

The Evaluation of Student Learning Outcomes: Understanding Impact of Two Christian  
Living-Learning Communities

Joe Gasbarre

Geneva College

Master of Arts in Higher Education

Capstone Final Project

May 2011

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the learning process of students in living learning communities, and evaluate the extent to which these learning communities are impacting the whole student in their educational experience at a four-year Christian liberal arts institution. The study seeks to understand the effectiveness, positive and negative, of two Christian living-learning communities on the overall education of the student. The qualitative study will tell the stories of students' experiences, revealing certain outcomes connected to their education.

## INTRODUCTION

### *Scope of the Project*

For the purpose of this study, the research questions my evaluation will address include: (a) How do students express what they have learned in Christian living learning communities? (b) How effective are these communities in helping students make progress toward desired outcomes? And (c) To what extent do differences in the structure and program of these living learning communities have an impact on the relative progress towards desired student outcomes? These questions are meant to guide my qualitative evaluation of the Christian living-learning communities and to understand their experiences of impact.

### *Significance of the Project*

A study of Christian living-learning communities for the education of the student is significant for several reasons. In my literature review, most of the research relies heavily on quantitative study, while my work focuses on the qualitative and experiential stories of students that can reveal a deeper awareness of the changes in students' learning. Also, all of the living-learning communities I researched came from a small faith based, liberal arts institution whereas the majority of current research concerns larger universities and colleges.

In addition, the majority of studies have been conducted on larger campuses focused on dormitory/residence living communities, but my research focuses on houses within neighborhoods. However, the houses do reflect similar qualities compared to

residential communities. The literature is very broad in its definition of living-learning communities, but the housing communities do qualify under those definitions.

American higher education is in need of serious reform for the sake of the overall education of the student. Education is suffering from fragmentation where students need restorative ways of learning to better engage the world around them. Community continues to be an overall goal and pursuit for nearly any college and university. Living-learning communities not only foster the academe's pursuits for community in their institution, but also contribute to academic reform and holistic student development.

As a study for evaluation, I hope my conclusions can assist the houses in a way that praises their efforts and challenges their methods. Finally, living learning-communities appear to be of high value among college students and the literature consistently suggests its positive influence over the student. Potentially, more institutions could invest in this type of learning for their students.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Learning is a communal effort. We see learning outcomes accomplished through community in our classrooms, small groups, study groups, student activities, residence life, and for our purposes living-learning communities. The definition for living-learning communities must be addressed if we seek to understand its overall impact in the educational experience of the student. As we pursue definitions, we can begin to recognize the different types of communities, but more importantly the type of impact living-learning communities have on students. The literature is vast on the exploration of living-learning communities and has contributed to my research of living-learning communities on Christian liberal arts campuses. Also, it guides my research in my understanding of impact as I compared and contrasted the literature to the interviews.

Living-learning communities are broadly defined. Lenning & Ebbers (1999) define living-learning communities as an intentionally developed place that “will promote and maximize learning” (p. 8). They further explore the historical development of living learning communities claiming its roots in the traditions of the colonial colleges in America. The traditions sought to develop a community of scholars who shared common values. As the history of American higher education progresses and goes through continuous changes, we move ahead to the 1960s and 1980s where out-of-class learning becomes very popular. During the 1980s, we see the term “learning communities” come into a more prominent role in American higher education and “began to evolve as a broad educational movement at the college level” (p. 9). The broad educational movement still carries various meanings that help us understand their impact more effectively.

The literature has provided some basic principles and characteristics for assisting our definitions. Schroeder (1994) provides four principles expressed in living-learning communities (and expressed in my research), which include involvement, investment, influence, and identity. These principles were modeled for experiential learning communities and my interviews expressed similar outcomes and goals in their communities. Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie (2009), a more recent contribution, suggests the importance of students' involvement, engagement, and integration in their educational experience. All of these principles embody what research shows to be active learning.

