programs discussed specific training for LLP staff. Similarly, faculty reported hardly any training at all for their LLP roles.

**Faculty involvement and faculty-peer interaction.** From their inceptions, LLPs on the campuses within our study have relied on faculty to champion their creation, design program experiences, and advocate for their continued existence. A commonality among the institutions was the involvement of faculty in the LLPs' administrative components: faculty maintained formalized, positional roles by serving as LLPs directors. Faculty also tended to be involved with LLPs administratively through advisory councils or boards. Not surprisingly, a prevalent form of faculty involvement within LLPs included teaching courses. Another common theme among the institutions was the diversity of involvement among faculty within the co-curricular aspects of the LLPs. Although faculty members' motivations for becoming involved with LLPs on the four campuses were not explicitly explored, it was evident that some faculty possessed great enthusiasm for their involvement.

Across all the cases, the interactions between students and faculty primarily occurred within the academic context of the LLP, such as classes and other programmatic elements of the program that were sponsored by the academic college or department. While some individual

faculty took on greater mentoring roles outside the confines of the official living-learning programming, the great majority of the student-faculty interaction did not occur in informal or co-curricular contexts.

**Common interests.** We theorized that LLP students should share common interests, and in general, students' motivations to join LLPs included: a desire to be with likeminded peers who share their academic interests, a wish for social acceptance, and a hope to ease the transition to college by joining a community that makes a large university feel more intimate. Often, these motivations worked in tandem as well: the shared academic interests of students led to feelings of safety and social acceptance among like-minded peers. Indeed, most Honors program students at each campus experienced this phenomenon. Participants in Civic and International programs appreciated being with others who shared their interests, such as a shared passion for foreign films, politics, current news and world events.

**Learning outcomes and assessment.** Most schools had begun discussing learning outcomes and assessment as an important venture, but at the time of the site visit, very little action had occurred. Many personnel affirmed the need and importance of learning outcomes, but few explicit learning outcomes were clearly articulated. Within one school, other measures (i.e., graduation rates, obtaining Honors certificates) were incorrectly labeled as learning outcomes, thus we inferred that they may have been unfamiliar with defining and assessing learning outcomes for LLPs. Due to our decision to focus on programs emphasizing civic engagement and international/cultural experiences, among others, it is no surprise that numerous LLPs in our study informally articulated the importance of fostering cultural competence, the appreciation of cultural diversity, and increased engagement with one's community as learning



outcomes for their students. However, as was previously noted, most programs had not established formal mechanisms to observe or measure these outcomes.

**Academic support, social support, and peer interaction.** Regardless of whether a LLP was focused on a particular academic or curricular theme, the general sentiment was that students benefited academically from involvement in the community. The proximity of peers who were studying similar fields, enrolled in the same courses, or interested in related topics and issues helped to provide students with an abundance of physical and human resources. From an ease in forming study groups to an open ear after a difficult test or project, having neighbors and hall mates who were engaged in similar studies helped students to overcome academic challenges which might have otherwise been overly daunting or difficult.

In addition to the extensive academic support that students received as a result of their involvement in LLPs, they also enjoyed varying degrees of social support within the community. Students reported a high level of companionship and camaraderie with their fellow residents due to similar curricular and co-curricular interests. The friendships and bonds that were formed as a result of involvement in L/L programs were of extreme importance and significance to these students throughout their college experience. Students reported feelings of acceptance, approval, and understanding from fellow residents and in some cases expressed that their halls were the only places on campus where they felt comfortable being themselves.

**Curricular programming.** While some universities placed a larger emphasis on the integration of a curricular component into LLPs at the meta-level, other institutions left decisions on the incorporation of curricular programming up to specific programs. Among those institutions that placed a strong emphasis on the inclusion of curricular programming into their

LLPs, the diversity and array of opportunities ran the gamut from highly involved to more passive programming.

In determining the structure and level of curricular programming that accompany the LLP experience, administrators considered the existing course load and other academic demands placed on the students enrolled in the program. However, in those programs where enrollment in the curricular offerings was optional, administrators found it difficult to maintain a level of consistency or cohesion in their courses from year-to-year. These inconsistencies had a seemingly negative effect on the perceived quality of the programming options.

**Co-curricular programming.** Whereas co-curricular programming in many LLPs focused around academic or curricular-based themes, programs in other communities showed that residents preferred a more informal, social program structure. A common component of co-curricular programming was that it was almost entirely student-run and developed within the communities. The presence of these self-initiated events helped to ensure that the co-curricular programming met the needs of the specific residential populations. By providing students with this sense of initiative and ownership over their co-curricular programming, the programs became both more organic and more rewarding for the students who were planning and participating in them. As was the case with the curricular programming in these LLPs, the variety and diversity of co-curricular programming ran the gamut from solely academic to purely social.

### **Emergent Themes**

Although the research team approached this case study with identified theoretical propositions for guiding effective L/Ls, new themes emerged that departed significantly enough

from the original theoretical propositions that they warranted new codes. The section below summarizes some of these new themes.

