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This chapter describes the Psychology Early Awareness Program (PEAP) at Loyola Marymount University, a residential learning community centered within a discipline. We discuss the theory that supports the value of living-learning communities, describe how this guided the development of PEAP, and summarize the benefits of this approach.

Residential Learning Communities Centered Within a Discipline: The Psychology Early Awareness Program

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Learning communities have increasingly become a mechanism for education reform in elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education. Recognizing that learning occurs both inside and outside the classroom, their emergence is partly a response to the critique that undergraduate education at American research universities lacks integrated and focused student learning (Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University, 1998; Pike, 1999). In other words, the typical college experience for many students is a solitary one, with each student selecting and taking separate, often disconnected courses; living in dormitories with peers who may or may not share career or intellectual interests; and engaging in extracurricular activities that are likewise disconnected from what is occurring in the classroom and in the dorm. Within higher education, learning communities allow for integration of students' academic (or intellectual) and social experiences—with the idea that ultimately such an integration enhances academic performance, engagement, and retention (Li, McCoy, Shelley, and Whalen, 2005).

Since their emergence in educational settings, learning communities as a means of integrating students' academic and social experiences have taken a number of forms: as structures *inside* classrooms that facilitate student learning of particular skills or content areas through collaborations

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with their peers (Brown, 1997; see also Chapter Five in this volume), as on-line collaborations that engage students in academic projects by connecting youth across the world (for example, see iEARN at www.iearn.org; see also Chapter Seven in this volume), and as vehicles for connecting students and faculty with similar interests (see Chapter Six). Many learning communities attempt to create connections between students and faculty and the curriculum (Smith, MacGregor, Mathews, and Gabelnick, 2004; see also Chapters Two and Three). When these efforts attempt to extend these connections beyond the classroom and into the residence halls, they are referred to as living-learning communities or as residential learning communities, which are the focus of this chapter.

Definition and Theoretical Foundations of Residential Learning Communities

According to Brower and Inkelas (2010), residential learning communities are “housing programs that incorporate academically based themes and build community through common learning” (p. 36). Such communities began as early as the 1920s (Rocheleau, Smith, Bergman, and Zrull, 2011) and were born out of the assumption that education works best when curricular and cocurricular activities are linked, when students’ social experiences are integrated into the larger academic and intellectual context. Such an assumption fits nicely with a relational model of human development (Covington and Surrey, 1997; Gilligan, 1982; Jordan and others, 1991). In this context human development is viewed as growth and connections with and toward others. Healthy connection with others (rather than autonomous disconnection) is the means toward and the goal of psychological development. It is also the foundation for growth, intellectual development, and achievement in life.

From this perspective, academic success is connected to relational developmental processes. As students are able to nurture student–student relationships and connections to a disciplinary interest and faculty associated with that discipline, they grow socially and intellectually. Subsequently, students’ commitments to their undergraduate institution, their chosen major, and career trajectory are strengthened. Furthermore, the model speaks to the importance of students’ roles in the learning community context: students in these communities must not only take on responsibility for their own learning but for others in the community as well; they must develop greater interdependence with, understanding of, and empathy for their peers (Brown, 1997; Riel and Fulton, 2001). The resulting healthy connections with others are “mutual, creative, energy-releasing, and empowering for all participants, and are fundamental to . . . psychological well-being” (Covington and Surrey, 1997, p. 337).

Empirical evidence suggests both intellectual and social benefits of residential learning communities. Participation in residential learning

communities has been associated with positive student outcomes, including better critical-thinking skills, higher rates of civic engagement, and easier transition to college (Brower and Inkelas, 2010). In addition, most studies of residential learning communities show that, in comparison to students in traditional residence halls, those in learning communities report higher grades (Barron, Buch, Andre, and Spaulding, 2010; Pascarella, Terenzini, and Blimling, 1994). In a study by Brower (2008), students who participated in a residential learning community consumed less alcohol and experienced fewer negative outcomes associated with drinking than those in more traditional dorm settings.

It is important to note that residential learning communities are not monolithic. For example, though some residence-based programs are managed by administrators in student affairs or housing, others are managed by academic affairs or faculty from a particular department. In addition, whereas some programs require that students enroll in shared classes, others do not. In an analysis of over 600 different residential learning communities, Brower and Inkelas (2010) identified more than a dozen categories of such communities. Examples include residence-based programs focused on a shared political interest; programs aimed at female students, first-year students, or second-year students; and programs targeting social, cultural, or civic interests.

