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THE EFFECTS OF MEMBERSHIP IN FRESHMAN INTEREST GROUPS MEREDITH CURTIN, SARAH THOMPSON, MEG WIGGINS

This study focuses on the impact of membership in Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs) at a large, Research I, public university in the Midwest. FIGs are learning communities that strive to integrate formal and informal learning in a residential environment. The researchers found that membership in FIGs has positively impacted college students and their perceptions of personal academic achievement and social adjustment in their first semester of college.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a significant amount of attention paid to the impact that learning environments have on college students. Students and their learning styles are changing and faculty, student affairs professionals, and university administrators need to respond to those changes in order to be effective and meet the needs of these students (Schroeder, 1993). A particular area of interest has involved student learning and achievement in connection with residential living. Research has found that residential students spend approximately 70% of their time within their residence hall (Schroeder & Jackson, 1987). Therefore, the residence hall is a crucial area in the lives of many students, particularly freshman, who are the highest percentage of students living in residence halls in most colleges and universities. The basic premise that has emerged from this research is that residential environments can be designed to enhance and foster student development for freshmen, particularly in terms of academic achievement and adjustment to college life. This can primarily be achieved by creating or restructuring optimal environments for academic success and achievement.

This study focuses on the impact that membership in a Freshman Interest Group (FIG) has on college students and their perceptions of personal academic achievement and social adjustment in their first semester of college. This study takes place at a large, Research I, public university in the Midwest and involves a combination of research on residence halls, the first year experience, and learning communities. A FIG is comprised of a group of approximately 20 first year students who take three general education requirement classes. These classes center around a central theme. The students of each FIG also live on a residence hall floor together and attend a seminar class once a week which is facilitated by a Peer Instructor (PI). The purpose of a FIG is to integrate formal and informal learning, and thus, enhance overall student outcomes.

Residence hall living and learning communities, such as FIGs, have been found to have positive effects on freshman students in terms

of academic achievement, satisfaction, intellectual development, involvement, and retention (Smith, 1991; Astin, 1993; Schroeder & Hurst, 1996). It is because of these emerging results that colleges and universities are working toward restructuring their learning environments and looking toward learning community models for their students (Smith & Hunter, 1988; Cross, 1988). This is a very important and timely subject and can possibly alter the meaning of learning and how it is developed at American colleges and universities.

This study will begin with a literature review of relevant literature from the field divided into two categories: residence halls, and learning communities. Each section discusses how these entities impact academic achievement and social adjustment in the first semester of college, and what specific elements have the greatest impact on these factors.

Literature Review

Residence Halls

Nowack and Hanson (1985) studied the differences in academic achievement between freshmen students who lived in the residence halls and freshmen students who did not. Their goal was to determine what factors affected freshman academic achievement and persistence on college campuses and if gender impacted this success. The results found that residence hall students had higher grade point averages (GPA) and less academic difficulty than non-residence hall students. Nowack and Hanson (1985) concluded that residence halls were positive environments for fostering academic achievement in freshman students and that there should be continued programmatic efforts to have an educational focus in the residence halls.

Astin (1993) found peer interaction, particularly in residence halls, to be one of the most valuable factors impacting college students in terms of academic achievement, retention, and satisfaction with the institution. He wrote that residence halls were underutilized in terms of peer and academic interactions and concluded that "the student's peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years" (Astin, 1993, p. 398). It is this peer element that constitutes many learning communities now found at colleges and universities across the country.

Learning Communities

Learning communities take many forms and structures, serve different purposes, and can refer to numerous approaches to learning. In its most basic form, a learning community can be described as "bringing together people with related interests and giving them the opportunity to learn from each other" (Hill, 1985, p. 1).

Matthews, Smith, MacGregor, and Gabelnick (1996) discussed the benefits of a rich learning environment that learning communities provide because of the high level of involvement, sense of community, and support. By connecting courses around a theme, learning communities provide students with an integration of material rather than disjointed classes experienced in isolation from one another. One type of learning community discussed was the FIG, not all of which have residential components. The main purpose of FIGs is to assist freshman students in their first semester adjustment to college, academically and socially, and to help them be successful. A case study examined by Matthews et al. (1996) involved FIG programs at the University of Oregon and the University of Washington, where all FIG classes fit students' general education requirements. In addition, students attended a seminar taught once a week by a PI, an undergraduate student who had been hired and trained to facilitate the course. They found this program to be successful in terms of helping students have a sense of community and connection when they need one most, therefore helping them be more successful academically (Matthews et al., 1996).

