A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF NURSING

LIVING–LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Living–learning communities, although not a novel concept, have been known to promote

student performance and a sense of collegiality. Because nursing is essential to the medical

profession, nursing student retention and pass rates are of paramount importance. Attrition tends

to happen to nursing students in their first formative years (Newton & Moore, 2009). Therefore,

this study was conducted to explore findings associated with living arrangements and residential

factors promoting and deterring retention. Although most studies on this topic have utilized

quantitative methods, this qualitative comparative case study, involving two universities in

Indiana during the winter of 2014, examined the personal experiences of 14 students residing or

having resided in a nursing-themed living–learning community. The investigation searched for

themes in mentoring and explored if and how mentoring was used. A symbiotic relationship was

found among the various themes identified revealing that the dynamics of the living–learning

community offer a strong network for mentoring and promoting the academic, social, and

personal development of the nursing student that, in turn, promotes retention and program

completion. Additionally, the resident assistant in the living–learning community was found to

be of central importance in sustaining the positive dynamic. Implications for practice that are

thought to be of most use in carefully building and sustaining a living--learning community were

derived from the themes.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Nurses represent the largest segment of the health care workforce, with the number of

licensed registered nurses (RNs) steadily increasing each year. The National Council of State

Boards of Nursing (NCSBN) found that numbers in 2006 had risen to almost 3.4 million nursing

workers (NCSBN, 2008). However, there is much speculation that there are not enough

registered nurses to provide care to a complex and aging population. Not only are there four

times as many RNs in the United States as physicians, nursing delivers an extended array of

primary and preventative care, family health, women's health, pediatric services, and

gerontological care (American Association of Colleges of Nursing [AACN], 2014; Auerbach,

Buerhaus, & Staiger, 2007) . According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services,

"the U.S. will require 1.2 million new RNs by 2014 to meet the nursing needs of the country,

500,000 to replace those leaving practice and an additional 700,000 new RNs to meet growing

demands for nursing services" (as cited in Potera, 2009, pg. 22).

Retention in nursing programs is a serious national problem and many state governments

are committed to diversifying both the student population and the health care workforce

(Cameron, Roxbugh, Taylor, & Lauder, 2011). Although there are over three million nurses

presently, it is projected that the number of new nurses will not eradicate the shortage of bedside

nurses (Health Resources and Services Administration, 2004). In projecting beyond the 2014

need for an additional 700,000 nurses as asserted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the AACN estimated that by the year 2018, more than 581,500 new positions will remain unfilled (AACN, 2014).To add to this dilemma, new nurses are leaving their occupations at an alarming rate; it is estimated that new graduate attrition from the field is at 50% (Ketola, 2009; E. L. Zeller, Doutrich, Guido & Hoeksel, 2011). Because of this shortage, higher education institutions speculate that the answer to the shortage is to educate and graduate more nursing students.

The education of a nursing student is rigorous and challenging; it is documented that over half of those attending nursing schools had contemplated dropping out of the program (Cameron et al., 2011). Most universities offer four-year programs with demanding course work requiring students to meet rigorous expectations. Thus, most students must learn to manage time, assimilate complex knowledge, collaborate with classmates, and adapt to university life in a short period of time. Given these challenges, it is not surprising that attrition rates in nursing academe are close to 50% across the nation (Newton & Moore, 2009).

The attrition from nursing programs is costly. Although many state governments provide assistance with funding for education, students that do not graduate are accumulating educational debt they may not be able to repay (Cameron et al., 2011). Yorke, as cited in Cameron et al., (2011), referred to research into attrition as "autopsy studies" because this data was only concerned about those students who have left. Because of the attrition rates, the nursing shortage continues to accrue. Poor academic achievement was a leading factor contributing to these alarming attrition rates, resulting in fewer graduates and fewer nurses for the profession (Bolan & Grainger, 2003; Cameron et al., 2011; Newton, Smith, Moore, & Magnan, 2006; Peter, 2005;

Symes, Tart, & Travis, 2005). It is essential that institutions consider what constitutes a conducive learning environment that promotes student success and retention.

One way a positive learning environment may be accomplished is through the use of a themed residence hall. Astin (1993) indicated that both the cognitive and affective domains of the student have been shaped by this atmosphere. Residence halls have been known to provide an environment that promotes student involvement on campus, devotion of time to study, participation with student organizations, and frequent interaction with other students and faculty. Astin also posited that although research in this area was multifaceted, there remained a gap in the literature surrounding variables that contributed to students' outcomes. Since research has gained momentum, changes are emerging due to the increased interest in andragogy (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Other independent variables that influence student outcome such as social development and students' cognitive development have also been the subjects of recent research (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton & Renn, 2010).

It is interesting to note that there is substantial evidence supporting the assertion that students who reside on campus have lower attrition rates and are likelier to graduate compared to their off- campus counterparts (Astin,1993). Additionally, residents were more likely than commuters to partake in extracurricular activities and leadership abilities. Student residents were more likely to express satisfaction with their undergraduate experience (Astin, 1993). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) also revealed that living–learning residential settings offered an effective academic environment that enhances solidarity among residents. In light of this evidence, institutions of higher learning are instituting the use of residence halls to retain students and promote academic achievement. Living–learning communities foster academic engagement and promote mentoring (Purdie & Rosser, 2011). Because the communities have various

characteristics, most are coeducational, are based on campus, are residential housing, and mainly

cater to the new freshman student. Various themes are engineering, athletics, and nursing.

