

# What Matters in A Living-Learning Community: An Analysis of A Living-Learning Community in Parks Tower

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**Abstract.** In recent years, learning communities are getting popular in colleges. Among them, living-learning communities are one distinctive and typical type. This paper is a case research. It will focus on a living-learning community at the University of Toledo. It is designed for first-year, direct-from-high-school and transfer students majoring in any education field. Programming is offered in conjunction with the College of Education and students have numerous chances to interact with faculty, graduate assistants, peer mentors, supervisors, and residential assistants. This paper will focus on the problems existing in this living-learning community and try to analyze this living-learning community from four different perspectives: structure, human resource, culture, and politics. At the end of this paper, there will be recommendations and suggestions provided to improve this living-learning community.

**Keywords:** learning, living-learning community, interaction

## 1. Introduction

These days, living-learning communities have steadily increased in number as more institutions have recognized the learning community as an effective way to promote curricular coherence, students' deeper learning, and sense of community among students and teachers. Living-learning communities represent two central ideals in higher education: learning and community (Laufgraben, Shapiro, & Associates, 2004). They are characterized by scholarly community, deep learning, strong sense of community, and the careful integration of the intellectual and social dimensions of university life (Laufgraben, Shapiro, & Associates, 2004).

It is evident that nowadays there is a shift in emphasis from learning with the focus on the individual to learning as part of a community (Laufgraben, Shapiro, & Associates, 2004). It means living-learning communities play an important role in our current higher education system. Generally speaking, a living-learning community is a group of people who live in the same residence hall, share common interests, focus, beliefs, and are actively engaged in learning together from each other. Such a community has become the template for a residence-hall-based, independent-learning oriented, and self-achievement approach (Laufgraben, Shapiro, & Associates, 2004).

These days, living-learning communities provide different programs, which are linked or clustered during an academic term, and enroll a common group of students. They do their best to meet different students' needs and distinct campus cultures. Within any learning community, there is no "one size fits all" (Laufgraben, Shapiro, & Associates, 2004). However, no matter how different they are, they, in fact, share some common characteristics, organizing students and faculty into smaller groups, helping students establish academic and social support networks, bringing faculty together in more meaningful ways, and offering a critical lens for evaluating the first-year experience.

With a growing number of students, faculty, and administrators involved, particularly to freshmen, living-learning communities play an important role in meeting their needs, and ensuring that it effectively help students obtain what they want to acquire, and meanwhile as an indispensable auxiliary part on campus, it can really make the institution more competitive.

However, living-learning communities do not function well currently within higher education. They are faced with many challenges as it becomes more and more prevalent.

This paper will focus on a living-learning community at the University of Toledo, which is located on the 15th floor in Parks Tower residence hall. Parks Tower is an air-conditioned hall offering traditional-style, single and double bedrooms with built in closet space. This living-learning community is called “College of Education Cluster Floor.” It is designed for first-year, direct-from-high-school and transfer students majoring in any education field. Residents live with students who take the same classes and upper-class peer mentors, not only from the college of education, but also from the field of arts and science, engineering, and business. Programming is offered in conjunction with the College of Education and students have numerous chances to interact with faculty, graduate assistants, peer mentors, supervisors, and residential assistants.

However, this living-learning community, compared with other living-learning communities on campus, has some problems arising inside, such as there are only about 5-10 students who actively take part in the programs in the residence hall most of the times, which is disappointing that less than 15% of the students would attend those activities and programs in their residence hall; faculty involvement is not very passionate; there is a lack of clear leadership inside, and etc. (Rosendo, graduate assistant in the Department of Early Childhood and Special Education, personal communication, March 15, 2010).

This paper will focus on the problems existing in this living-learning community and try to analyze this living-learning community from four different perspectives: structure, human resource, culture, and politics. At the end of this paper, there will be recommendations and suggestions provided to improve this living-learning community.