Student affairs professionals have the ability to create specific learning environments for students with the student learner as the focus (Schroeder & Hurst, 1996). An example of such an environment would be a FIG. Schroeder and Hurst (1996) attested that by using Blocher's (1978) theoretical base of optimal learning environments and healthy communities, learning communities could thrive because students are of primary importance and the environment is a close second. They give the example of a residential FIG program which integrates formal and informal learning (Schroeder & Hurst, 1996).

Wilcox and delMas (1997) recognized that the first year of the college experience is crucial to students' success and that packaging courses and building a sense of community through learning communities was an effective way to help academic achievement and retention. The students enrolled in the learning communities were found to be more successful overall, especially in the areas of credit completion, academic achievement and persistence (Wilcox & delMas, 1997). The students in the learning communities responded that the main factors impacting their experiences were frequent meetings with professors and peers, constant exchange of ideas, peer pressure to attend and be active in class, a sense of community, academic and personal support.

A growing body of research demonstrates that learning communities are successful because they help to build a sense of group identity and community among students academically and socially (Matthews et al., 1996). The researchers hypothesized that those students who participated in the FIG program studied, transitioned to college academic work more smoothly than non-FIG participants. In addition, the researchers also hypothesized that the FIG participants adjusted socially with more

ease than non-FIG participants.

Method

Sample

This study was conducted at a large, public, residential Research I institution in the Midwest. In the fall of 1998, this Midwestern university implemented a program of Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs). The program offered first year students the opportunity to join a community of students with similar topical interests. In the first semester of its operation, there were nineteen different FIG communities in which students could join. Within the context of a specific FIG, students enrolled in the same three academic courses, as well as a FIG seminar led by an upper-class peer instructor. Students who participated in the FIGs program were housed by theme, interspersed on residence hall floors with non-FIG participants throughout campus (personal communication, FIGS Director, September 17, 1998).

This study looked at the impact of FIGS on the academic and social adjustment of first year students to campus life. The researchers investigated the FIG and non-FIG students' perceptions of their academic and social transitions, comparing the two groups and analyzing the differences. By interviewing FIG and non-FIG participants who resided on two different floors in Nicholas Center (a pseudonym), the researchers assessed the impact that student participation in the FIGs program had on successful adjustment to life on campus. The sample for this study was not randomly selected. Both FIG and non-FIG students volunteered to be interviewed for research purposes. The researchers limited their study to the students of one specific residence center to control for the variations between the cultures evident in different residence halls.

Twenty-one students were interviewed for the study, all of whom were enrolled in their first semester of college and living in Nicholas Center. At the time of the interviews, FIG participants had been a member of their FIG for approximately 8 weeks. Of the 21 participants interviewed for this study, 9 were male and 12 were female. There were 4 male and 7 female participants from the FIG group of students and 5 male and 5 female participants from the non-FIG group of students. The sample population was comprised primarily of White students, with only one African American participant and no other racial/ethnic group represented.

Procedure

In order to interview the students, a survey instrument was developed consisting of 57 questions. The questions were separated into four categories: 1) general information; 2) academic achievement; 3) social adjustment; and 4) questions specifically for FIG members. The

questionnaire was utilized to measure the students' perceptions of their academic achievement and social adjustment to their first semester of college.

Interviews were conducted primarily in the participant's residence hall floor lounge or private room. In order to ensure confidentiality and privacy, no other students were present during the interviews, and participants were asked to supply a pseudonym for themselves. Each participant was involved in an interview approximately forty-five minutes to one hour in length. Each interview was tape recorded with the participant's consent.

Limitations

There were several limitations that may have affected the research study. A predetermining factor was that the project was conducted by three White female researchers. Another limitation in the study was that all of the participants volunteered to be interviewed. There is a higher probability that these students who volunteered are already more active, more involved, and therefore socially adjusted, serving as a confounding variable in the study. The response rate yielded only 21 participants, all of whom participated in the same FIG. This may not have been a large enough sample to gain an accurate depiction of the learning community experience, or the FIG seminar experience. Out of the 21 participants interviewed, only one was a person of color. This could show a very limited view of student social and academic adjustment, because our sample is not proportional to the student body as a whole. Finally, previous research has shown that residential learning communities in the form of FIGs are not as common as non-residential FIG programs. For this reason, this study will not be replicable for the majority of FIG programs at other institutions.