**Women in STEM.** Several distinctive findings emerged in the analysis of LLPs geared toward women in STEM (W-STEM LLPs). First, we were surprised to learn that two programs in the study included male students. In one case, the program regarded men as key to changing the culture for women in STEM fields, while in the other, men were simply co-participants in a STEM-focused LLP. In another gender-related finding, students in W-STEM programs reported little experience with overt gender discrimination, but they did note some differences in the behavior of female and male students in STEM classrooms. Further, some W-STEM LLP staff members shared that women-oriented initiatives were not always attractive to women students; indeed, some students had an aversion to the word “feminism,” and some students in women-only programs thought men should be included.

Meanwhile, W-STEM students were grateful for the close friendships, mentoring, and supportive social and academic environments within their W-STEM programs. These features fostered peer support and perseverance through challenging curricula and occasional moments of self-doubt. However, some students, particularly in programs that did not include undergraduate men, worried about becoming insular and, in some cases, isolated from the broader campus. Finally, both students and faculty in W-STEM programs reported that a desire to help others was an important part of their motivation for choosing STEM careers.

**Suggestions for improvement.** One salient theme among participating institutions was the tendency for stakeholders to make suggestions for improvement to their own programs. Indeed, recognizing one’s own programs’ limits emerged as an important characteristic of strong LLPs. Suggestions included aspects such as increased collaboration among the curricular and co-

curricular aspects of LLPs, increased intentionality in curricula, and greater attention to staffing. In addition, given the financial landscape within higher education, administrators emphasized the importance of fiscal solvency for their LLPs. Despite the attention to the financial climate, faculty and students involved with LLPs believed that expansion of programmatic initiatives, including involvement with the external campus community, could be a growth area for their LLPs.

**Living-learning fads.** One additional finding emerged from Southern Rural University's case that reflected a unique attitude toward LLPs by a senior administrator. This high-level Student Affairs administrator noted that the themes around which LLPs were created often reflected fads of the times; this individual suggested that as new fads arose, new LLPs should be created to supplant those programs whose themes were no longer in fashion. This administrator indicated an openness to hear and cultivate new and fresh ideas from faculty and others, accompanied by a willingness to re-evaluate and eliminate older programs for the sake of keeping the LLPs vital as a whole.

### **Surprising Findings**

The following results represent some of the more surprising findings uncovered during the multiple case study. Many of these findings emerged in relation to one of the 10 theoretical propositions, but they deviated from our original assumptions in ways that we had not anticipated. Consequently, they represent critical examples of new perspectives previously unidentified in the LLP best practices literature.

**Parallel partnerships.** First, effective LLPs do exercise some form of an Academic and Student Affairs partnership, but the form of that partnership can vary significantly. Some, like Southern Rural University, had very well integrated and coordinated efforts. Others, most

notably Mid-Atlantic University, operated with what we have characterized as a “parallel partnership,” in which the Academic and Student Affairs units divided their labor based on their level of expertise. Parallel partnerships allowed each unit to “do what it does best,” often translating to community building, discipline, and hall programming being handled by Housing, and courses, faculty involvement, and academic programming being handled by the Academic department in the partnership. Regarding Southern Mid-City University’s partnership between Academic and Student Affairs, one staff member discussed that LLPs operate with, “University Housing providing the residence halls, Residence Life staff, and administrative support, while one or more faculty members direct each Living-Learning Community and design its curriculum.” The parallel partnership appeared to be equally as effective as the integrated partnership, assuming regular communication between both units. As a senior residential life administrator at Mid-Atlantic University said,

The best thing we can do for these living-learning communities is to first of all provide really good communities, and that’s what we’re good at, that’s what we excel at, that’s what we’re supposedly experts in, so let’s spend our energies there and let the academic folks design the academic ... learning part of it.

A senior Academic Affairs officer at Southern Mid-City University offered this perspective on parallel partnership: “[Academic Affairs and Student Affairs] certainly are still somewhat separated, but we know that ultimately the program can’t work without the collaboration of the two.” At their best, the parallel partnerships reflected mutual respect and trust and offered efficiency and flexibility so that each partner could enhance their own areas of responsibility. When not at their best, however, parallel partnerships permitted mistrust and lack of communication to detract from the effectiveness of the LLPs’ development and operations.

There were some areas of distinctiveness within these broad themes. For instance, we found that at Southern Rural University, much of the energy and initiative for building and maintaining strong collaborative ties were provided by housing administrators, in particular senior leaders. At Southern Mid-City University, where we found parallel partnerships, we found that the academic program provided both the curricular and co-curricular content of the LLPs.

One initiative found on three of the four campuses that facilitated greater collaboration across units and promoted open communication was the advisory council. At Southern Rural University, Mid-Atlantic University, and Midwestern University, these councils typically included representatives from Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, academic programs, LLP staff, and students. These councils also encouraged collaboration among LLPs. Overall, these councils allowed trust to develop and the broader LLPs to flourish.