## **2. Structural Lens**

This cluster floor is governed and administrated by both the Office of Residence Life and the College of Education. This living-learning community is one of the learning communities under the Office of Residence Life. The Office of Residence Life provides the funding to sustain this cluster floor, such as paying the cost of housing for those peer mentors working inside, the cost of offices, and providing those mentors with a stipend. The administrators and mentors are from the College of Education (Emily Creamer, advisor in College of Education, personal communication, March 5, 2010).

According to my research, I find it very obvious that there is a shared control in this living-learning community. The funding comes directly from the Office of Residence Life, but the staff, peer mentors, and faculty are from the College of Education. It is hard to distinguish the true decision-maker in the governance. In my opinion, shared governance could be considered as a win-win situation, but sometimes, it means no governance at all, because each party would think it is not his duty to make critical decisions, handle the tough problems, and prepare for the future development. When it comes to the dilemma, both parties would not be active to take the first step forward, and they would choose to wait until another party takes action (Birnbbaum, 1991). As the word “separation” in the process of governance mentioned by a peer mentor working in this community (Rosendo, graduate assistant in the Department of Early Childhood and Special Education, personal communication, March 15, 2010).

Emily Creamer, working as an advisor in the College of Education, would have a meeting with the Office of Residence Life every month, but that is not compulsory. It seems that there is a lack of communication between both parties. Based on my observation, I think the College of Education has strong ties with this living-learning community, although the money, which might be an important input, is from the Office of Residence Life. At the same time, I find that from the structural lens, there is no specific title for Emily, who is in charge of this living-learning community in the College of Education.

For example, Emily Creamer, who works as an advisor in the College of Education, along with two graduate assistants, in effect, is at the frontline of daily management and administration of this cluster floor. However, her title is an advisor, without the direct relationship with the living-learning community. Two other graduate assistants work together with Emily. Each of them takes separate role as they serve in this living-learning community. They provide different academic programs and social activities for those first-year students in the College of Education. These programs and social activities are intended to help the newcomers fully engaged on campus, and better adapt themselves to the new life in the university. Emily holds meetings periodically with graduate assistants to discuss the progress, and collect feedback from the

residents, mentors, residential assistants, and try to make more residents to be involved in this community (Rosendo, graduate assistant, personal communication, March 15, 2010).

During my interview with Emily, she mentioned that Dr. Brady, new Dean in the College of Education, and Dr. Keil, Associate Dean for Undergraduate Studies in the College of Education, both attended the social activities in Parks Tower. Their involvement partly shows that the College of Education accounts for a higher proportion in the operation of this living-learning community.

### Human Resource Lens

When it comes to the aspect of human resource, I think it is the people who make decisions, prepare academic and social programs, organize diverse activities, help and interact with those students. This living-learning community needs ideas, energy, and talent which people provide, while people need careers, salaries, work chances which organization provides. The key to effectiveness is to tailor the organization to people, which is to find an organizational form that will enable people to get the job done while feeling good about what they are doing.

In the College of Education, a core group takes charge of this living-learning community in Parks Tower. Also, the involvement of faculty and peer mentors makes this community appealing to the residents. Emily Creamer, an advisor in the College of Education, is the chief person in charge of this living-learning community, although she has no specific title for this position. She would go to Parks Tower periodically, and work with two graduate assistants. According to a survey they did with all the residents living inside, there are about 70 students from education majors living in Parks Tower, but the fact is that not all of them live on the same floor, which means not everyone, has the same access to this living-learning community in the residence hall. About 50 students live on the cluster floor, and the rest of 20 students live on different floors. Most of the times, the problem is that there are only about 5-10 students who actively take part in the programs in the residence hall (Rosendo, graduate assistant and peer mentor in the Department of Early Childhood and Special Education, personal communication, March 15, 2010). Therefore, it is sad to say that less than 15% of the students would attend those activities and programs in their residence hall.