In undergraduate education, the most recent advancements have taken the form of residential learning communities that operate within the context of specific academic disciplines. Typically, these incorporate activities that foster engaged, collaborative learning and participation through educational and social activities that extend beyond the classroom and that allow students to draw upon a variety of sources to engage in a focused study of a discipline. Next, we share a brief sampling of residential learning communities centered on psychology from around the country. Then we provide an in-depth example of the residential learning community that we developed at Loyola Marymount University (LMU).

Starting in the fall of 2002, James Madison University (JMU) created a residential learning community targeting approximately twenty first-year students interested in psychology. In addition to a residential component in which all student participants live in the same dorm, students are also required to take several linked courses together. Specifically, students enroll in special sections of two research methods courses (one in the fall and one in the spring) and in a course designed to teach students about the discipline of psychology and the different opportunities within the discipline. The program goals were inspired by the American Psychological Association’s 10 learning goals for undergraduate majors and by Astin’s (1993) suggestion that student–student interactions, student–faculty interactions, and time spent on task are the best predictors of college success. To date the program is having great success: students in the program report higher grade point average (GPA), both in the major and overall.

than other psychology students (Barron, Buch, Andre, and Spaulding, 2010).

Another example of a residential learning community, once again linked to psychology, comes from Appalachian State University (ASU); the curricular component of this LC has already been described in Chapter Two.) One of the unique pieces about ASU's program, Brain Matters, is that it is not exclusively for students who want to major in psychology. Instead, it is for students interested in the field regardless of whether it is their primary intellectual or academic interest or not. Similar to JMU's program, ASU requires students to live together and take classes together and co-curricular programming is intimately tied to course content and to the residential component. For example, faculty involved in Brain Matters host office hours in the dorm. Though data have yet to be reported on this particular community, data from other residential learning communities on the same campus demonstrate great benefits to the students and to the university including significantly higher retention rates.

The Context and Origins of LMU's Residential Learning Community

Loyola Marymount University began implementing themed living-learning communities in deliberate efforts to maximize academic engagement and promote sustained student retention and academic success. LMU is a student-centered, Jesuit-Marymount university located in Los Angeles whose mission is the encouragement of learning, the education of the whole person, the service of faith, and the promotion of justice. Within this broader university mission, the Department of Psychology aims to develop ethical leaders for a culturally diverse world and to contribute to the liberal education of its majors. Through a comprehensive education in the science of psychology, the department's curriculum is committed to educating the whole person, the pursuit of academic excellence, advancing scholarship, promoting service and justice, and encouraging lifelong learning.

In 2008, the Psychology Department established a residential learning community for entering first-year psychology majors called the Psychology Early Awareness Program (PEAP). Following Life Sciences, PEAP was the second academically driven residential learning community at LMU. PEAP most closely approximates Lenning and Ebbens's (1999) residential learning community, yet it contains features of their curriculum-based learning community with linked courses and embedded cohort models (see Chapters Two and Three). We were inspired to create the program based on our belief that learning does not and should not end when class is over. As Davis and Murrell (1993) have suggested, "for growth to occur, the work that is done in the classroom must find expression in other aspects of a student's life" (p. 286).

PEAP was conceived as a residential learning community in particular because we strongly believed that this structure could optimize students' ability to navigate the transition to college. Entering college is similar to a rite of passage (Van Gennep, 1960). Students go through a process of separation, transition, and incorporation. Although rites of passage may occur many times during a student's career, the first year is particularly important (Pike and others, 1997). Given this, PEAP is designed so that first-year psychology majors live together in a designated residence hall, participate in coordinated curricular activities, and have access to other academic programs and services. In-class and out-of-class experiences are linked, creating a seamless, integrated educational environment focused on learning, academic success, and personal development.

PEAP was designed to promote the university and department's mission and vision through a student-centered immersion process. To do this we used the best of what is known about residential learning communities. Brower and Inkelas (2010) identified three characteristics that are associated with the most successful residential learning communities. To begin, successful programs detail clear learning objectives with a strong academic focus. Central to this is the inclusion of at least one course that students in the program are required to take together as well as academically based activities that occur alongside regular coursework. Second, successful programs take advantage of community settings to create learning opportunities. Third, successful programs require a strong, clear relationship between the leaders of the program, including both academic and student affairs. In addition to these qualities, PEAP was inspired by four characteristics that Jerome Bruner identified through his observations of one learning community (Brown, 1997). These include:

agency: taking more control of your mental activity...; *reflection*: not simply "learning in the raw" but making what you learn make sense...; *collaboration*: sharing the resources of the mix of human beings involved in teaching and learning...; [and] *culture*, the way of life and thought that we construct, negotiate, institutionalize, and finally...end up by calling reality... (Bruner, 1996, as cited in Brown, 1997, p. 399).