Living-learning communities provide a certain context for active learning. According to Lenning & Ebbers (1999), "For dramatic student outcomes to occur, learning communities must be effective in helping students engage in active learning" (p. 61). Active learning reveals the need for collaborative learning and for design and execution of the learning community. Active learning requires initial reform and as Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith (1990) address, "Learning communities constitute an unusual reform effort because of their focus on the structural features of our institutions and our curriculum as both the problem and the solution" (p. 5).

They are suggesting a purposeful restructuring of the curriculum with greater coherence and increased interaction. The authors recognize structural fragmentation in the education we provide to students. In the structure of American higher education, the authors confess barriers being raised up causing disconnect in a student's overall education. Their definition so beautifully describes the ethos of

living-learning communities. They state, "Learning communities are a structural response to this fragmentation. They try to establish conditions that promote coherence, community, and a sense of common purpose in an institutional environment otherwise characterized by social and intellectual atomism and fragmentation" (p. 10). Living-learning communities share a commonality in their purpose and desire for active learning.

Schroeder (1994) emphasizes how the commonality of purpose, unity, transcendent values, and cohesiveness distinguish a living learning community from a traditional residential unit. A continual theme throughout the literature is involvement. It is through involvement that students can greatly benefit in their educational experience. Pasque & Murphy (2005) note how participation and involvement play a crucial role in intellectual engagement. It is in their involvement and intellectual engagement that we see students taking ownership of their education. They transition from believing what they deserve to what they are privileged to receive. And literature recognizes the various different types of living-learning communities that are bringing an impact over the student.

In its broadest of definition, there are also many different types of living-learning communities. Lenning & Ebbers (1999) list four types of living-learning communities for American higher education. They include curricular learning communities, classroom learning communities, residential learning communities, and student-type learning communities (these communities are for students who are academically underprepared, underrepresented groups, students with disabilities, honors students, and students with specific academic interests). For our purposes, the residential learning communities are

the types of living-learning communities I have researched. Research, specifically quantitative research on larger institutions, has been heavily explored (Brower & Inkelas, 2010). Very little research has been conducted on living-learning communities for smaller liberal arts schools, let alone Christian liberal arts schools. My research seeks to understand the level of impact for students in a community off campus within a Christian liberal arts setting. These types of learning communities are also considered to engage in experiential learning. Eyler (2009) explores the method of learning connected to what students do. These types of residential experiential learning communities, offer a sense of practicality to the liberal arts allowing students to also practice their faith within the community. While research is lacking for learning communities in the Christian liberal arts, there is research that recommends a liberal arts structure to community.

Some larger institutions offer residential living-learning communities reflecting a liberal arts style of structure and programming. Inkelas, Zeller, Murphy, & Hummel (2006) offer recommendations for these types of communities. Their recommendations include; learning based on inquiry, investment of integration in the first year with continual integration in the second, develop interdisciplinary methods, freedom to express openly, and foster a sense of community. Stewart (2008) reinforces the act of fostering community in any type of learning environment, especially community between faculty, staff, and students. He suggests all people within the community to maintain a unified purpose in their learning together. Living-learning communities should not be multiple things all at once, but a cohesive structure that allows collaborative efforts. These recommendations suggest a level of impact living-learning communities should



seek. As we understand definition and types of communities, we can already notice how the meaning of living-learning communities is tied to the level of impact they provide.

The level of impact for students in living-learning communities across the board has brought positive outcomes. These positive outcomes are interconnected to academic, personal, social, and faith development. Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith (1990) note the increase of student retention with the implementation of living-learning communities. They state, “for students in learning communities nationwide, beginning to end-of-quarter retention rates average ten to twenty percentage points higher than typical institutional averages” (p. 63). Astin (1993) emphasizes the power of an educational environment. “Retention is significantly affected by more environmental variables than almost any other outcome measure” (p. 195). As retention increases, it can be noted that involvement increases (a key element in defining LLC). The level of involvement affects the intellectual orientation of the student and their overall approach to their world.