Results

The researchers evaluated the study using two main categories: academic achievement and social adjustment to the college campus. These categories, as well as their sub-categories were created as a result of the themes that emerged during participant interviews. Research has shown that student involvement and participation in a learning community during the freshman year has a significantly positive impact on their perceptions of academic and social success (Matthews, et al., 1996; Nowack & Hanson, 1985).

Background Information of Participants

All of the participants in the study were 18-19 years old, and only three of the students' permanent residences were out of state. All of the participants stated that other students from their high school attended this university, half of the participants knew other students on

their floor before moving in, and only two knew their roommate prior to attending school. With one exception, FIG students lived on residence hall floors with other FIG students of the same sex, and were enrolled in three of the same classes. These classes also contained non-FIG students, who, in fact, composed the largest population of enrolled students. In addition, all FIG students attended the same weekly seminar class that was taught by a PI.

Academic Achievement

The first category we researched was academic achievement. The researchers identified four factors in determining the academic achievement of FIG and non-FIG students including 1) perceptions of academic achievement, 2) study habits, 3) academic support, and 4) academic interactions.

Perceptions of academic achievement

Students were asked how they defined academic achievement and what factors were involved in determining this term. FIG students defined academic achievement as setting a specific goal and working to achieve that goal to the best of their ability.

FIG member, Mary: I would describe academic achievement as doing your best and reaching your highest potential regardless of your actual GPA.

The majority of non-FIG students mentioned grades as the highest factor in determining whether or not they were achieving academically.

Non-FIG member, Jack: Achieving academically means 3.5 or above, no questions asked.

I mean, if you can't make the grades, why are you here?

Although some FIG students did mention grades as a factor, it was not as high a determinant as for non-FIG students. Overall, students in both groups (FIG and non-FIG) anticipated their semester grade point average to be between 3.0-3.5. Non-FIG students were happy with their academic achievement thus far, while FIG students often felt that they could be doing better and achieving more academically.

Study habits

Non-FIG students mentioned academics as a high priority in high school, whereas academics were not as high of a priority for FIG students, who reasoned that high school was often not a challenge for them. In their first semester of college, however, the majority of all participants interviewed stated that academics were a high priority. Participants generally stated that they attended class on a regular basis. Some FIG students mentioned that when they did miss class that they could easily get the notes and class assignments from other students in their FIG.

FIG member, Veronica: Because we're all mostly in the same classes together, it's really not that big of a deal to skip or miss class. Y'know

what I mean? It's so easy to get the work from someone else across the hall.

Some factors found to be related to the participants' study habits were class attendance, where they sit in class, and how much and in what location do they study. The participants stated that where they sat in class varied from week to week, but many FIG students did mention that it was typical to sit with other FIG members because they were in the same classes. However, one FIG member specifically stated that she wanted to sit with other non-FIG students so that she might have the opportunity to meet other people.

FIG member, Robin: I don't always like to just hang out with people in the FIG. They are together so much anyway that I like to get to know other people too. I also like to sit in the front so I can get to know the professor better. Other people in the FIG don't always do that.

The consensus was that FIG students study 10-15 hours per week and non-FIG students study 15-20 hours per week. The majority of the participants studied in their room or floor lounge, and FIG students were more likely to study in groups, whereas non-FIG students were more likely to study by themselves.

FIG member, Jordan: Every Monday night we get together to study because we have a geography lab the next day. It really helps me to be able to study with everyone else. I actually wish that people in the FIG were in my math class too. That is, by far, my worst subject.

Non-FIG member, Jenny: I study in my room, in the lounge, outside, and in the library, but I always study by myself. Um, my friends on the floor aren't in the same classes as me, and I think we would just talk anyway and not get any work done.

Academic support

Students overall felt very supported academically in their residence halls and on campus. Within the residence hall, FIG students perceived that their floor had academics as a high priority, and non-FIG students perceived academics as a medium to high priority on their floor. All participants mentioned that their floor had quiet hours, and although the hours were not strictly enforced by the Resident Assistant, all of the students stated they felt comfortable asking neighbors to turn down their music or lower their voices. In addition, the majority of participants had met with their advisor at least once, and they felt that the necessary resources were available to enable them to succeed academically.

FIG member, Robin: Oh yeah! I have been to a lot of math tutorial session things in other residence halls. I went to a writing one, too. There are computer clusters everywhere too which are really helpful.