However, it is encouraging that staff, peer mentors, and graduate assistants are passionate into this community. They try hard to change this situation. In the residence hall, there is one academic program provided for the residents. According to a mentor's words, the reason why they provide just one study group is that most of the students are freshmen, and they do not have too many core courses in education majors. Therefore, the main focus of this living-learning community is to try to help these new-comers to better get used to the college life, get to know more activities and associations on campus, and make them able and willing to be engaged on campus (Rosendo, graduate assistant and peer mentor in the Department of Early Childhood and Special Education, personal communication, March 15, 2010).

Some of the activities they do since this fall semester started are as follows: mentors take the first-year students to arts museum, a place which makes new-comers have a closer touch of this city; to attend UT3 program, which is the only program in northwest Ohio that recruits, prepares, and supports science and mathematics teachers to teach specifically in high need schools, where there is a nationwide shortage of qualified teachers; to hold door decoration contest in the residence hall. They also have organized the dinner with the Dean of the College of Education, and this can make the freshmen feel they have the access to share their opinions towards the school. Moreover, some mentors will give their cell phone numbers to all the residents, and ask them not hesitate to get in touch with them. Some mentors also use Facebook, a very popular social network among the college students, to keep in touch with the students. One of the mentors told me that before the deadline of the registration, he would stay online to help those students who had problems with their registration. The staff is specifically trained to better understand first-year students, and with a smaller student-to-staff ratio than in other residence halls, they are able to spend more time with floor residents (Rosendo, graduate assistant and peer mentor in the Department of Early Childhood and Special Education, personal communication, March 15, 2010).

Therefore, in my opinion, people really function well in this living-learning community. They work hard not only to sustain and improve this environment, but to provide as much guidance and assistance for all the first-year students.

However, one of the main purposes of living-learning communities is to enhance the interaction between students and faculty. As regards the involvement of faculty in Parks Tower, I think there is still a long way to go for this living-learning community. Based on my research, there is no denying that faculty members have heavy research burdens to complete, and most of the time, the programs in Parks Tower often take place in the evening. It is really hard to find the right timing for both students and faculty getting together (Emily Creamer, advisor in the College of Education, personal communication, March 5, 2010). Thus, it is not convenient for the faculty members to passionately involve in this living-learning community. This situation would depend upon many factors, such as personal interests, daily schedule, and a lack of stimulation. In my opinion, the reason why faculty members are not passionately involved is partly because that they think their efforts are not valued and there is no tangible or intangible stimulation to them. Thus, faculty members actually do not perform well.

### **3. Cultural Lens**

Regarding the culture in this living-learning community, it concentrates very much on the first-year experience (Rosendo, graduate assistant and peer mentor in the Department of Early Childhood and Special Education, personal communication, March 15, 2010). Meanwhile, the University of Toledo also has a strong sense of first-year experience. On one hand, our school implements a variety of initiatives to enhance the quality of first-year experience and help students achieve success. There is a program called "First Year Experience," which ensures that our new students are supported through the use of peer mentors, orientation classes, service learning, freshman activities, and increased interaction with faculty and staff outside the classroom, such as living-learning communities in the residence halls.

On the other hand, the culture in this living-learning community in Parks Tower matches up well with the culture on campus. The institution is trying hard to help those students better prepare themselves for the transition period. As for the living-learning community in Parks Tower, all students living inside also participate in the first-year experience program. Hall and floor programs focus on the specific needs, issues and challenges of first-year students. The staff is specifically trained to better understand first-year students, and with a smaller student-to-staff ratio than in other residence halls, they are able to spend more time with floor residents. Students have the opportunity to develop their leadership skills, improve their academic skills and make an overall positive transition to college life (Rosendo, graduate assistant and peer mentor in the Department of Early Childhood and Special Education, personal communication, March 15, 2010). Opportunities for frequent faculty-student interaction and individualized attention are provided to the students residing on these floors. Students also have greater opportunity to be connected to university services as well as participate in workshops, study groups and tutorials designed to help with their transition to college (Emily Creamer, advisor in the College of Education, personal communication, March 5, 2010).