**Hyperbonding.** As discussed above, we found that LLP participants developed strong peer communities that may have been initially built upon similar academic interests, but typically blossomed into robust social networks or even oases of social acceptance. However, in some LLPs, the student participants demonstrated an over-exaggerated sense of social connection. In these LLPs, the participants were so satisfied with their LLP peer groups that they began to isolate themselves from the rest of the broader campus. Thus, one potentially disadvantageous side effect of the heightened peer effect that we found is something that we termed “hyperbonding.” While this increased level of interaction was not always negative, its presence exemplifies a potentially challenging social consequence of living-learning participation. For example, in LLPs at all four institutions, students expressed concerns that they might not be able to successfully make friends on campus outside of their LLP. Similarly, many staff noticed that

some communities became insular to the point where students were uncomfortable interacting with peers from other programs or communities. A student at Mid-Atlantic University described this connection in saying that “it’s such a close community that you’re so much in your comfort zone, that you don’t want to take a risk of like going out and meeting new people.”

In some instances, this extraordinary social connection served to heighten friendships and create a community in which students were committed both to their fellow residents and to the community as a whole. This was most frequently observed in LLPs focused on global cultures or international issues. In pairing international students with domestic students who expressed an interest in global cultures, these programs brought together residents who held a similar interest but may have had little else in common. In contrast, LLPs that focused on a particular area of study or field of interest tended to attract a very homogeneous population of students.

As residents in the aforementioned international or cultural LLPs brought a diverse array of backgrounds and interests to the community, hyperbonding in these settings was more constructive and took the form of dedicated and committed connections between residents. Students told stories of friendships that endured even after one or more of the residents had moved back to their native country. Throughout the interview process, many students commented on making friends “for life.” One student said, “Looking around at my closest group of friends here after only two semesters of school, I can tell that these meaningful friendships will last a lifetime.” Similarly, one RA spoke of a culture in which outgoing students would leave their linens and other necessities for the incoming group of international students. Moreover, many residents used these friendships and networks to branch out and make social connections with other like-minded individuals at the institution.

In contrast, the relative lack of diversity within other LLPs, like W-STEM programs, led residents to become more insular and self-confined to this smaller social circle. While this intense connection was a strong support system for students, it also resulted in negative consequences, such as disruptiveness in classes and acting out within the residential community. This was of particular concern within LLPs in which participants were required to take the same academic courses as their fellow residents. As a result, the intense social bonds between neighbors and peers carried over into the academic setting, with little distinction between living quarters and classroom. One staff member noted that residents in these programs appeared to be more “chatty” and social both within the residence hall and within the academic classroom.

Another negative consequence of hyper-bonding was isolation, as students came to over-rely on support from their living-learning peers to the exclusion of others at the university. This relationship support dependence also manifest with LLP staff, particularly among residential advisors (RAs). One RA commented that LLP participants call upon their RAs more frequently than traditional residence hall students, noting that students often do not discuss issues or grievances with anyone outside of their immediate support circle. He said,

Last year when I was an RA in the regular housing, I left my number outside my door like, “If you need me, call me,” and they called me a couple of times when they actually needed me, and now I receive text messages at like 12:30 1:00 in the morning like, “Where are you? I need you to go talk to the neighbors,” and I’m like, “It’s 12:30. Go call the RA on duty,” but...I respond to it, but they just, it’s just a lot more. They just need me more.

Students expressed difficulty in forming relationships outside of the LLP, as if they had become so comfortable in their immediate environment that they were afraid to branch out for



fear of what they might find. As a result, it was difficult for residents to become fully immersed in the larger social community at the institution. This isolation proved to be particularly noticeable in LLPs with a focus on women in STEM. Despite the benefits of single-sex women in STEM programs, the fact that most of these communities included only female students made the experience quite different from what the women were likely to encounter after college. Although this structure appeared to be the norm, some LLPs intentionally included male students (e.g., the W-STEM LLP in Southern Rural University) in the community both to create a more diverse social and residential environment, and to provide interested men with the opportunity to learn more about issues faced by women in STEM fields.

Sometimes, hyperbonding among residents resulted in disciplinary difficulties, when students disrespected the personal boundaries of individuals, spread rumors about others through an already tight-knit community, or participated in illicit activities. In addition to the over-reliance on living-learning peers for friendship, this hyperbonding was observed within the classroom as living-learning students were reported to be cliquish because of their out-of-classroom relationships, making non-LLP student collaboration intimidating and sometimes disrupting the flow of classroom dynamics. Other examples of hyperbonding included both a lack of awareness of the racial homogeneity of the Honors Program at Mid-Atlantic University, requests at several of the Universities that the same group of LLP students could still live together in Housing facilities, even after the program had concluded, and a general lack of interest in forming friendships with students who were not in their LLP.

Despite these negative academic consequences of LLP involvement, other students' experiences pointed to the positive influence LLP participation can have on academic achievement. As many LLPs seek to blend curricular and co-curricular components of college

into a unified residential experience, students with similar academic interests often live in close proximity within these communities. In this study the programs with these characteristics included Honors, W-STEM, and International LLPs. Whether it was because the proximity facilitated the organization of study groups, or because residents understood what the others were going through and were thus more respectful and understanding of the needs and rules of the community, it seemed clear that most students valued this residential structure. Particularly for students who felt a great deal of pressure to succeed in their coursework, having sympathetic neighbors and peers was greatly appreciated.