Reflecting these principles, our goals for the program are as follows. PEAP students should:

- Feel a sense of community, bonding, and engagement to peers, faculty, the broader educational community, and the field of psychology.
- Feel supported by peers, faculty, and the broader university community.
- Feel a sense of engagement in classes.
- Take responsibility for their own learning and that of their peers.
- Use collaboration and teaming strategies to enhance their educational potential.

- Value opportunities for exploration and value intellectual pursuits in higher education.
- Demonstrate greater awareness of available resources at the university and greater knowledge of how to access them.
- Demonstrate improved academic outcomes, as evidenced by GPA in both their major and LMU's core courses and through higher retention rates.

The Design and Implementation of PEAP

On average, the Department of Psychology receives approximately eighty entering first-year psychology majors who are invited during summer orientation to enroll in the PEAP learning community. The program allots only twenty-five slots, accommodating a little less than one-third of the fall first-year class. Although students self-select into PEAP, attention is given to achieving gender and ethnic diversity in the program admission process.

The Residential Component. As discussed previously, learning communities offer not only an opportunity for intellectual integration across courses but also for social integration. To maximize this potential, participants in PEAP live together on one floor of a highly sought-after freshmen dormitory with an assigned resident advisor who is also a psychology major. Participants begin the program the week prior to the start of fall classes to participate in three days of bonding, engaged learning, and local Los Angeles excursions. In addition to helping students connect with one another, this immersion component is designed to introduce participants to different experiences and opportunities available through LMU and the city of Los Angeles. PEAP students immerse themselves in diverse communities facing concrete challenges that heighten social awareness and inspire lifelong social action. During the year, monthly informal "fireside chats" with department faculty occur within the dorm setting. This provides PEAP students a chance to get to know and develop relationships with department faculty, upper-class students, and PEAP alumni. Within these chats, students learn about faculty research, careers in psychology, and getting into graduate school. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, these chats provide a space for students to discuss current hot topics in psychology. Students rarely have this type of access to faculty and professionals in the field at this stage of their college career.

Finally, in the Spring Semester, students engage in a Spring Event Weekend activity. These are specially designed, psychology-focused "alternative break" opportunities exclusively for PEAP participants. These activities promote service and cultural exchange on the local and national levels through hands-on, community-based learning during academic-year breaks. Through PEAP, our students engage with individuals outside the LMU community and integrate with the larger world in which they live. Spring Event activities have included service-learning activities at a

women's prison, engagement with youth community organizers in economically challenged inner-city neighborhoods, participation in community campaigns in the skid row community, and discussion and sharing with formerly incarcerated youth involved in juvenile justice campaigns. Most recently an activity included a visit to a Los Angeles school, serving large numbers of English-language-learners and low socio-economic-status children in an intervention effort involving literacy and reading motivation.

The Academic Component. All entering first-year psychology majors are required to take Introductory Psychology for majors. In addition, they are all required to enroll in "core" courses in philosophy, math, science, and English. With that in mind and with the intention of creating a truly integrated intellectual experience, the PEAP schedule is coordinated by the Dean's Office, Psychology Department, English Department, Math Department, Philosophy Department, and Life Sciences Department. Designated sections of required foundational courses expected of all first-semester psychology students are reserved for PEAP students only.

The first-semester English class is linked thematically and academically to the Introductory Psychology course, and Introductory Psychology is also linked to a one-unit liberal arts course focused on personal and academic development. The resulting fall semester PEAP schedule is preset, and all PEAP learning community students rotate together through classes that are open only to them. In addition, once the semester begins, resident advisors who work with the PEAP students coordinate group study sessions in the dorms so that students can collaborate with one another and to further create a total "learning community." Careful coordination and collaboration across divisions (Student Affairs and Academic Affairs), across departments (Psychology, English, Math, Philosophy, and Science), and with local community-based organizations is required to set up the coordinated curricula and cocurricular program. Resource sharing and participatory planning has been essential to establish the multifaceted nature of the program.