Pascarella & Terenzini (1991) explore the impact of intellectual orientation where the student approaches their world with “intellectual curiosity, inclination to be skeptical and critical of information, analytical orientation, and intellectual flexibility and complexity” (p. 221). They emphasize how a place of residence does affect the academic development of the student, but that socializing influences bring about the changes in intellectual orientation. Zhao & Kuh (2004), very prominent leaders in student engagement research, reaffirm the impact of intellectual orientation for student participants in living-learning communities. Their studies confirm an increase in academic performance, academic integration, and collaboration. Also, their research

reveals the continued importance of active learning highlighting its impact on a student's personal and social development.

The socializing influences play a large role in developing the quality of impact for the student in a learning environment. Astin (1993) assess the intensity of the student's exposure using the "frequency of interaction with other students and the frequency of interaction with faculty (p. 27). Since the majority of the time for students is spent outside of the classroom, there can be a positive impact in personal development and learning.

The most common type of impact cultivated in a living-learning community is personal development. Kuh et al. (1991) offer a comprehensive understanding of personal development. They envision personal development affecting student attitudes, values, skills, reflection, appreciating differences, and a sense of independence, ability to care for others, relating in friendships, and understanding how to balance. Living in close community with peers, sharing their educational experience brings a sense of belonging and care. This is a theme heavily stressed in my data collection. The literature does advocate the personal development of belonging and care as well.

Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith (1990) examine particular values students develop while living in a learning community. The first is a high value of friendship and belonging. As students live together, they begin to learn collaboratively and eventually appreciate other student perspectives. In turn, students build intellectual connections, embrace complexity, and develop new perspectives in their own learning process. Kuh et al. (1991) reinforces the positive consequences of caring and belonging stating, "When faculty members, administrators, students, and others subscribe to an

ethic of care, powerful messages are sent to students about the importance of respecting all individuals as persons of worth and dignity” (p. 285). Living-learning communities, in my experience and research, indirectly ascribe to an ethic of care. While we design intentional spaces and opportunities of growth, and we must do this, caring seems to come as an indirect influence within the development of relationships.

Finally, research has indicated the importance of living-learning communities as tools for assessment in an institution. Lopez et al. (2004) notes a number of institutions, with faculty desiring active learning for their students, develop innovative ways of assessment through measuring the level of impact. They observe the impact of student-student and student-faculty collaboration, involvement, interdisciplinary learning, and knowledge constructivism. As a way of understanding impact for student outcomes, we can establish these “identifiable areas and measurable objectives by which to assess their students’ learning” (p. 66).

### *Summary*

Current literature reveals three important pillars to my research for two Christian living-learning communities. First, the literature establishes how to define living-learning communities and the credibility these definitions give to my research. Secondly, there are different types of living-learning communities to be recognized. While my research is a type of residential living-learning community, it is unique in being off campus and within the institution’s neighborhood. Finally, the literature reveals the definite impact living-learning communities carry onto student participants. My research most certainly affirms the impact the literature describes and the literature allows me to evaluate student outcomes within each living-learning community.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Introduction*

The purpose of this study is to explore the learning process of students in living-learning communities, and evaluate the extent to which these learning communities are impacting the whole student in their educational experience at a four-year Christian liberal arts institution. The study seeks to understand the effectiveness, positive and negative, of two Christian living learning communities on the overall education of the student. The qualitative study will tell the stories of students' experiences, revealing certain outcomes connected to their education.

I interviewed a variety of students living in two Christian living-learning communities and all students currently attend two small, Christian liberal arts school. The first house is located in Canton, Ohio and is affiliated with all female Malone University students. The house focuses on faith formation as students work toward Christian discipleship and leadership. The second house is located in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania where Geneva students are invited to serve their neighborhood and learning is connected to practice. My goal is to understand the relative impact over the students' experiences to their education and to address the experiences to their overall student development.

### *Participants*

The Malone Discipleship House consists of five female students. They include two seniors, one junior, and two sophomores. Their house is located directly across from

campus and is student-led. One student, a senior, is considered the leader who initiates interviews and passes the leadership onto a new student. This is her second year in the house while everyone else is new.

The Geneva City House is located in downtown Beaver Falls and consists of six undergraduates, one graduate, and one resident leader. The only person I did not interview was the graduate student since my study is focused on undergraduate impact. They include three seniors, one junior, one sophomore, and one freshman. Two students, the freshman and sophomore, started in the spring semester while everyone attended the full year. The resident leader has lived in City House for approximately five years.