**Resident and peer advisors.** One potentially powerful source of peer interaction that remained largely untapped in more than one case involved the use of resident advisors (RAs) or peer advisors (PAs). For the most part, RA or PA roles within LLPs were defined identically as RA or PA roles in any traditional residence hall context. Several stakeholders, including RAs or PAs themselves, noted that much more could have been done to integrate the in- and out-of-class connections of the LLP by using the RA/PA as the conduit. One RA at Southern Mid-City University articulated her awareness of the difficulties of being in a specific LLP. Regarding her role, she said, “I think sometimes keeping them positive about their classes [is harder]...[I] just remind them, “Hey, this is a great opportunity for you. You gotta stick with it.”” Moreover, administrators and students at Mid-Atlantic, Midwestern, and Southern Rural Universities noted that community building and mentoring was vastly more effective when the RA or PA was a former participant in that LLP.

Discussions regarding living-learning program structure revolved around several main issues. Many practitioners, especially paraprofessionals like the RAs and PAs, described their frustration with vague and ambiguous role definitions. For example, at Southern Rural

University, the RAs and the PAs in the LLPs were employed for different purposes. Although students had difficulty differentiating between the paraprofessional roles, they found all to be useful. Similarly, staff at Midwestern University defined the first year advisor role as complicated and overwhelming, albeit significant and crucial for the programs' successes. Similarly, professional staff commented that the multiple responsibilities associated with their job were often difficult to juggle. Finally, it is important to note that RAs and PAs assigned to living-learning floors were often given no additional training about the unique qualities of LLP students versus traditional residence hall residents. Rather than receiving formal training, one STEM LLP RA viewed her meetings with program administrators as an informal orientation, saying:

I met with [program administrators] before the semester began to kind of go over the goals of the community and just kind of get to know them also, just to make sure that we're all on the same page as far as goals and aspirations for the program, and it helped serve as kind of an orientation for me.

Lack of training might help to explain why the RAs and PAs deemed to be the most effective were often former participants in those LLPs: these students already had a working knowledge of the respective living-learning programs. Asked if an academic background in a STEM field was a prerequisite for a STEM LLP RA, the assistant first-year advisor of an LLP at Midwestern University replied,

Typically that's one criteria that we do look for, but it's not required...An interest though is required, and so we do have a fourth-year RA who actually used to be in [the STEM LLP] when she was a first-year student, but now has changed to business and will graduate with a business degree...so it's more of an interest or a desire to be a part of the

community that we kind of definitely look for, but then if they do have a science background, that's just an added bonus.

However, we might infer that RAs or PAs without such previous experiences may be at a disadvantage when working with a LLP population. Although RAs can demonstrate a commitment to program missions outside of their academic discipline, professional staff often sought to select RAs with similar degree programs.

## **Discussion**

### **An Empirical Model of Best Practices in Living-Learning Programs**

The results of the multiple case study revealed many conceptually interesting and professionally important implications. First, while all of the theoretical propositions were at least partially confirmed by the data, there were numerous examples in which the propositions were stretched beyond their initial conceptions. For example, while it was found to be beneficial to have Academic and Student Affairs partnerships in LLPs, that collaboration does not necessarily mean that each unit has to be involved in *every* aspect of programming. Indeed, a healthy separation of labor was effective in some circumstances. In addition, while peer interaction is a necessary ingredient in a healthy LLP, too much peer bonding can lead to negative consequences for the participants, the program, and the broader institution. Third, there were several places in which there was a gap between LLPs' initial intentions and implementation; these areas included issues such as uneven sources of funding and vague paraprofessional roles. Finally, while all LLPs in the study had an articulated set of objectives in written form, it did not appear that program stakeholders continually reflected upon whether or how the programs were exercising

fidelity with those objectives, and it was clear that none of the four cases had implemented a purposeful assessment plan to evaluate their effectiveness in meeting their objectives.

As a result of this study, and in combination with the survey data collected by the NSLLP from 2004-2007, we developed a schematic that depicts essential building blocks of LLPs that, when integrated, represent what we believe are the best practices of living-learning (see Figure 1). The building blocks are arranged in a stacked pyramid, much like Maslow's hierarchy of needs has been depicted in the literature (Maslow, 1987/1954; Kenrick, Giskevicius, Neuberg, & Schaller, 2010). At the base of the pyramid is the LLP infrastructure, or those aspects of living-learning programming that—at its foundation—must exist for more sophisticated aspects of programming to subsist and flourish. Just as in Maslow's hierarchy in which individuals require basic physiological needs in order to survive (e.g., food, water, shelter, sleep), LLPs require: a) a set of clearly articulated goals and objectives that should directly relate to the program's theme; b) adequate fiscal and human resources to effectively run the program; and c) a collaboration between Residence Life or Housing units and the relevant Academic Departments supporting the LLP.