Although many students are intrigued by the idea of themed housing, students sometimes are

given the assignment of the living–learning community or are put on a waiting list. Each

university offers specific criteria for the selection of the student regarding living

accommodations. First-year students comprise the majority in the residential living–learning

communities, although sophomore students also reside in this arrangement (Edwards &

McKelfresh, 2002; Hotchkiss, Moore, & Pitts, 2006; Wawrzynski & Jessup-Anger, 2010).

Because students often initially start out at the community, several decide to relocate off campus

or leave for other unknown factors. Some universities provide housing for freshman through

senior year; however, this is the exception and not the norm.

Universities and educators support learning communities for various reasons. Initially,

the community should strengthen the students' involvement in their learning and their

commitment to the occupation. By the use of peer support and mentoring, this arrangement

allows students to engage in their learning and thrive in an environment that enhances and

promotes growth. Successful educational outcomes are nurtured by time and effort. Tino, as cited

in Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, p. 51), built upon the work of Spady (1971) and theorized that

students entered a college or university with varying patterns of characteristics and skills that are

either enhanced or thwarted through interaction. Those who are disengaged often do not invest

time and are known to have negative educational outcomes such as failing courses or leaving the

academic environment altogether (Kuh, 2003). Kazmi (2010) posited that many students spend

their time daydreaming and not facing the realities of the academic environment. In addition, he

suggested that the student should not take all the responsibility. He accused the institutions of

allowing other priorities to compete with the educational responsibilities. For example, although extremely popular, even athletics competed with educational priorities. Both Kazmi (2010) and Kuh (2003) agreed that educational outcomes should be shared by both the institution and the student.

Learning communities have existed for several years. As early as the 1960s, information appeared in the literature addressing the benefits of the learning community (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Presently, living–learning communities are formulated to enhance development and provide housing for those sharing a commonality, especially for those who share an academic vision or goal (B.L.Smith & MacGregor, 2009). There exists a plethora of literature surrounding the social, academic, and environmental benefits of the communities (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). In addition, literature has linked living–learning communities to a reduction in attrition rates (Tinto, 2003). Living–learning communities have been known to promote effective learning practices as well as formulate social engagement. It is not known whether the characteristics students brought to the environment were the reasons for success or if it was the living–learning community that was the source of the positive outcome. This question remains to be answered (Soldner & Szelenyi, 2008). Additionally, there is limited data regarding how the living–learning communities affect student outcomes and student learning (Purdie & Rosser, 2011). Moreover, there were no data supporting nursing and the living–learning community until recent research was conducted (Vincent, 2013).

Vincent (2013) recently conducted research at a Midwestern university examining differences between residing in a multi-level nursing living–learning community and a traditional residence hall. The goal of this study was to determine whether grades were similar or

different depending on where the student resided. Although no significant grade differences were found, research did present unique findings that supported the implementation of the themed residence hall.

Even though research surrounding living–learning communities has been extensively studied, there remains limited knowledge regarding qualitative research addressing the living–learning community and the nursing student. The current research on living–learning communities was primarily quantitative and remained focused on the outcomes of social integration, peer interaction, and the faculty (Wawrzyski, Jessup-Anger, Stolz, Helman, & Beulieu, 2009). Therefore, this study utilized qualitative methods to explore the positives and negatives of the living–learning community. In addition, this research explored the concept of mentoring and examined whether students consider mentoring as a factor in their living–learning community.

Background of the Study

Higher education has been under examination for the last 125 years (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). For the last two decades, institutions have been under attack and persuaded to reform due to the attention of the report *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Even though this report primarily focused on K-12 education, higher education has also dealt with the impact. Higher educational institutions are scrutinized and being held accountable for student success and for assisting students with degree completion. At research universities, education has been reported to be at a crisis level, according to the Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University (BCEURU, 2006). The Spellings Report (U.S. Department of Education) published in 2006 challenged higher education to resist complacency and provide an atmosphere of innovation,

assessment, and quality improvement measures. Although some positive changes have occurred, the ability of American higher education to deal with diverse student populations and to change to meet a global educational market is not well known (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

For many years, there has been a nursing shortage that waxes and wanes. As early as the 1960s, the shortage of registered nurses in the United States was problematic (Dolan, 2011). For various reasons, universities are turning away nursing applicants in record numbers and scrambling to retain students in the programs. Various occupations compete with the desire of becoming a nurse. Presently, other careers are becoming attractive to women. Careers such as pharmacy, physical therapy, sports medicine, and engineering are attracting women unlike in the past. However, even though men are now considering nursing, women still continue to make up a large portion of the nursing profession (Staiger, Buerhaus, & Auerbach, 2000). Students who are not successful in nursing school often have substandard grades and poor support systems, leading to attrition in the program. In addition, due to the shortage of nurses in the healthcare industry, colleges offering nursing programs have paid more attention to attrition and the factors contributing to the success of the student (Hopkins, 2008).