#### *Rationale for Data Collection*

A qualitative research approach was chosen for this study so that the expressed stories may evaluate the living-learning communities and students' responses in an interview brings fresh perspectives for a deeper understanding of their experiences. Also, the literature provides rich evidence of the positive impact of living-learning communities but mostly through the lens of survey analysis. My intention of evaluation for each house can be accomplished best through listening to each participant's experience.

#### *Data Collection*

My interviews with the Geneva City House were conducted face to face in the Geneva library. First, I interviewed the resident leader of the house and then contacted all of the undergraduates to set up interview times during the week. I interviewed three students individually and interviewed a focus group of three students collectively. My hope was to allow students to converse and reflect off of one another in a group setting.

The interviews conducted with the Malone Discipleship House occurred in their home. I interviewed two students individually and three students in a focus group. In all of my interviews, I recorded our conversations through my laptop. Afterward, I listened through the recordings, wrote extensive notes, drew important quotes, and finally developed themes with each conversation.

The questions asked revolved around their basic experiences, significant conversations with each other, their experiences of living in the house connected to their life as a student, the impact over their faith development, understanding impact of learning, and its overall impact on the development of the student. As I listened to their responses, I was able to assess and question the deeper meanings that came from their experience.

#### *Limitations*

There are many multiple types of living-learning communities and much more interviews could have been conducted through other schools, but my project was simply focused on two communities. There is a possibility that students will be more reflective when they exit their living-learning community and follow-up could be very helpful. This study was only directed to those currently living in the community. Finally, I was unable to interview the students who lived in the Geneva City House for only the first semester.

## RESULTS OF THE DATA COLLECTION

The data I have collected reflects how living-learning communities impact the life of the whole student. Also, the living-learning communities embody the definitions explored in the literature review. However, my research extends current research since the living-learning communities I examined are at Christian liberal arts colleges and are clearly understudied. My research compares and contrasts with what the literature regards as impact and validates living-learning communities as spaces that cultivate student development.

First, how do the two Christian living-learning communities define their own community? More importantly, what is their understanding of a living-learning community? As we have seen from the literature, authors provide a vast array of definitions of living-learning communities. Participants from City House brought their own definitions and how they understand living-learning communities in their experience. Specifically, the resident leader of the City House explains the type of learning she desires the house to portray.

### **Defining the Community**

“The experiential learning that connects, connecting what we learn both information but connecting a rich learning experience with how we live together, connecting that to learning communities. Experience of learning together with others, being intentional about how we connect what we learn with how we live, connecting faith and action, belief with behavior.” (City House Leader)

Students reflected similar perspectives on how they understood the type of community described by the resident leader.

“I feel like, I see a lot of connections between what I learn in the classroom and like what I see down in downtown beaver falls or what I see at

Providence where I do my volunteering at, stories I hear from the soup kitchen from what I hear from these guys.” (Female Junior)

“We as students learn what it means to live in community and we learn how to give to the community. Both I think to the community in the house and then also the community outside the house.” (Female Sophomore)

“As far as academics, I probably don’t have as much time to put into my school work but at the same time it kind of gives me more purpose and reason to put effort into it.”

I responded, what kind of purpose?

“I would say intentionality. And focusing on why I want to learn.” (Female Senior)

Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith (1990) emphasize the learning community to be a place organized around common purposes that promote active learning and discussion. Students were very clear in their experience of common purpose.

“Deeper thinking discussions go on just naturally in the house.” (Female Senior)

“It’s helpful, sometimes you don’t think about classes as like something that you need to remember. You know, it’s a class you get it over and done with and you can forget about it. It’s been cool that she (city house leader) kind of pushed me to apply my life to the class instead of having it be separate from how I live.” (Female Sophomore)

City House has established a place where students are brought into close community with one another and the common purpose of being a part of a community is certainly evident. The City House is known to function as a place that seeks Christian community with one another and for students to understand their place in downtown Beaver Falls.