However, based on the findings from the multiple case study, we suggest that partnerships between Housing and Academic Units are contextually-bound, and should follow the working relationships that are most optimal for their unique contexts. For some institutions, such as Southern Rural University, where there is precedent for and an embracement of a strong integration of roles and responsibilities between faculty and Student Affairs staff, a fully integrated type of collaboration may be best. For other institutions where no such precedence exists or where the Student and Academic Affairs spheres orbit somewhat separately, a more “parallel partnership”—such as that which we found at Mid-Atlantic University—where the two

divisions maintained boundaries in their roles (Housing responsible for community building and discipline while Academic departments responsible for the curriculum and academic advising) might be best. In either case, however, it is crucial that both divisions communicate regularly and trust one another.

The final block of the infrastructure layer of the pyramid represents the needs of LLPs to possess adequate resources. And, in this case, resources include both financial and personnel sources. First, analyses of the theoretical propositions among the sites did reveal that champions played a significant role in LLP successes. The most common champions for LLPs included institutional leaders, but even more often, the directors of the programs themselves. In addition, we found that different LLPs had radically different budgets, sometimes even at the same institution. And, not surprisingly, those programs with smaller or stretched budgets were often not able to fulfill all of their desired objectives. Thus, if campuses are considering whether to develop new LLPs in current stark economic and budgetary times, they must consider whether they have the resources to support those programs. If they do not, it may be better to not offer the LLP at all than to ask more of the program than it can deliver with severely limited resources.

Resting on top of the LLP infrastructure on the pyramid is the academic environment, or the intellectual hub of the program. The elements that form this layer of the pyramid include: a) courses for credit that the LLP offers or co-lists with an academic department; b) academic advising performed by faculty members; and c) a residence hall climate that is academically and socially supportive. One of the keys to successful living-learning programming that we identified in the case studies is co-registration in common courses among the participants, especially if those courses were part of a major sequence related to the theme of the program. For example, one of the greatest sources of support that women in STEM majors relayed about their W-STEM

LLP experience was that they were living among other women who “got it,” or understood their academic challenges. These women were, largely, taking the same courses and then going back to their residence halls and doing their homework or studying together. Their exams were on the same schedule, so their residence hall environment was appropriately quiet when they needed to study and celebratory when the exams had concluded. In essence, their shared classroom experiences became part of the social fabric of their residence environments. Unfortunately, analysis of the LLP data from the quantitative portion of the NSLLP revealed that fewer than half of the LLPs offered any form of coursework as part of their program experience (Inkelas, 2010). Moreover, many of the LLPs offered a course in conjunction with their programming, but the course did not garner any credit. In those cases, the level of student motivation naturally fell. Thus, our model recommends that LLPs build-in opportunities for students to take courses together that satisfy requirements for their major and that are relevant to the LLP’s theme.

The results of our multiple case study showed that faculty involvement is considered an important, if not crucial, aspect of effective LLP programming. In terms of faculty roles and responsibilities in the programs, the case study findings and the quantitative analyses of the NSLLP data revealed that the most common forms of faculty involvement in LLPs was teaching courses and advising students. Not surprisingly, then, LLP students in the NSLLP survey data reported significantly higher levels of course-related interaction with faculty members than non-LLP students (1.96 versus 1.92, respectively, where 2.00 = a few times per term) (Inkelas & Associates, 2007). However, somewhat surprisingly, while LLP students were statistically more likely than non-LLP students to have engaged in a mentoring relationship with a faculty member, their mean response to this survey question was 1.50, which fell between never (1.00) and a few times a semester (2.00). Moreover, the non-LLP mean response for the same question was 1.46

(Inkelas & Associates, 2007). Thus, it would appear that LLP students interacted with faculty most commonly regarding course-related or academic advising issues, and less commonly in the context of mentoring relationships. This may be because most LLP participants are first-year students, and thus their initial interactions with faculty may not yet lead to more mature, mentoring types of relationships. Accordingly, our model recommends that the student-faculty interactions optimal to effective programming are generally organized around specific course or academic advising, which in turn may lead to more sustained mentoring relationships in the future.

Finally, the last blocks in the academic environment layer of the pyramid relate to the level of support that LLP students perceive academically and socially in their residence environments. The multiple case study findings certainly indicate that some of the most influential aspects of LLP environments are the peer climates in the residence halls—so much so that some may tip the balance and become instances of hyperbonding. That notwithstanding, peer-to-peer interaction in the residence halls was mentioned by LLP students as the single most positive aspect of their programming, and from the quantitative analyses, we found that students' perceptions of academically and/or socially supportive residence hall climates were significantly associated with student outcomes ranging from the transition to college, sense of belonging, appreciation of diversity/multiculturalism, and commitment to civic engagement (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Johnson et al., 2007; Rowan-Kenyon, Soldner, & Inkelas, 2007).

The placement of the blocks on the pyramid is also symbolic; if the foundation that the academic environment blocks are resting on is not solid or missing, the effectiveness of those blocks is compromised as well. For example, if there is no or a weak collaboration in the LLP on the part of the Academic Department, there is little chance that the LLP courses or academic



advising performed by faculty will be successful. Similarly, if Housing or Residence Life is not attentive to the residence community in which the LLP resides, it is unlikely that the academic and social climate in those residential spaces will be supportive in meaningful ways.