Non-FIG member, Corey: There are a lot of services available in the

residence hall and on campus. I haven't taken advantage of any of them, but I know they're there if I need them and I have heard that they're helpful.

We found that FIG students were more often aware of these resources available to them than non-FIG students, and the FIG students mentioned that they learned about these resources in their FIG seminar. Although many resources are available to the students, some made recommendations for improvements.

FIG member, Fred: I wish my professors would encourage us to come to office hours a little more. I mean, they don't really encourage or discourage us one way or the other.

Academic interactions

Interactions with faculty, staff, and peers had an effect on how participants perceived their academic achievement. Most participants stated that they had very little or no contact with faculty outside of class, but two FIG students stated that they had very frequent interaction with faculty during office hours or after class. Based on their first meeting with their academic advisor, most students felt confident that they would have continued interaction with their academic advisor in planning their future at the institution. Whereas non-FIG students rarely spoke with peers about academic classes, we found that FIG students often mentioned regularly talking to their peers about classes as well as studying in groups with members of the FIG to complete class assignments or study for tests.

FIG member, Kelly: It's impossible not to talk about classes because the majority of the people that I hang out with are, you know, people in my FIG. We have pretty much the same classes and usually talk about those.

Social Adjustment

The second category researched was social adjustment. Four factors were identified in determining the social adjustment of FIG and non-FIG students including 1) perceptions of social adjustment, 2) residence hall living, 3) social interaction, and 4) campus involvement.

Perceptions of social adjustment

Students were asked how they defined social adjustment and what factors were involved in determining this. All of the students had different perceptions of what it meant to be socially adjusted on the college campus, but most felt that any student could fit in because of the diverse student population. This allows all students to find their niche. All of the participants felt that they were socially adjusted and all mentioned factors such as friendly and helpful people on campus and feeling comfortable on their residence hall floor. FIG participants mentioned that being a member in the FIG was a major factor in their social adjustment because they instantly had a peer group to associate

with at the beginning of the school year.

FIG member, Allison: Well, since I didn't know anybody on my floor before I came here, it was good to have an automatic like group of people that I knew on my floor and in my classes. Even though we're not all best friends or anything, it's still nice to have people to, you know, go eat with and sit with in class.

Non-FIG members also felt the sense of community on their residence hall floor, but because of limited interaction outside of the residence hall, it took more time for their level of comfort to equal that of FIG members.

Residence hall living

All participants interviewed were extremely satisfied with their experience in their residence hall. Many stated advantages such as: a central location on campus, a good variety of residents, ability to study in their room or floor lounge, being "homey," and feeling a strong sense of community. Some disadvantages were mentioned such as: absence of a food court, no elevator, desire for more first year students, and the long distance from class buildings. However, overall the participants found that the advantages of living in their residence hall far outweighed the disadvantages. When asked why the participants chose to live in the selected residence hall, most participants mentioned that they had visited the hall, or that the hall was referred to them by previous residents. Four FIG members specifically mentioned that they chose this FIG because they were guaranteed a spot in the selected residence hall.

In order to orient students to campus, the residence hall has an orientation program before the first week of school. All FIG members attended this orientation and felt that they attained valuable information, whereas none of the non-FIG members had attended. In addition, the majority of FIG members have attended residence hall programs this semester such as floor dances, speakers, or workshops, and, though they mentioned being aware of the on-campus programs, none of the non-FIG members have attended these types of activities.

Overall, the majority of the participants felt that there was a sense of community on their floor, and all of them stated that they felt comfortable living on their floor. Many FIG students found that there were distinct groups on the floor, usually between FIG members and non-FIG members. Women acknowledged these groups than the men did. The majority of participants felt that they had a good relationship with their roommate, but a few FIG members stated that they would prefer to live with a non-FIG member.

FIG member, Annie: Sometimes I think it would be nice to live with someone not in the FIG just because we are all together so much. I really like my roommate, but sometimes I just get sick of her because we live together, have most of our classes together, and eat together. You know what I mean?

Social interaction

All of the participants stated that they regularly interacted with other students on their floor. The participants also mentioned that they regularly socialized with students that did not live on their residence hall floor such as high school friends, students they met in class, and friends of friends. Non-FIG members mentioned that their social interaction is primarily with floor residents, and FIG members stated that much of their social interaction was with FIG students not living on their floor.

FIG member, Jordan: If I am studying, I always study with people in the FIG. But when I want to go out, I usually go out with friends from my high school.