Nursing school enrollment cannot meet the projected demands for nurses (AACN, 2014). Due to an aging workforce and poor job conditions, nurses are leaving hospitals in record numbers (AACN, 2014). In the next five years, the projected age of the registered nurse is expected to be 50 years old (AACN, 2014). Within the next 15 years, it is projected that more than a million will reach retirement age (AACN, 2014). In addition, changing demographics signal a need for more nurses to care for aging populations (AACN, 2014; Ketola, 2009). As the baby boomers age and the nation's need for health care professionals intensifies, colleges and

universities struggle to expand enrollment while simultaneously ensuring the success of the student.

Organizations, both hospitals and educational institutions, need to assist in nursing retention. Hospitals are faced with nurses leaving due to lack of appreciation, finding alternative areas of practice, a diminished sense of value, and a lack of professional stimulation (Gardulf et al., 2005). Fiscal implications indicated that the cost of training each replacement nurse may reach $74,888 (Daniel, 2006). Other factors that contribute to nurse attrition are salary and stress-related factors such as long shifts, the inability to meet patients' needs, and fear of physical injury (Letvak & Buck, 2008). Higher patient acuity and heavier workloads also contribute to nurses' leaving professional nursing practice (Bally, 2007). Nursing, although ranked highly as a trusted profession in the USA, continues to be portrayed as a stereotypical and negative occupation (Goodin, 2003). Many individuals see nurses as the physician's personal assistant.

Because of this crucial situation, various methods are being implemented to not only retain nursing students but also assist with their success. Living–learning communities have been identified as one solution to this dilemma. Campuses across the nation are now being developed and modified to promote and enhance academic success. Not only do these arrangements offer alternative ways of educational enhancement, they also provide additional faculty support and encouragement. The word *community* envisions groups of people with shared value systems and common goals. This concept fosters social interaction while enhancing student engagement. The outcome is the development of new knowledge and bonding with others who have similarities. The community must have commitment, dedication, and meaningful interactions in order to be successful (Bickford & Wright, 2006).

Institutions can foster and enhance learning, although it is ultimately the responsibility of the student to digest the material. Institutional and student cohesiveness can be established through the promotion of a positive learning environment. Living–learning communities often serve as an alternative answer to the traditional residential housing arrangement. These arrangements promote active learning and collaboration and endorse experiential development. Furthermore, several positive skills may be acquired by this arrangement such as teamwork, social skills, and course knowledge. Students who resided in a living–learning community were involved with like-minded students and gained hands-on interaction by the use of various methods in themed housing (Ball State University, 2012).

The traditionally known college student is now referred to as the millennial student (Jackson & Woolsey, 2009). Because these students are characteristically 18-22 years of age, they have often been raised by dual working parents. Another popular term presently used to describe a parent is the *helicopter* parent. Helicopter parents are said to hover over their children and do not allow children to fail at any endeavor (Jackson & Woolsey, 2009). In spite of the family arrangement, these students prefer to multi-task, work in groups, and collaborate with others and are usually excited about change. Millennial students favor experiential learning and do not hesitate to challenge authority. Although this generation is often seen as caring, it poses a challenge for faculty who are not well versed in educating this population. Living–learning communities frequently align with the needs of this sector. W. J. Zeller (2008) examined the influence of information technology regarding the way students learn and integrate technological advances in the community. He found that by integrating strategies for traditional learning and strategies that extended outside the classroom, students maximized their learning potential and

promoted blending of various methods. Promoting critical thinking skills and independence were both used as instructional strategies to facilitate and enhance learning.

Millennials are used to a rapid transmission of ideas in the digital age and prefer online learning activities (Jackson & Woolsey, 2009). Furthermore, they are accustomed to peer mentoring and like problem-based clinical situations (Jackson & Woolsey, 2009). Jackson and Woolsey (2009) substantiated that, like Generation X, Generation Y (millennials) brought attitudes and beliefs congruent with their generational cohort. Often raised as only children, they were taught self-esteem in school and do not adapt well at accepting constructive criticism. These students preferred to learn best with group activities and expected good grades for merely showing up in class and completing reading assignments.

Nursing education is making strides to accommodate Generation Y. Instructional methods that use critical thinking and promote independence were preferred (Monaco & Martin, 2007). Classrooms incorporate *clickers*, digital devices that students use to answer questions anonymously. Flipped classrooms is another strategy faculty are using for the student. Flipped is where material is read on the students' own time in the evening and students are expected to attend class prepared to participate in discussion about the material (Monaco & Martin, 2007).

Living–learning communities try to accommodate the millennial student with study rooms and additional examination rooms where students can practice their skills. In an attempt to keep nursing students motivated, Marchand (2010) noted that several of the living–learning communities offer up-to-date medical books and anatomy models so that students can collaborate and use nursing equipment to practice on their own time. Recently, colleges are being more responsive to students' interests and schools are trying to maintain a competitive edge. Not

only does it stimulate the interest of the incoming student but it makes an attempt to keep upperclassmen on campus (Marchand, 2010).

Most universities offer students a variety of living quarters. However, literature is replete with examples to demonstrate that themed housing is superior to alternative methods (Hotchkiss et al., 2006; W. J. Zeller, 2008). Even so, often students are given the choice to live on or off campus. The majority of universities require freshmen to live on campus for the first year. If students choose to live off-campus, most opt for apartment sharing or commute from home. If students live near the university, they may choose to walk or bike to school. Some universities have sorority or fraternity houses in which students may choose to reside (Hotchkiss et al., 2006).