The third level of the pyramid consists of the co-curricular environment, or formal, out-of-class activities that supplement and fortify the academic goals of the LLP. Generally speaking, the co-curricular activities best suited for a particular LLP are ones that directly relate to and enhance its theme. For example, first-year students in a Transition program might benefit from workshops with the campus Career Center on the relationships between certain majors and careers. Alternatively, students in a Foreign Language LLP might participate in a “coffee and conversation” activity with native speakers of that language. The survey results from the NSLLP found that the most popular required co-curricular activities in the LLPs studied were orientation programs, group projects, and team building pursuits, and the most popular optional co-curricular activities offered included cultural outings, multicultural programming, and study groups. However, analyses investigating the relationships between specific co-curricular activities and student outcomes, such as the transition to college, overall sense of belonging, and sense of civic engagement, showed that four co-curricular activities in particular were most often linked to more positive outcomes: participating in study groups, outreach to K-12 schools (buddies, peer tutoring, etc.), visits to work settings (corporations, labs, governments, etc.), and career workshops (Inkelas & Associates, 2007).

The highest level of the pyramid, or the “icing on the cake,” is what we have termed intentional integration. This concept represents the extent to which all of the other blocks in the pyramid are in alignment with the LLP’s goals and objectives and integrated with one another. First, it is important that all of the LLP’s elements (or blocks) align with program goals and

objectives: a strong Academic/Student Affairs partnership is optimal, but not if it operates in opposition to or unconscious of the program's mission. However, it is also important that the other blocks in the pyramid align with one another. For example, in the W-STEM LLP at Southern Rural University, the timing of milestones (e.g., exams and major assignments) in the introductory mathematics and science courses that co-enrolled women in W-STEM programs was coordinated with augmented tutoring hours. At Mid-Atlantic University, the W-STEM program made use of multiple generations of current and former participants to integrate programming: junior and senior women who were alumni of the W-STEM program became "big sisters" to the first-year and sophomore current participants of the W-STEM program, offering advice, academic assistance, and networking opportunities. The current W-STEM participants at Mid-Atlantic made trips to local public middle schools, in turn, to sponsor a "Science and Technology Day," designed specifically to fuel middle school girls' interests in STEM topics. And, powerfully, one of the women in STEM majors from our Mid-Atlantic University focus group was so influenced by that Science and Technology Day that she now, as a college student, is participating in the W-STEM program and serving as a role model for today's middle school girls.

The final aspect of the pyramid is assessment, and in the best practices model, it is depicted as the mortar between the blocks that holds together the rest of the pyramid. Effective LLP assessments not only assess discrete parts of their programs (e.g., their courses, their staff), but also assess the extent to which all facets of their program: a) align with the program's goals and objectives, and b) integrate with the other elements of their programs. Indeed, this is why the block representing "Clear Goals and Objectives" is the cornerstone of the model. Despite acknowledged efforts by the LLPs we studied in the case study to step up their assessment

efforts, most were only in the beginning phases of designing and executing their assessment plans. Accordingly, as LLPs contemplate the types of assessments they might pursue, we recommend that they plan for efforts that examine: 1) the effectiveness of the discrete elements of their program; 2) the extent to which the LLP's elements are aligned with the program's goals and objectives; and 3) the level of integration of the various elements to form a cohesive program.

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

The results of the multiple case study and our new empirical model of LLP best practices yield many significant implications for research and practice. At its most basic level, our study demonstrates the importance of empirical research on living-learning programs: while many of our theoretical propositions (which were based on the practitioner literature's best practices) were confirmed, there were several noteworthy deviations from our assumptions—thus illustrating the importance of relying on evidence in addition to advice. In addition, the case study results and best practices model illuminates the *specific aspects* of living-learning programming that may exemplify best practices. Much of the newer empirical literature tends to focus on whether participation, *per se*, is related to student outcomes. The new model will allow researchers to explore LLP impact with more fine granularity—from its most foundational level to its most conceptually sophisticated. Thus, instead of continuing the trend of operationalizing living-learning participation as “yes” or “no,” the next generation of research on LLPs should include measurements and analysis of the various constructs in our model, and should investigate if or how these constructs relate to key student outcomes, such as academic achievement, persistence, and learning. Indeed, practice-based empirical research should consider prioritizing their programs' goals and objectives as the first set of outcomes studied. Finally, in addition to

greater specificity within LLP structures, future research should expand its focus to include greater variation along several planes, including: different types of LLPs (e.g., Honors vs. Cultural vs. STEM-based programs); different student identity groups who may participate in LLPs; and differences among faculty and staff who work with LLPs. It is important to underscore that the NSLLP researchers chose to investigate the four sites in this study due to their exemplary survey data, but there were more than 50 institutions and 600 LLPs represented in the NSLLP, and all offer a wide range of programming.