### **Impact of Common Involvement**



One of the most common themes in the City House, from mostly all participants, was their common purpose of community involvement. But community involvement not for the sake of trying to rescue and save Beaver Falls, but involvement because they recognize how Beaver Falls can positively affect their lives. Once again, the resident leader reflects her understanding of student perspectives coming into the house and her hope with how their views might shift living in a particular place.

“I think often students come with the approach of like, I should live in beaver falls because poor people are there and I can serve them and hopefully toward the end of the year, they should say, we should live in places like beaver falls because it’s good for us.” (City House Leader)

Students express how they understand the City House and how their involvement has impacted their relationship with the community around them.

“I think one of the main goals for us as students, teaching us how to affect a community or how to be a part of a community.” (Female Sophomore)

(The City House Leader helped) “Introduce the idea of being a part of the community and gain things from it and its not solely there as a mission field or a place to go to do service.” (Female Senior)

“I think one of the main goals for us would be what are you supposed to do in a community, what is your role in a community wherever you go.” (Female Sophomore)

### **Impact of Care**

Students recognize their place in the Beaver Falls community and also within their own house. One of the largest impacts over students living within the City House was the ethic of care described by Kuh et al. (1991). Students described their expectations before moving into the house and toward the end of their experience

they felt a sense of care and belonging from each other. This is a similar theme we will examine for the Malone Discipleship House. Students from City House stressed:

“My hopes was that it would be a caring community.” (Female Senior)

“Carrying each other’s burdens not just our own by ourselves.” (Female Senior)

“The way I see the house is a way for me to be living in a community, in a place where I can give to other people and get to know other people that I wouldn’t normally know. That was kind of my reason for going in the house.” (Female Sophomore)

“For me, living in the house is more of like, um, it’s like a home for me.” (Female Sophomore)

“There was always someone there I knew who actually cared about how I was doing. I could go to them but they also came to me without me having to go to them first.” (Female Senior)

Students shared stories of pain and heartache as they tried living with each other, but by the end they all realized how much they truly cared for one another. One student shared an experience of going through depression her first semester and her struggle with alcoholism. Her academics were failing and she was concerned with graduation, but her housemates supported her and cared for her. They made sure she didn’t go out to drink and invested the time to listen and encourage her in her academics. The spring semester has been much better academically and life in the house has brought a sense of peace and healing.

### **Impact of Diversity and Responsibility**

Another impact City House members recognize is the value of diversity and different perspectives. Schroeder et al. (1994) emphasizes the same values City House exists to embody. He states, “These learning communities would foster patience, tolerance, empathy, responsibility, and interpersonal competence. Such

humanitarian values as justice, social responsibility, and intercultural understanding would be the components of the 'implicit' community curriculum" (p. 165). The structure and programming of the City House to meant to foster these common values and next year a course will be offered that is much more direct in relaying and experiencing the values of justice and social responsibility. This course will certainly bring together the purpose of the house, but students consistently spoke of experiencing these things, more specifically different perspectives.

"Really helped to get a better perspective on my life, what I'm able to contribute, why I believe the things I believe" (Female Sophomore)

"As far as a new way of learning, just being open to new ways of thinking. I find it so interesting to talk to people with completely different views." (Female Senior)

"It's easier to live with people who are a lot like you, there is also something to be said for living with people who don't think the same way as you do." (Female Senior)

"Living in community is so much how to do with communication and learning to work with other peoples communication styles who are like people who have different communication styles than you." (Female Senior)

"Opened my eyes to African American culture and how they view education" (In regards to a conversation with an African American student and their experience with education). (Female Senior)

Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith (1990) also stress the development of student values in their impact within a learning community. The authors stress how living-learning communities cultivate for students an appreciation of different perspectives and building new perspectives in their relational experiences.

### **Impact of Place and Environment**

Finally, the City House brings a sense of responsibility for students in how they live together, in their education, and faith development. Not only do the

students recognize the change within themselves, but they feel their professors see the difference too.