Statement of the Problem

Although many factors can and do influence students' learning in higher education, where the student resides is an instrumental variable for success. Higher education is paying attention to the problems voiced by the student and has become committed to the students' success. It is imperative to intervene due to the paucity of nurses for the future and to contribute to the success of the universities in encouraging program completion.

Even though living–learning communities show promise for student success, little is known from a qualitative research standpoint (Wawrzynski et al., 2009). Although the living–learning community enhances support and student engagement, there is limited information regarding what students see as helpful or detrimental in the living–learning community. In addition, no studies were located that specifically addressed mentoring in the living–learning community.

Academic failure was often cited as the reason (Cameron et al., 2011; Waters, 2010) for the climbing attrition rates in nursing school (Newton & Moore, 2009). In order to be successful in nursing school, the student must achieve a grade of C or higher. Many schools of nursing implement this policy. Students must maintain a grade of C in a cognate course or a 75% average in a nursing course. Many nursing programs require students to have a 2.50 cumulative grade point average (GPA) or higher (on a 4.0 scale), and additionally, the students must pass all cognate courses. Examples of cognate courses include sociology, microbiology, communication, anatomy and physiology, English, health, and basic mathematics. Some universities allow students to repeat cognate or nursing courses only once after failure of the course. Furthermore, upon a second failure, the student will no longer be eligible for the program and would have to reapply after a lengthy period. In some instances this may be five years or more. For this reason, it is imperative for the student to succeed, and supplemental academic and environmental support is vital to that mission. All of these factors are instrumental in retaining students and enhancing graduation rates. Mentoring strategies and living–learning communities are rapidly emerging to foster academic success.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to appraise the lived experience of nursing students who resided in a living–learning community in order to understand how such communities may contribute to student retention and matriculation. A prominent factor in successful educational outcomes is student engagement (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006). The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) was developed to provide information and assists colleges regarding undergraduate information (NSSE, 2010). Its primary activity is annually surveying college students to evaluate the extent in which they engage in educational

practices associated with high level learning and improvement (NSSE, 2010). The NSSE College Student Report is one of the most popular surveys regarding enrolled undergraduates (Pike, 2012).

In order to improve higher education and assist in examining student engagement, benchmarks of effective educational practice were developed (NSSE, 2010). The NSSE established benchmarks that include level of active and collaborative learning, student–faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and a supportive academic campus atmosphere. The NSSE benchmark categories provide a heuristic framework for understanding the findings of this study.

This study was developed to provide a voice to the experiences that contributed to and detracted from the usefulness of the themed residence hall in the promotion of student retention and matriculation. There is much known about the experiences that promote learning and there are several questions on the NSSE survey that capture vital aspects of these experiences.

Research Questions

This study sought to determine the effectiveness of residing in a living–learning community at two different institutions. In order to guide this study, three different research questions were asked:

1. What influence has the living–learning community had on students' perceptions of their development and achievement?

2. What influence has mentoring within the living–learning community had on students' perceptions of their development and achievement?

3. What influence has the living–learning community and mentoring had on students' willingness to remain in or leave a program?

Significance of the Study

This study supported the fact that combining educational learning opportunities with academic support is paramount to the betterment of student success. Furthermore, in nursing, student attrition remains a significant problem and compounds the overall nursing shortage found in the nation. Educational success leads to greater retention of nursing students and produces a quality product. Success in education ultimately translates into an increased number of graduate nurses and, in turn, lessens the impact of the nursing shortage.

State funding is an integral issue for any institution of higher learning. However, there are currently more students being accepted into colleges and universities, and these institutions need the funding to thrive (Goodin, 2003). Across the United States, living–learning communities are being implemented to enhance learning and meet the needs of the traditional student. The results of this study may shed light on areas of need or needed improvement, including those requiring funding, from the lived experience of the student.

Definition of Terms

Several terms were found to be significant to this study. By defining these terms, a better understanding will be facilitated and, thus, produce a thorough comprehension.

Collaborative learning. This method is a distinctive epistemology for learning communities fostering collaboration over competition.

Course failure. Course failure is defined as the grade of below a C in all cognate courses and below a 75% in a nursing course.

Course pass. Course pass is defined as earning a C or above in all cognate courses and a 75% or greater in a nursing course.

Five effective educational practices. This expression is analogous with the term benchmarks. Following are the five effective educational practices, according to NSSE (2010):

- *Level of academic challenge.* Level of academic challenges encompasses students' preparation for class and performing well.

- *Active and collaborative learning.* Active and collaborative learning encompasses class participation and collaborating with peers both in the academic and living settings.

- *Student-faculty interaction.* Student-faculty interaction encompasses both educational and social settings and extends to elements of feedback.

- *Enriching educational experiences.* Enriching educational experiences encompasses diversity, which includes exposure to various ethnicities, races, and values. It also includes gender, genetics, age, sexual orientation, and style of learning (Stokes & Flowers, 2009).

- *Supportive campus environment.* Supportive campus environment encompasses social support and academic learning. This also includes a positive on-campus relationship with faculty and peers. Additionally, this includes a sense of community belonging.

Learning communities. "Groups of people linked geographically or by shared interest, collaborating and working in partnership to address their members' learning needs. Learning communities are a powerful tool for social cohesion, community, capacity building and social, cultural and economic development" (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2003, p.12).