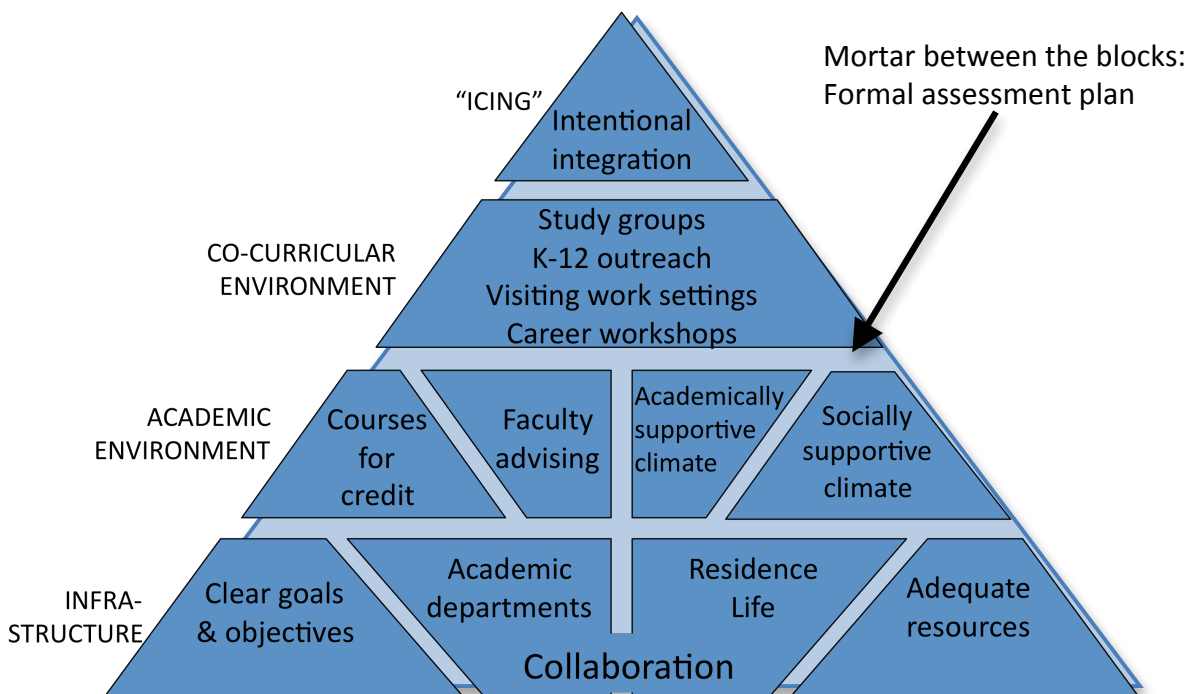
For living-learning practitioners, the findings from this study and the accompanying best practices model can offer much insight for effective LLP functioning. First, while nearly all of the practitioner literature (e.g., Gruenewald & Brooke, 2007; Laufgraben et al., 2007) recommends that LLPs incorporate highly integrated partnerships between Academic and Student Affairs units, we found that these types of partnerships are best aligned with their unique institutional contexts, control, and/or type. While some institutions might have the resources and climate to support tightly integrated Academic/Student Affairs partnerships, others may require something akin to a “parallel partnership,” in which the two units focus their energies on their administrative strengths. At any rate, the multiple case study has shown that there is no “one size fits all” strategy for such partnerships. A second implication for practice involves the facilitation of peer interaction in the LLP. While heightened peer engagement is generally considered a program strength (indeed, it is often considered a hallmark of living-learning programming), it can have its drawbacks as well—including hyperbonding, or a form of peer interaction that creates greater insularity and cliquishness among LLP participants.

A third implication relates to the use of paraprofessional staff. Several of the case study sites included LLPs in which the RA or PA role was rather nebulous, creating role confusion for

the students in those positions and a sense of lost opportunity for the program. In particular, a few case study examples point to the recommendation that former LLP participants often make the most effective senior peers, such as RAs, informal advisors, or role models. Fourth, a more optimal use of living-learning resources could be fostered at institutions where there is more than one LLP. One effective way of sharing ideas and even resources themselves is to establish a living-learning council, on which every LLP on the campus is represented. During council meetings, LLP representatives can share and learn from one another, a free form of capital that has the potential to elevate the effectiveness of all programs. Finally, it is now time for all LLPs to implement an assessment cycle similar to the one we recommended above. Specifically, all assessment plans should include a way to assess: 1) the effectiveness of the discrete elements of the program; 2) the extent to which the LLP's elements are aligned with the program's goals and objectives; and 3) the level of integration of the various elements to form a cohesive program. Practitioners would also be wise to align their assessment plans with broader university goals and initiatives, such as strategic plans and/or accreditation reviews.

Together, the multiple case study and best practices empirical model hold the potential to assist LLP practitioners and researchers with the tools they need to develop, maintain, and study effective programs. Much is left to be learned about the AAC&U high-impact practices (Kuh, 2008). This study is one small step in illuminating what, if anything, makes living-learning programs a high-impact endeavor.