There is that “added sense of responsibility being in city house and I think there is that maturity level that increases from being there and I think it is something they (professors) have recognized.” (Female Senior)

“The more knowledge I gain about different areas of life..... put those into being able to serve people, have more thoughtful discussion about the things we discuss at city house. Cause I think I went through a stage where academically and my faith, was like, why did I have to know all this. But over time I’ve realized it’s all intertwined.” (Female Senior)

Kuh et al. (1991) notes how a liberal arts setting combined with a living-learning experience heightens the student’s experience of gaining responsibility. Since City House is off campus, there is an intentionality of place and the environment brings the student to be responsible with basic decisions in the house such as cleaning, cooking, or shopping. The authors highlight the importance of place and the environment we create for a living-learning community. The City House certainly emphasizes the importance of place and being aware of the social responsibilities around you. In this regard, students learn to transition from living at home to living in a dorm to living in a house where they must take ownership.

The Malone Discipleship House is different in structure, but similar in impact. Their house focuses on spiritual formation while understanding Christian community living with each other. The house is student-led and the students determine their own desired outcomes. Initially, the house was created to be a Christian leadership program that invested in students to send them back onto campus to serve the Malone community. In my understanding, I do not see this goal as a desired outcome at least for this year. The house has been functioning for

approximately five years and will continue to exist as long as students maintain it. Student development is not directly involved with the house except in approving students to live off campus. Over the years, it appears the house has lacked a basic overall vision and structure. Students express their initial difficulty and struggle with the community.

### **Impact of Expectations**

“Hard to establish expectations for the what we were going to do for the house, we didn’t have a way for doing that because first semester was very busy.” (Female Senior)

“Just because of the lack of starting expectations, talking, just interaction period. That was the biggest struggle.” (Female Junior)

“It was not a good beginning at all and it kind of set the tone for me in the first semester.” (Female Sophomore)

“I think it’s a challenge for any group of people to come to a consensus on the kind of focus they want to have.” (Female Senior)

“I don’t think we ever came to a consensus on what the direction of the house was and I think it was a major stumbling block for us to come together as a group because we never agreed. There was no consensus on the direction for the house it was just here we are a bunch of different people with different ideas and by the time we tried to figure it out it was December.” (Female Senior)

### **Impact of Involvement, Investment, and Influence**

Schroeder et al. (1994) explains residential living-learning communities having a proper sense of identity. Since the Malone Discipleship House falls under the type of residential living-learning community, it would appear their identity is their largest struggle. Interestingly enough, the student leader of the house observed, “I think this year people are looking for a sense of identity.” However, the literature suggests involvement, investment, and influence as key components of

residential learning communities. These are characteristics evident in the house.

Students described their experience in the house as:

“Place where I could invest in people and I would expect to be invested in.”  
(Female Junior)

“We are students and we’re very attentive to that but we’re also very attentive to how we’re developing as people and how we can be a presence in each other’s lives to be a supportive figure and to be a safe space to talk about struggle, to talk about the past and you know heal. I think there’s been a lot of healing in this house and a lot of road to healing for people.” (Female Senior)

“I’ve emphasized enough how scary it is living in close community with people and how much vulnerability there is. I guess that’s the main thing I was kind of surprised about, just like how trying to create this family like structure cause how many other opportunities do you have to live with people like this... just committing to sharing and living with others is kind of scary. You really have to commit to maintaining relationships.” (Female Sophomore)

### **Impact of Healing**

Students are being invested into by each other and being vulnerable with honest dialogue. Since living in close community with one another, their personal development of honesty and transparency has allowed a type of healing. The type of healing described by the students must be heard and understood. Institutions in the Christian liberal arts would do well to respond to living-learning communities in their ability to bring healing into a student’s life. As Christian educators, we desire students to experience holistic healing in their lives. In the Discipleship House, one student expressed a deep level of care from the community when she experienced four deaths in her family within the same year. Her fellow housemates conveyed an ethic of Christian care for her and this type of place created the proper space.

Another student in the house has a type of cancer. She did not openly express this to

me, but one student commented how she has learned much from living with a person who faces death the way she does. The student with cancer went on trips once a week to Texas for treatment and students cared for her as she continues to endure her illness. Students who live so closely together not only develop relationships, but also experience a level of care that directly affects their identity as a student and as a Christian. Their faith development continues to develop through active caring for one another.