Examining the Effectiveness of PEAP

A necessary component of the program includes an examination of its potential effectiveness. Thus, we conducted a study that compared the academic performance of PEAP students with a comparison group of nonparticipants. We gathered data from two sources. First, we collaborated with Loyola Marymount University's institutional research department in order to compare classroom performance and retention rates for PEAP participants versus non-PEAP psychology students. Second, we surveyed PEAP participants in order to hear about their experience in their own words. The overall PEAP sample included forty-two students who participated in either the first or second year of the program, twenty-three from 2008–2009 and nineteen from 2009–2010. The comparison sample included 198

Table 4.1. Means and Standard Deviations for Self-Report Items

	M	SD
To what extent did your participation in PEAP help you DEVELOP A SENSE OF...		
Connection with peers in the psychology major	4.59	.71
Belonging with psychology faculty	4.19	1.00
Support from peers	4.50	.72
Connectedness with the field of psychology	4.28	.89
Engagement in classes	4.03	1.00
Responsibility for your own learning	3.88	.98
To what extent did your participation in PEAP help you DEVELOP AN ABILITY TO...		
Synthesize and apply a variety of learning techniques	3.59	1.04
Think critically about psychology	4.16	.88
Think critically about scientific research	3.66	1.00
Succeed academically (for example, in terms of GPA)	3.72	1.11
To what extent did your participation in PEAP help you...		
Develop an awareness of the university's resources	4.03	.90
Develop an intrinsic appreciation of learning	3.84	.99
Value intellectual pursuits in higher education	4.16	.99
Value participation in outside of class discussions	4.09	.93

almost all participants (93.8 percent) reported that PEAP helped them "quite a lot" to "very much" in developing a sense of support from peers. In addition, in terms of collaboration and community, 87.5 percent of participants stated that PEAP helped them "quite a lot" to "very much" in developing a sense of connection with peers in the major, 78.9 percent in sense of belonging with psychology faculty, and 84.4 percent in developing connection with the field of psychology. Comments made in response to the open-ended prompts corroborate these data. One student, for example, wrote the following:

I was very grateful for the sense of community that was created. I really got to know and love all of my peers quickly. Even now I have a strong bond with my PEAPs. Also, I became close with a lot of the faculty. This made asking questions and getting help so much less scary.

Another student wrote, "I enjoyed having classes the first semester with my friends and the people I lived with. Being in PEAP enabled me to develop friendships quickly."

In terms of agency, 81.3 percent reported that PEAP helped them "quite a lot" to "very much" in taking responsibility for their learning, 71.9 percent in developing an intrinsic appreciation for learning, 81.3 percent in valuing intellectual pursuits, and 78.1 percent in valuing out-of-class discussions. In terms of reflection, 84.4 percent used the top two answer choices to indicate that PEAP helped them think critically about psychology; a smaller number (62.6 percent) indicated that PEAP helped them think critically about scientific research. Once again, statements from the PEAP students help to flesh out these numbers. One student wrote, "I am unafraid to take on difficult academic aspirations because I know I have my PEAP community and faculty to fall back on should I need to," whereas other students wrote that participation in PEAP helped "strengthen my passion for psychology" and "connecting real world experiences with my current educational pursuits." Interestingly, and in line with the institutional data, only 59.4 percent stated that PEAP had helped them "quite a lot" to "very much" in succeeding academically in terms of grades.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

PEAP was created at LMU as way to provide a subset of first-year psychology majors with a comprehensive educational experience that would allow them to develop intellectually and personally. Data collected from the first two years of the program suggest that we have been successful on several fronts. Most clearly, PEAP helped students connect to the university, the major, and to their peers. The data on the academic component of the program were less clear. Though students in PEAP outperformed comparison

students who completed the Psychology 101 course, an Introductory Psychology class for those who are declared psychology majors, from the fall of 2006 through the fall of 2009.

Our results suggest that PEAP is having a positive impact on student retention: 100 percent of PEAP participants returned for their second academic year, compared with 81 percent of comparison students. These differences persisted beyond the second year as well. For those who had Junior year data 91 percent of PEAP students were retained, whereas 68 percent in the comparison group were retained. In terms of grades and GPA, the data were less clear. PEAP students statistically outperformed comparison students on only one of five first-semester courses. Specifically, PEAP students scored significantly higher in their Philosophy course, a course that focuses on critical-thinking skills, but there were no differences in Introductory Psychology, First-Year English, Statistics, or Natural Science. However, the PEAP participants' overall GPA at the end of the first semester, at the end of the first year, and the end of the second year was slightly higher than that of the comparison group, though none of the relationships was statistically significant.

The self-report data allowed us to more fully examine the effectiveness of PEAP and our ability to accomplish our stated goals. In general, participants reported receiving great benefit from the program. For example,

students on some dimensions, the effects were not so consistent or so robust as we would expect. In addition, students reported mixed feelings about the comprehensive nature of the intellectual experience we have created and implemented. On one hand, many students reported benefiting from taking classes together in their first semester and being able to rely on each other in their hallway for help with studying; simultaneously, they reported feeling relatively isolated from other first-year students given that all their courses are linked at the start of the school year.