**Figure 1**  
**Best Practices Building Blocks for Living-Learning Programs**



## References

- Bergman, C. J., & Brower, A. M. (2008). Faculty involvement in residence halls: Bridging faculty and staff cultures through residential learning communities. In Zeller, W. J. (Ed.). *Residence life and the new student experience*. (Monograph No. 5, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Columbia, SC: National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, University of South Carolina.
- Creswell, J. W. (2008). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Garrett, M. D., & Zabriskie, M. S. (2003). The influence of living-learning program participation on student-faculty interaction. *Journal of College and University Student Housing*, 32(2), 38-44.
- Gruenewald, D., & Brooke, C. (2007). In B. L. Smith & L. B. Williams (Eds.). *Learning communities and student affairs: Partnering for powerful learning*. Olympia, WA: The Evergreen State College, Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education.
- Hummel, M., Murphy, R., & Zeller, W. (2008). Principles for effective living and learning programs. In Luna, G., & Gahagan, J. (Eds.). *Learning initiatives in the residential setting* (Monograph No. 48). Columbia, SC: National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, University of South Carolina.
- Inkelas, K. K. (2010, February). *The National Study of Living-Learning Programs: Lessons learned about one high-impact practice*. Plenary presentation at the 29<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference on the First-Year Experience, Denver, CO.

- Inkelas, K. K. & Associates. (2007). *National Study of Living-Learning Programs: 2007 report of findings*. College Park, MD: Authors. Retrieved from <http://www.livelearnstudy.net/additionalresources/reports.html>.
- Inkelas, K. K. & Associates. (2004). *National Study of Living-Learning Programs: 2004 report of findings*. College Park, MD: Authors. Retrieved from <http://www.livelearnstudy.net/additionalresources/reports.html>.
- Inkelas, K. K., Johnson, D., Lee, Z., Daver, Z., Longerbeam, S., Vogt, K., & Leonard, J. B.. (2006). The role of living-learning programs in students' perceptions of intellectual growth at three large universities. *NASPA Journal*, 43(1), 115–143.
- Inkelas, K. K. & Longerbeam, S. (2008). Working toward a comprehensive typology of living-learning programs. In G. Luna & J. Gahagan (Eds.). *Learning initiatives in the residential setting* (Monograph No. 48). Columbia, SC: National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, University of South Carolina.
- Inkelas, K. K. & Soldner, M. (2011). Undergraduate living-learning programs and student outcomes. In Smart, J. C., & Paulsen, M. B. (Eds.). *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, 26, 1-56.
- Inkelas, K. K., Soldner, M., & Szelenyi, K.. (2008). Living-learning programs for first-year students. In M, Dunn & W. Zeller (Ed.). *Residence life programs and the new student experience*. (Monograph No. 5, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Columbia, SC: National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, University of South Carolina.
- Inkelas, K. K., & Weisman, J. L. (2003). Different by design: An examination of student outcomes among participants in three types of living-learning programs. *Journal of College Student Development*, 48(5), 525-542.



- Johnson, D. R., Soldner, M., Brown Leonard, J., Alvarez, P., Inkelas, K. K., Rowan-Kenyon, H., & Longerbeam, S., (2007). Examining sense of belonging among first-year undergraduates from different racial/ethnic groups. *Journal of College Student Development, 48*(5), 525-542.
- Kuh, G. (2008). High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter. Washington DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Laufgraben, J. L., O'Connor, M. L., & Williams, J. (2007). In B. L. Smith & L. B. Williams (Eds.). (2007). *Learning communities and student affairs: Partnering for powerful learning*. Olympia, WA: The Evergreen State College, Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education
- Laufgraben, J. L., Shapiro, N. S., & Associates (2004). *Sustaining and improving learning communities*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Kenrick, D. T., Griskevicius, V., Neuberg, S. L., & Schaller, M. (2010). Renovating the pyramid of needs: Contemporary extensions built upon ancient foundations. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 5*(3), 292-314.
- Maslow, A. H. (1987/1954). *Motivation and personality* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Harper and Row.
- Pike, G. R. (1999). The effects of residential learning communities and traditional residential living arrangements on educational gains during the first year in college. *Journal of College Student Development, 40*(3), 269-284.
- Rowan-Kenyon, H., Soldner, M., & Inkelas, K. K. (2007). The contributions of living-learning programs on developing sense of civic engagement in undergraduate students. *NASPA Journal, 44*(4), 750-778.

Schoem, D. (2004). Sustaining living-learning programs. In J. L. Laufgraben & N. S. Shapiro (Eds.). *Sustaining and improving learning communities*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Shapiro, N. S., & Levine, J. H. (1999). *Creating learning communities: A practical guide to winning support, organizing for change, and implementing programs*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, Inc., Publishers.

Stake, R. E. (2006). *Multiple case study analysis*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Yin, R. K. (2008). *Case study research: Design and methods* (4<sup>th</sup> ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Zeller, W., James, L., & Klippenstein, S. (2002). *The residential nexus: A focus on student learning*. Columbus, OH: Association of College and University Housing Officers International.