Non-FIG member, Jack: When I got here, I really didn't know anyone, so I started hanging out with guys on my floor. They're all pretty cool, and we get along pretty well.

Whether socializing with residents on their floor or not, FIG members mentioned engaging in social activities such as watching TV, going out to eat, watching movies, and going shopping. Interestingly, not one of the FIG members mentioned attending parties or drinking as a primary activity. In contrast, the non-FIG students mentioned drinking and parties as their primary social activity.

Campus involvement

There was a distinct difference between the amount of campus involvement between FIG and non-FIG students. When asked if they were involved in any campus activities or student organizations, the majority of FIG students responded yes, and planned to be more active on campus in the future.

FIG member, Allison: Right now I am in the marching band. I think I want to be in some more clubs or activities, but since it is my first semester, I wanted to see how much time band would take and see what else is out there.

None of the non-FIG members mentioned involvement in any campus activities or had any concrete intentions of increased involvement in the future. Also, none of the non-FIG students had attended any campus wide programs, whereas many FIG members had attended campus lectures and major campus events.

Additional FIG findings

There was some additional information found about the FIG members that was not mentioned in previous findings. When asked why they chose to participate in this FIG, only three students stated that they chose the FIG because of the topic and because they truly desired to be in a FIG. The remaining FIG members mentioned a guaranteed spot in the residence hall, or a guaranteed spot in the introductory English course, or both.

FIG member, Jordan: When I first came here, I was in [name of residence hall], but I really wanted to be in [name of residence hall]. My advisor told me that if I joined this FIG, that I could live here.

Even though the majority of participants did not choose to be in the FIG for its intended purpose of social and academic adjustment, all of the FIG members found the overall experience to be very positive, and they felt that they had reaped those benefits.

FIG member, Jay: I would definitely recommend it to other freshmen coming here next year. Um, I didn't know much about it, and I agreed to get the classes I wanted, but it really has been helpful in terms of meeting people and knowing stuff on campus.

Although a few students felt that they had attained some valuable information from the seminar, all of the respondents were dissatisfied with the seminar class in general. Most felt that the Peer Instructor had little to no impact in assisting with their adjustment during their first semester at the university. All FIG members stated their extreme dissatisfaction with the class, and many even offered suggestions of ways the class could be improved.

FIG member, Fred: I like the fact that we have the same classes and everything, but the actual FIG class seems pretty pointless. I haven't gotten anything out of it.

FIG member, Karen: The Monday night class is totally unproductive. All it is is a hassle and a lot of busy work. It was nice at the beginning to find out about stuff on campus, but I think it should only be an eight week class instead of lasting the whole semester.

Discussion

The purpose for conducting this study was to determine if membership in a FIG had a positive impact on first year college students and their perceptions of personal academic achievement and social adjustment in their first semester of college. The findings of this study indicate that such membership had a positive effect on at least four aspects of the students' academic achievement and at least four aspects of their social adjustments to campus life.

Academic Achievement

In discussing their perceptions of academic achievement, FIG students spoke of setting a specific goal and working to achieve that goal to the best of their abilities. In contrast, non-FIG students defined such achievement strictly as the grades that they earned in their coursework. This implies that FIG members are more concerned with what and how they are learning than what they are earning in their classes. This difference could have developed as a result of the increased congruence

of their coursework. According to Matthews et al. (1996) and Wilcox and delMas (1997), students are more academically successful, persist to greater levels of education, and find their academic experiences more satisfying when their course material is integrated, rather than disjointed. In contrast, according to information gathered during the interviews, non-FIG members focus their perceptions of academic achievement more on the grades that they earn in their coursework rather than the content of what they are learning, as their earned grades are the primary way to tie together courses that are very different in nature.

As far as their study habits were concerned, FIG students seemed to study together more regularly with the members of their FIG than non-FIG members did with most of their classmates. This could be because having FIG members both in classes and in close proximity in the residence halls made it easier for students to talk about class work, share notes, and study together. As a result, FIG members were able to maximize the material that they took away from their classes, as they were able to share their learning with those around them. This ability is important for enhancing academic success while in college. In contrast, non-FIG students did not have such academic support as readily available, and therefore, spent more time studying, studied alone, and had few friends with whom they shared classes.