Living–learning community. A group of college or university students who reside in a residence hall based on a common theme that integrates academics and social components into the community practices.

Mentoring. "A two way professional collegiate partnership which contributes to the growth and development of both partners" (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2003, p. 4).

Assumptions and Limitations

All research has inherent assumptions and limitations. Assumptions are circumstances or elements in research that many researchers take for granted as true (Polit & Beck, 2004). Limitations are often referred to as weaknesses that frequently are identified by the researcher and are taken into account when interpreting the results of the research (Polit & Beck, 2004). Shortcomings are identified when researchers recognize assumptions and limitations of the study (Polit & Beck, 2004). Although many of these conditions are out of the control of the researcher, the identification of assumptions and limitations provided conceivable explanations for the phenomena to be observed. In this study, I assumed that participants would truthfully share their experiences. This study was limited in that I was not able to recruit a larger number of participants.

Nature of the Study and Theoretical Foundations

This study employed a qualitative methodology design to determine benchmark objectives and determine various attitudes surrounding the living–learning community. Research was conducted at two Midwestern state-funded universities.

The NSSE provided the framework for the research findings while Astin's (1993) and Lave and Wenger's (1991) theories were the "lens" through which meanings and themes took

configuration. Specific benchmarks of NSSE are highlighted and interwoven with the former theoretical ideologies. The underpinning theoretical foundation of this study is Lave and Wenger's (1991) social learning theory. Their model of situated learning proposed that learning involves a process of engagement in a community of practice and both had a strong interest in social theory (Smith, 2003). To understand and exemplify how the environment affects learning, Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory was considered in concert with Astin's (1993) inputs-environments-outcomes (I-E-O) college impact model, which was designed based on his student involvement theory. These two theories demonstrated that learning is embedded and enhanced with activities that include environmental effects, interaction, and collaboration.

Nursing students who reside in living–learning communities and on-campus residences are exposed to opportunities such as peer mentoring, role modeling, tutoring, enhanced social opportunities, and greater interactions with faculty and peers. Albeit these situations are usually artificially created, these experiences give students an opportunity to thrive and explore additional assistance. Benjamin (2007) described observation as one of the connecting elements between social learning theory and living–learning communities. Peer-to-peer interactions are abundant and program directors along with faculty provide students with role modeling behaviors.

Summary

This study analyzed nursing student living–learning communities in Indiana at two accredited schools of nursing. These two nursing schools provided themed housing for first year freshman residents. The following chapter is a review of the literature related to the issues of mentoring and the satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the themed residence hall. Chapter 3 includes an analysis of the case study research design and incorporates methodology, data

collection, and analysis to provide clarity. Chapter 4 delivers the analytical section regarding

details of the findings and Chapter 5 addresses future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to present literature findings that address mentoring and the

nature of the living–learning community. The underpinning theoretical framework of the study is

explored. Upon reviewing the literature, the development of the living–learning communities is

examined, including the definition and correlated founders. Living–learning communities are

introduced and explained along with examination of the phenomena of mentoring. Close

examination of living–learning communities is offered along with reported benefits and

deterrents. There are four influences in higher education that include the following: the seven

principles/practices of Chickening and Gameson's (1987) undergraduate education, student

engagement, the benchmarks of effective educational practices, and the NSSE. The relevance of

academic failure and its effect in nursing education is addressed. Upon conclusion, a summary of

presented information is provided.

Mentoring

Mentoring, although documented to be effective, was investigated and the methods of

mentoring were explored in this study. Mentoring and induction models drew largely from

constructivism and gained increased popularity in higher education (Moss, 2010). This was

primarily due to increased attrition and the need for student success. Constructivist epistemology

uses scaffolding, cognitive apprenticeship, as well as reflection to embrace authentic context

replicating the way knowledge will be used in real life. Moss (2010) posited that educational

practices may be enhanced through authentic activities, access to expert performance, and

modeling of processes, reflection, collaborative practices of the construction of comprehension,

articulation of personal values and beliefs, and coaching with the use of scaffolding.

Historically, the term mentoring was first identified in Greek mythology; mentoring

relationships have been around for centuries. Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey* (as cited in

Bryant-Shanklin & Brumage, 2011), coined the term, and the word mentor was born. It was at

the beginning of the poem when aging King Laertes Odysseus, King of Ithaca, surrendered his

crown to his only son Odysseus. Prior to leaving his family to battle in the Trojan War, *Odysseus*

entrusted his beloved son Telemachus to his acquaintance and advisor Mentor. Ultimately, it

became Mentor's obligation to function as Telemachus's role model, trusted advisor, instructor,

and patriarchal figure. The association between Telemachus and Mentor in *The Odyssey* helped

inspire an understanding of the original mentoring process.

Mentoring has been defined as a mutually beneficial learning partnership in which a more

experienced student (a mentor) takes an active and nurturing role in assisting a less experienced

subject (a mentee) to attain specific learning or professional developmental tasks. It has been

demonstrated to be beneficial for new employees and aides in countering occupational attrition

(Paris, 2010). Research has claimed that those who are mentored are more likely to stay in their

profession. Just as education is a powerful force that continually shapes the quality of experience

(Dewey, 1938), so are mentoring and formulating an educational community a powerful force

shaping the quality of an experience (Mullen, 2009).