### **4. Political Lens**

Nowadays, considering the current scarce resources inside the institution, particularly the limited budget, there is no doubt that it becomes more and more difficult for each organization to obtain enough resources to sustain itself, let alone to improve itself. Each organization would experience competition, bargaining, and compromise in this process.

It is no wonder that this living-learning community tries hard to maintain its current administrative personnel and strives to acquire enough funding. To sustain and improve this living-learning community, staff in this living-learning community submitted a proposal for funding. However, the proposal has still not been approved by the Office of Provost (Emily Creamer, advisor in the College of Education, personal communication, March 4, 2010). At the same time, the College of Education has no financial support to this living-learning community in Parks Tower. Moreover, an advisor position for this living-learning community has been cut off during current academic year (Emily Creamer, advisor in the College of Education, personal communication, March 4, 2010).

Therefore, due to the lack of powerful person in the process of bargaining, and negotiating, this living-learning community finds it very difficult to compete for resources inside the institution. In fact, Emily Creamer, who is the chief person in charge of this living-learning community, works as an advisor in the

College of Education. It is tremendously hard for her to compete for more funding, especially under the context of limited budget. Without other powerful person's involvement, it is impossible to obtain adequate money to sustain and improve this living-learning community.

## 5. Conclusion

After I analyze this living-learning community from four different perspectives, it's time for me to reflect on the problem from an overall angle.

As discussed above in this paper, this living-learning community really functions well in some specific fields, for example, passionate and committed staff members, diverse social programs, and strong culture of first-year experience. However, there are still challenges facing this community, such as a lack of a director in charge of this living-learning community, weak involvement of faculty members, and few academic programs established in this living-learning community.

In the end, to sustain and improve this living-learning community, I have some recommendations and suggestions for this living-learning community as follows.

First, more academic programs should be provided in this living-learning community. It is called a learning community, and one remarkable feature of the living-learning community is deep learning, where students have the opportunity for learning to go beyond the boundaries of the classroom (Laufgraben, Shapiro, & Associates, 2004). Granted, many social programs can greatly help the first-year students better adjust themselves to the college life, but at the same time, they need the careful integration of the intellectual and social dimensions of college life (Laufgraben, Shapiro, & Associates, 2004).

Second, to make faculty members passionately involved in this living-learning community, some benefits and stimulation plans must be provided by the College of Education, the Office of Residence Life, or other organizations on campus. Without the proper recognition for faculty's work, it is really hard for faculty members to put more extra time and energy into this living-learning community, besides their heavy research work. Faculty participation in the creation maintenance and improvement of the program is crucial. With faculty support, it is possible for living-learning programs to move from the margins to the core of institution life (Laufgraben, Shapiro, & Associates, 2004).

Third, a director of this living-learning community must be appointed. Without the clear structure of governance, this living-learning community in Parks Tower cannot run smoothly in the long run. Compared with the most successful living-learning community on campus (Jo, Campbell, personal communication, Director of Residence Life, March 16, 2010), Arts Living-Learning Community, which is located in Ottawa House East. Much of the success of any particular living-learning community program is due to the commitment and effort of the director (Laufgraben, Shapiro, & Associates, 2004). Programs thrive when senior administrators who are responsible for oversight of living-learning programs find ways to support directors, faculty, and students (Laufgraben, Shapiro, & Associates, 2004). Therefore, one lesson for the living-learning community in Parks Tower to learn is that a passionate and engaged director is of urgent need.

Last but not least, the College of Education and Office of Residence Life must communicate and cooperate more frequently and effectively from now on. Due to the fact that this living-learning community is jointly governed by both parties, each party thus cannot overlook the responsibility of its own, and more channels for communication and dialogue must be taken into consideration.

## 6. References

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