Now that two years of the program have been completed and the data have been analyzed, we are able to reflect on the lessons learned and the limitations of the project. To begin, how did the program stack up to its theoretical underpinnings? First, we saw evidence of a community that incorporated the four elements identified by Bruner—collaboration, through formal (that is, program-delivered) and informal (for example, student study groups) structures (Brown, 1997). Students evidenced agency over not only their own but their peers' learning as well. Several of the events (for example, fireside chats) incorporated "physical spaces" for reflection and sharing. And ultimately, these resulted in a culture of learning, support, and integration of students' academic-intellectual and social worlds that were different from what we have observed among our non-PEAP majors. Furthermore, consistent with the relational model of development, students' self reports suggested the development of relationships with peers and faculty was the glue underlying many of the program's successes (Covington and Surrey, 1997; Gilligan, 1982; Jordan and others, 1991). Finally, the higher retention rates that we observed suggest that our decision to target first-year students, who face potentially challenging transitions on entering college, was a sound one.

From a pragmatic perspective, the past two years have revealed ways in which PEAP can be further strengthened to more deliberately achieve our goals. First, we recognize that we need to clarify what components are central to a living-learning community. Though we were clear on the importance of academic and social integration, we may have, ironically, failed to meaningfully integrate these two pieces as successfully as we could have. For example, it appears that little intellectual programming occurred in the dorm and that the blending of living and learning may not have been achieved. In the current iteration of the program, the psychology faculty who serve as codirectors for PEAP are deliberately coordinating with student housing staff and resident advisors to ensure that students are truly engaging in dialogue about their learning within their home environment. Furthermore, the programming in the dorm will move beyond study sessions, to drive students to take ownership over their own intellectual development. In addition, using surveys of prior PEAP students, we have determined that fewer linked courses will likely be more effective than our earlier fully linked-schedule model. Thus the most recent cohort of PEAP students is slated, in the fall semester, to take their Introductory

Psychology, English, and 1-unit liberal arts courses together, and in the Spring semester to take their Brain and Behavior course together.

Another issue that has arisen since the initiation of PEAP concerns equity issues among our students. A residential learning community necessarily requires dedicating valuable and limited resources to a small group of individuals. Some have questioned whether this is fair and whether it puts our other students at a disadvantage. Recognizing that this is a real issue, we are intentionally finding ways to have PEAP students give back to the "life" of the department as a way to maximize our "investment" (both financially and in terms of human resources). To date, this has happened organically as many former PEAP students have chosen to involve themselves in the department as a way to give to other students. For example, the current president of Psi Chi (our honors society) and the Villagers (our student-run organization) are PEAP alumni. In addition, many of the research assistants in the department were involved in the program. As the program continues, we will remain cognizant of balancing the rewards given to the PEAP participants in contrast to our other majors.

As a final lesson learned, it is clear that buy-in is needed from many constituencies and that, for the program to succeed, ongoing collaboration and relationship building with these constituencies must occur. Though the program has an academic focus and is housed in the Psychology Department, it cannot function effectively without close working relationships with Student Affairs and with buy-in from a cross section of units in the university. The program works best when there is a team of committed people across divisions and departments with a vested interest in its success. In addition, the program works best when everyone in the department is involved. Because the particular type of residential learning community that we created is centered in an academic department, all the faculty in that department must be on board and willing to be involved. In our own experience, such involvement took the form of participating in fireside chats in the dorm and in attending events off campus with students during the opening weekend of the school year and the Alternative Weekend. More can be done, however. For example, ongoing communication with the faculty needs to occur so that they are abreast of the workings of the program and of the students enrolled, and so they can have a voice in making the program more effective.

In addition to considering the lessons learned, we are also clear that more research needs to be done to better understand the residential learning community experience. For example, though we are aware that these processes work and are effective in helping students academically and personally, data are needed to examine the mechanisms by which specific practices achieve their effects on student outcomes including their academic success and their sense of community and social integration. In addition, more needs to be known about how the institutional context in which residential learning communities occur moderates the effectiveness of the

programs. In our own case, for example, it is likely that some of the specific pieces of PEAP worked, in part, because they were aligned with the university's mission. Specifically, students responded quite well to events where they interacted with community members and with people on the margins of society; this is perfectly in line with the university's mission to educate individuals in the promotion of social justice. Future research should examine facets of the specific institutional context that can serve as barriers or supports in achieving the goals of the living-learning community.

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