Presently, the process of mentoring in educational purposes is a progression involving

two or more individuals working side by side to build up and formulate the abilities of one entity

(Bryant-Shanklin & Brumage, 2011). Prior to the 1980s, mentoring had not been acknowledged for its benefits by researchers and human relations specialists; however, due to the rigor in higher education, mentoring is increasingly popular and gaining attention. Historically, mentoring first became useful in the business sector where empirical research had been conducted. The strategy of effective mentoring has been viewed as a lost art. Educators and administrators have become so metric oriented that it is challenging to retrieve the human face of mentorship (Mullen, 2009; Zeind, Zdanowicz, MacDonald, & Parkhurst, 2005).

The diverse population of nursing students means that students may find themselves in a group where they feel isolated. Often camaraderie and formalized mentoring is a possible mechanism for students to help and support each other that should be explored further (Cameron et al., 2011). Fast-paced demands on education are suffocating quality mentoring and institutions are frantically attempting to create more collegial partnerships. Dyadic in nature, creative collaboration and group-learning contexts may be the mentoring techniques of the future (Mullen, 2009).

Supervisors most frequently made value judgments or criticism on novices' performances, while mentors did not (Ambrosetti & Dekker, 2010). Characteristically, mentors have been in management roles or are people the mentee aspires to resemble and have a more positive connotation. Terms such as guide, instructor, counselor, supporter, and encourager are commonly used to describe a mentor's task. While in undergraduate school, teacher education students frequently encounter a variety of mentors due to experiencing several school sites. However, mismatches in personality have been known to make the experience unsuccessful in traditional mentoring relationships.

Although mentoring has been recognized as an ancient art and inherent in all apprenticeships, it has evolved to include various sites and disciplines as well as definitions. The type of the mentoring and the involvement of the mentor depend upon the various types of mentoring. In the academic setting, mentoring is viewed as a relationship through which both the mentor and mentee exchange ideas and can mutually benefit from each other's perspectives and experiences.

The competency, identity, and effectiveness in the professional areas are encouraged and groomed by the mentor. Many attributes are essential for successful mentoring, these include but are not limited to wisdom, caring, integrity, commitment, a sense of humor, and the ability of the mentor to act as a catalyst (Zeind et al., 2005). In addition, other characteristics included approachability, integrity, and the ability to listen, commitment to the profession, tactfulness, flexibility, and cooperativeness. The mentor-mentee selection process, according to Cook (2012), is crucial in careful and deliberate matching. The later process allowed for the maximization of benefits to all involved.

Essential for the mentor is the ability to learn, care, trust, possess a spirit of praise and encouragement, and be open to the limitations of others (Zeind et al., 2005). The skill of identification of qualitative changes in the protégé approach to tasks rather than immediate productivity is paramount. By assisting the protégés, the mentors may find a renewed purpose in their academic role. Additionally, another learning experience for the mentor was the exposure to the younger mentees point of view and academic knowledge, this may include up to date research or current practice (Iancu-Haddad & Oplatka, 2009). Ideally, the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST, 2003) defined mentoring as "a two way professional collegiate partnership which contributes to the growth and development of both partners" (p. 4)

Novices profit from the knowledge and expertise of their qualified colleagues. For many

mentees, the mentor served as a concrete representation of what they wish to come (Hayes &

Koro-Ljungberg, 2011).

Recently, attention has been given to peer mentoring and the support systems that are

paramount for university entrants to be successful (Smailes & Leary, 2011). It has been posited

that students' sense of identification with peers is both important to their success and

demonstrated perceived control over academic progress. Personal networks provide

encouragement for reflection and cognitive development. Students from lower-income families

have been shown to have had a decrease in peer support to draw from. Correlation studies have

suggested socio-economic groups, first year grades, and the possibility of withdrawing from the

university may be related (Smailes & Leary, 2011).

Nursing, as an academic profession, has had not a lot of experience with mentoring.

According to Ketola (2009), the vision of what mentoring is or what it can do is vague for both

mentors and nursing students. Mentoring focuses on both knowledge and tasks without personal

involvement. Students desperately want assistance and guidance and they need reinforcement of

their passion and socialization regarding the "soul of nursing." Unfortunately, the practice of

nursing as a profession of women who need only to follow the commands of the physicians

continues to impede the aspirations of the nursing students as they select the opportunities most

beneficial in the expansion of their careers. This mentality ultimately thwarts trusting in their

intelligence and self-confidence, self-respect, and activism that is essential in creating an

environment of healing that they should be proud of and in which they should take pleasure in

working.

During September 1999, alumni at a large university on the West Coast initiated a mentoring program for undergraduate nursing students (Ketola, 2009). More than 100 students (50% of the student body) joined the program and 60 community nurses, representing a plethora of various specialties, agreed to volunteer in this endeavor (Ketola, 2009). Using a survey completed the previous year, this program had been methodically planned. Then, a successful nine-month pilot study was undertaken using 13 students and 13 mentors. However, during the next four years, enrollments of students in the program dropped to less than 1/3 of the original number. The transition and leadership was never a success resulting in the person leading the program leaving the institution. This study listed lack of vision and dedication to the mentoring role as reasons for the lack of success.