“I feel comfortable being honest and vulnerable about like things in my life and all my struggles and the horrible things I do. I feel like I’ve grown closer to God through that.” (Female Senior)

“I’ve had to confess more things, I’ve realized things about myself I didn’t before because of living in such community.” (Female Sophomore)

“It’s been a huge impact. Having a group of people in my house that I know I can just turn to and say I am really struggling with this. To be able to know that I can come home and carry on a conversation about my faith and like trust that they will be responsive and care is an incredible thing.” (Female Senior)

### **Impact of Intellectual Orientation**

Pascarella & Terenzini (1991) emphasize how the socialization process tends to facilitate over the structural process of a living-learning community. They observe the changes in intellectual orientation are more clearly related to socializing influences.

Since the Discipleship House does not carry a definitive structural process, their level of impact falls upon their socializing influences. We have already noticed the extreme difficulty in the beginning, but their intellectual orientation has certainly shifted through the spontaneous socializing process.

“I guess this atmosphere is more conducive to studying than a dorm room is, actually by far, we have a lot of space.... Whereas living on campus if in a dorm there is no where to go... that’s been really great to have private quiet safe places here. And we have homework parties sometimes. We all did homework together.” (Female Junior)

“I think its interesting hearing what people are doing, the different stuff, and its definitely broaden my interests in other things, I learn more about other majors.” (Female Sophomore)

“I really do feel like I’ve gained three different minors.” (Female Sophomore)

The homework parties drew my attention since there is a common room for homework space. They shared experiences of helping each other with their papers and some even recognized how their field of study connected to a different field. Together, they shared ideas and explored the connections between their different majors. The house, in their socialization process of learning, provided a space for holistic education. Students expressed a greater appreciation for different fields, but more importantly how those fields impacted their own area of study.

### **Impact of Peer-to-Peer**

One of their struggles as a house is having a student leader. The student leader confessed her struggle of pressure in leading the house and consistently wondered if she failed the house in some way. In my conversations with her, it was evident she needed a mentor to guide her in the house. The more I conversed, the more I realized that the mentor should not live with the women but exist as a guide outside the house. There is a clear impact occurring between peers that might not have occurred if a resident mentor lived in the house. The spontaneous peer-to-peer interactions are shown to be an indirect impact in the student’s overall experience in the house. While intentional programming is valid, my research



indicates the unplanned and unexpected experiences to be the most significant impact for the students.

The student leader experienced living in the Discipleship House last year and reflects her experiences of impact as a student last year compared with this year. She shared a very strong experience of impact when she had a study group stay at her house.

“We just talked through everything that’s happened in the class in the semester. We had one that was seven hours long! We just sat and ate soup and like you can’t, like that study group would have ended much quicker had it been on campus simply because its not as comfortable. I think that we have a home, a comfortable home makes a big difference and being able to offer it to them.”

While she planned a study group at her house, she did not expect students to stay for seven hours! She certainly experienced active learning with her peers and also recognized the type of impact it has brought into the classroom.

“All these things combined created a really helpful way of bringing the classroom here and bringing here to the classroom. So it was a very easy integration of learning here and learning there and combining those things.”

She always emphasized the importance of place and the type of environment the house brought to students. Also, the rest of the participants recognized the house as an extension to campus. Astin (1993) confirms the power of an educational environment and how a type of environment does make a difference in impact for the student. Students in the house observed outside students desiring to be a part of their community through study groups and movie discussions. Students were drawn into a certain environment that was conducive to their academic development. We must consider the environments we create and, as the literature indicates, understand its positive effect on retention.

## *Conclusion*

In my interviews with students, it was evident in their experiences that the City House had a significant impact over their personal, academic, social, and faith development. There were serious struggles within the house where students were forced to deal with conflict and confront relational responsibility. Students learned to care for one another through their struggles, but also to care about the things they study in conversations with each other. Students stressed the importance of having a leader who listened to them and how one-on-one mentoring was vital to maintaining the community. Also, students recognized the value of having a graduate living in the house with them. They spoke very highly of having a male leader presence in the house alongside the female house leader (I would recommend this as another opportunity for a graduate assistant position through the Higher Education program). Finally, it is important to note how student experiences vary from year to year simply because the community changes. Next year, City House will be more structured in curricular programming and will hopefully add to the student's active learning experience.