When talking about academic support, both FIG and non-FIG students felt supported academically, both in the residence hall and on campus. However, FIG and non-FIG students felt supported academically in different ways. The notable differences in their observations stem from their knowledge of campus resources. FIG students consistently seemed more aware of the academic resources available to them on campus than non-FIG students. FIG members attribute this knowledge to the content of their FIG seminar. Again, such findings are consistent with the arguments made by Matthews et al. (1996), and Wilcox and delMas (1997), who asserted that when students participate in learning communities, they are often more aware of and satisfied with the opportunities available on their college campuses.

Finally, FIG students consistently commented that they regularly talked with peers about their class work and studied in groups. As a result, FIG members were able to maximize the material that they took away from their classes, as they were able to share their learning with those around them. In contrast, the non-FIG students did not utilize such peer support, and therefore, spent more time studying and rarely studied in groups.

Social Adjustment

In discussing their perceptions of social adjustment, both FIG and non-FIG students mentioned that the diverse population of the

college allowed students to more easily find their niche on campus. All students mentioned that the friendly and helpful people on campus, as well as the comfort that they experienced in their living environments, helped to foster a strong sense of social adjustment for them, as well as the feeling that they "fit in" on campus. The interesting difference between FIG and non-FIG students, as far as social adjustment is concerned, is that FIG members were able to establish a peer group more quickly than non-FIG students, who took a bit longer to feel a part of the community on their residence hall floors. This finding runs in accordance with the findings of Hill (1985) and Matthews et al. (1996) who asserted that formalized learning communities help to foster social interaction and integration, as well as academic achievement.

As far as residence hall living is concerned, both FIG members and non-FIG members were happy in their residence hall. Interestingly, while FIG members attended their residence hall orientation and residence hall programs more often than non-FIG members, and were therefore more involved in the activities of the hall, more non-FIG members thought of their floors as holistic communities than FIG members (who spoke of cliques and distinct groups of students on the floor). In addition, more FIG students spoke of wanting a more expanded social circle than non-FIG students, as in many cases they lived, ate, studied, and socialized with their FIG peers. While these findings were not mentioned by Hill (1985) and Matthews et al. (1996) as consequences of being a member of a learning community, it is not surprising that students would want to expand their social and academic circles once they establish a level of comfort on campus.

In speaking about their social interactions, FIG members and non-FIG members mentioned that they socialized with residence hall floor and non-floor members, such as high school friends, friends of friends, and classmates. The notable differences between the two groups were the activities in which they participated. FIG students were more likely to watch movies, shop, or dine out, while non-FIG students were more likely to drink or attend parties. These differences, which distinguish the type of students that participate in FIG groups, may speak to the maturity and comfort level of students with themselves and their peers, according to the studies of such students conducted by Matthews et al. (1996) and Wilcox and delMas (1997). In other words, the students who are more likely to participate in FIG groups may have more self-confidence, and therefore, not feel the pressures to drink and attend parties common to many first year college students.

Finally, FIG members and non-FIG members demonstrated a sharp contrast in their involvement in campus life. Most FIG students were highly involved in campus activities, while most non-FIG students were not and did not plan to be in the future. These findings correlate with those of Matthews et al. (1996), Schroeder and Hurst (1996), and

Wilcox and delMas (1997), who all found that participation in learning communities fostered greater levels of campus involvement and satisfaction. Again, this could be due to the self-selection nature of FIGs members and their campus participation.

The findings of this study echo the results of research done by others on the topic of membership in learning communities. That is, learning communities based out of the residence hall, where students spend approximately 70% of their time (Schroeder & Jackson, 1987), have positive effects on freshman students in terms of academic achievement and satisfaction as well as social integration and involvement. For this reason, institutions of higher education would benefit by assessing their learning environments and considering learning community models (Cross, 1988; Smith & Hunter, 1988). As the residence hall is a central environment in the lives of many students, it would be an ideal location for programs that would enhance and foster student development. As this study has shown, this can be achieved by creating learning environments that will promote academic achievement and social integration.

Since the participants in our research were involved on a voluntary basis, future research on membership in learning communities may want to focus on a wider breadth of students, and thus, gain a more widespread depiction of the learning community experience. Also, due to the negative reactions of students to the PI seminar, future research could consider the format and content of the class to provide more useful instruction for participants. In addition, a longitudinal study would allow researchers the opportunity to view the impact of such membership on the total college experience, rather than that of the first semester of the first year. Finally, future research is needed on the topic of minority student participation in learning communities. The results of such studies could and most likely will impact the means through which college and university faculty members and administrators respond to the educational and interpersonal needs of all of their students.

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