Because of the climbing attrition rates in nursing (Newton & Moore, 2009), academic failure was often cited as the reason for students leaving the program (Cameron et al., 2011; Waters, 2010). For the student to succeed, supplemental academic and/or peer support is vital to that mission (W. J. Zeller, 2008). All of these variables were instrumental in retaining students and enhancing graduation rates. Mentoring strategies and living–learning communities are rapidly emerging to foster academic retention.

Recently, the art of mentoring has been more prominent in the pre-service teacher education area (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010). Mentoring has been replacing supervision in many educational degrees. Whereas supervision consists of the roles of teacher, boss, assessor, counselor, and expert, mentoring involves assisting, befriending, advising, grooming, guiding and counseling. Mentoring is suggested to be more favored than supervision. Traditionally, the literature regarding mentoring has stereotypically portrayed mentors as more experienced, older, and more intelligent compared to their counterparts. Mentees are seen as a less experienced

protégés. This is not presently always the case. Currently, a mentor can be a co-worker or a peer; it may be someone who has equal status and may be the same age (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010). Mentoring may be seen as a reciprocal partnership. The use of partnering two individuals from differing domains has been a successful alternative to the one-directional, non-reciprocal structure (Paris, 2010).

The National Survey of Student Engagement

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) was first launched in 2000 (NSSE, 2010). The NSSE initially started as an innovative experiment in changing undergraduate education. The NSSE was initially bankrolled by The Pew Charitable Trusts; currently, institutional fees cover the costs of participating in the initiative (Kuh, 2001). Presently, hundreds of four-year colleges and universities participate in this assessment measure. Through its annual student survey, *The College Student Report*, NSSE collects information related to student engagement. Since its inception, NSSE is used at more than 700 institutions annually. Whether students have learning experiences that are likely to result in effective and enduring learning are questions NSSE strives to address (NSSE, 2010).

The conceptual roots of the NSSE go back several decades in the form of efforts to document the circumstances that enhance student scholarship (Kuh, 2001). Several pioneers in this endeavor included Astin, Sanford, and Chickering. Later, Chickering and Gamson joined a number of other researchers to condense the research findings on learning and teaching at a 1986 retreat at Wingspread. This assembly fashioned the "Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education" (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). Several years later, in 1991, Pascarella and Terenzini artfully synthesized decades of study of college students that acknowledged these practices and pointed to some additional circumstances that enhance

learning and retention (Kuh, 2001). The outcome of this synthesis was the NSSE (2010)

Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice (see Table 1).

Table 1:

Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice

Benchmark	Measures
Level of academic challenge	Central to the student learning and collegiate quality is challenging intellectual and creative work.
Active and collaborative learning	Once students are intensively concerned and involved in their educational pursuits, and they are asked to think about and apply what they are learning to their studies, students learn more.
Student-faculty interaction	By interacting inside and outside the classroom, students learn firsthand how experts solve practical problems. Teachers then become role models and guides for continuous, life-long learning.
Enriching educational experiences	Learning opportunities both inside and outside the classroom augment the academic program. By experiencing diversity, this teaches students important things about other cultures and themselves.
Supportive campus environment	Students are better satisfied when colleges are committed to their success and social relations are cultivated.

Note. Adapted from "The college student report: NSSE 2010 codebook," Bloomington, IN, pp. 19-20. Copyright @ 2010 The Trustees of Indiana University.

The NSSE benchmarks provide a look into student and institutional achievement at the

national, sector, and the institutional levels (Kuh, 2003).These benchmarks are a window into

student performance at many levels. Engagement patterns of students are examined; active and

collaborative learning strategies are explored (Astin, 1984; Kuh, 2003). Questions on the NSSE

separately assess how much coursework emphasizes analysis, memorization, synthesis, and

application (NSSE, 2010). Answers are given for what different colleges and universities expect

in terms of homework, reading and writing, coursework, and academic responsibilities. NSSE

results can raise challenging questions and expose problematic facts, one of which is grade

inflation. Record numbers of high school seniors are graduating from high school with an A

average, suggesting students are achieving higher grades while putting in less effort (Kuh, 2003).

Another area addressed is the frequency of participation in various forms of active and

collaborative learning.

Theoretical Framework

There is a plethora of literature to support that learning does not occur only through

academics. Interactions and social support are also known to enhance information retention and

are essential components of learning. They continue to contribute to learning during the lifetime

of the individual (Meltzoff, Kuhl, Movellan, & Sejnowski, 2009). Social learning (Schusler,

Decker, & Pfeffer, 2003) has been defined as "learning that occurs when people engage one

another, sharing diverse perspectives and experiences to develop a common framework of

understanding and basis for joint action" (p. 311). Nursing education has used social learning

theory in both clinical and didactic portions of their programs.

One of the original researchers in higher education who proposed a holistic model for

using undergraduate outcomes was Alexander W. Astin (Bird, Anderson, Anaya, & Moore,

2005). Astin's conceptual model consisted of three basic components: input-environment-

outcome (I-E-O). These concepts were interrelated and the purpose of the model was to assess

the impact of various environmental experiences by investigating whether students mature or

change differently under changeable environmental circumstances (Astin, 1993; Bird et al., 2005).