The interviews conducted with the Malone Discipleship House was very helpful in understanding the type of impact students experienced that shared similar outcomes with City House, but very different in programming and structure. Students certainly sensed an impact in their overall student development. While their experiences did reflect the type of impact expressed in the literature, the house did contrast with the level of identity and involvement the literature emphasized. The literature emphasizes how the increase of involvement increases student

learning and development (Schroeder et al., 1994). While students were certainly involved in the daily interactions of living in community with one another, the type of involvement was limited due to lack of vision and identity. I recommend a Discipleship House mentor, not a student, who maintains a vision for the house and a proper identity for students. The mentor would not live with the students, but certainly involved in the overall ordering of the house.

Living-learning communities, in our understanding of the literature and the exploration of my research, reveal a positive level of impact for student development. In the literature and in my research, students were impacted in their personal, academic, social, and faith development. It is clear that living-learning communities impact the whole student in their educational experience at a four-year Christian liberal arts institution. Since the impact is evident, Christian liberal arts colleges should consider their involvement in the development of these programs.

I highly recommend Christian institutions to listen attentively to the experiences of students and how the qualitative research I provide takes the current research a step further into understanding impact. As Christian educators, we believe in the transformation of the whole student. We desire students to be changed through their educational experience into people who are engaged and care deeply for the things God cares about. Students who intentionally live in community with each other discover growth and experience an unexpected level of impact over their holistic student development.

### *References*

- Astin, A. W. (1993). *What matters in college?: Four critical years revisited*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers.
- Baker, R. L., Anderson, J., Lopez, C. L., Dugan, R. E., Maki, P. L., Herson, P., Carter, E. W., . . . Bloomberg, S. (2004). *Outcomes assessment in higher education: Views and perspectives*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.
- Brower, A., & Inkelas, K. (2010). Living-learning programs. *Liberal Education*, 96(2), 36-43.
- Eyler, J. (2009). The power of experiential education. *Liberal Education*, 95(4), 24-31.
- Gabelnick, F., MacGregor, J., Matthews, R. S., & Smith, B. L. (1990). *Learning communities: Creating connections among students, faculty, and disciplines*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers.
- Inkelas, K., Zeller, W., Murphy, R., & Hummel, M. (2006). Learning moves home. *About Campus*, 10(6), 10-16.
- Kuh, G. D., Schuh, J. H., Whitt, E. J., Andreas, R. E., Lyons, J. W., Strange, C. C.,

- Krehbiel, L. E., . . . MacKay, K. A. (1991). Involving colleges: Successful approaches to fostering student learning and development outside the classroom. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers.
- Lenning, O. T., & Ebbers, L. H. (1999). The powerful potential of learning communities: Improving education for the future. *ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report*, 26(6).
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (1991). How college affects students. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers.
- Pasque, P., & Murphy, R. (2005). The intersections of living-learning programs and social identity as factors of academic achievement and intellectual engagement. *Journal of College Student Development*, 46(4), 429-441.
- Schroeder, C. C., Mable, P., Pascarella, E. T., Terenzini, P. T., Blimling, G. S., Stimpson, R., Welty, J. D., . . . Levine, A. (1994). Realizing the educational potential of residence halls. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers.
- Stewart, G. (2008). Assessing learning outcomes in living-learning programs: One journey. *Journal of College & University Student Housing*, 35(1), 50-65.
- Wolf-Wendel, L., Ward, K., & Kinzie, J. (2009). A tangled web of terms: The overlap and unique contribution of involvement, engagement, and integration to understanding college student success. *Journal of College Student Development*, 50(2), 407-428.
- Zhao, C., & Kuh, G. D. (2004). Adding value: Learning communities and student engagement. *Research in Higher Education*, 45(2), 115-138.