Astin (1993) extensively researched student involvement. A highly involved student was one who devoted considerable energy into studying, showed active participation in student organizations, spent considerable energy studying, and interacted frequently with students and faculty members (Astin, 1993). His belief was that students remaining in college were linked to factors associated with involvement, whereas those factors that contributed to the students' dismissal implied a lack of involvement. One of the most surprising factors that resulted in retention was holding a part-time job on campus. Whereas it may seem that employment would take time and energy away from academic pursuits, part-time employment on campus actually facilitated retention. On a subtle level, relying on the college for income can result in a greater sense of college attachment.

Residing on campus increased the student's chances of persisting and of acquiring a graduate or professional degree (Astin, 1993), Commuters were less likely to achieve in extracurricular areas such as leadership and athletics and to voice satisfaction with the experience of undergraduate studies (Astin, 1993). This satisfaction is particularly true of student friendships, institutional reputation, social life, and faculty student relations (Astin, 1993). Frequent interaction with faculty was highly associated with student satisfaction more than any other institutional or student characteristic (Astin, 1993). Those who frequently interact with faculty members were more likely to express satisfaction with all areas of their college experience (Astin, 1993). This finding outranks administration, student friendships, course variety, and the overall intellectual environment (Astin, 1993). It was not surprising then for students to find strongly student-oriented faculty in a private, four-year university and a strongly

research-oriented faculty in a public institution (Astin, 1993). Astin (1993) posited when colleges

put research first, it pays a heavy institutional price.

Astin (1993) argued his I-E-O elements as the following: Inputs (I) were the students'

characteristics upon entering the program. Examples were socioeconomics, race, and gender.

Environment (E) represented all educational experiences that enhance and influence the student.

Outputs (O) were characteristics that result from the interactions of the inputs and the

environment. Because Astin found that peer-to peer interactions contributed considerably to

academic prosperity, enhanced self-esteem, and critical thinking skills, he also attested that

students' behavioral development and mental and cognitive development was greatly influenced

by peer relationships. Astin saw in his theory elements of the Freudian notion of cathexis (the

investment of psychological energy) and postulated that students discover by becoming involved.

Thus, the student played a central role in determining the extent and nature of academic

development according to the degree of involvement or effort with the resources provided by the

institution (Parscarella & Terenzini, 1991).

The I-E-O model is an approach of looking at cause and effect (Bird et al., 2005). This

model took into consideration what happened between the input and the outcome to more

accurately determine causality between variables. The model was formulated to yield assessment

results that will simultaneously (a) yield maximum information on the possible causal

connections between various educational modalities and educational outcomes and (b) minimize

the chances that one's causal inferences will be erroneous. Theoretically, the I-E-O design,

corrected or adjusted for input or differences (e.g., differences in involvement, student

motivation, ability) in order to obtain a less-biased estimate of the comparative effects of

dissimilar environments or outcomes. Because the instrument was designed to control for the

non-random assignment of students (inputs) to programs (environments)—in other words, to control for variables that may influence outcomes—the model was of particular use for assessments (Bird et al., 2005).

Jean Lave is a social anthropologist who emphasized situated learning in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). By rethinking the notion of learning, treating it as an emerging property of whole persons' legitimate peripheral participation, this theory valued community of practice and asserted situated learning fosters a deeper and more varied understanding of knowledge. Lave's theory saw mind, history, culture, and the world as interrelated processes that connect each other. This belief held learning as neither subjective nor fully encompassed in social interaction and not separated from the social world.

Much of Lave's labor has been focused on the *reconceiving* of learners, learning, and the instructive institutions in terms of social practice (M. K. Smith, 2003). She posited that learning has no beginnings and endings, is more than the result of teaching, and is not separated from the rest of our activities. Her work with Etienne Wenger was instrumental in momentous innovations in practice within organizations and more recently within some schools (M. K. Smith, 2003). According to Lave and Wenger (1991), as individuals approach the study of learning as a situated process, learning is not bound by term of knowledge outcomes or acquisition. Learning was a process of participation and social engagement in a community of practice (Pella, 2011).

The fundamental premise made by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger was that communities of practice were everywhere from job, school, residence, or in individuals' municipal and leisure interests (Smith, 2003). In some groups, communities of practice may take a marginal role for a member, while in other groups, individuals may be at the core. Being alive as human beings means that humans are constantly engaged in the quest for enterprises of various kinds. Humans

exist from ensuring our physical survival to seeking pleasures. As individuals define these enterprises and engage in their pursuit together, we interact with each other and with the world. The result is learning.

Over time, this collective learning resulted in practices that reflect attendant social relations and the pursuit of enterprises (M. K. Smith, 2003). These practices are thus the property of a community of sorts and relations are fashioned over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise. Therefore, it made sense to identify these kinds of communities *communities of practice* (Wenger, 1998).

The characteristics of communities of practice often differ. Some have names while others do not (Smith, 2003). While some are quite ceremonial or formal in organization, others are informal or fluid. However, members are brought together while joining activities and by 'what they have learned through their mutual engagement in these activities' (Wenger, 1998). In this respect, a community of practice is unique from a community of interest or significance or a geographical community in that the community involves a shared practice.

According to Wenger (1998), a community of practice defines itself along three dimensions: what it is about—its *joint enterprise* as understood and continually renegotiated by its members, how it functions—mutual engagement that bind members together into a social entity, and what capability it has produced- the shared repertoire of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artifacts, vocabulary, styles, etc.) that members have developed over time.

A community of practice included much more than skill acquisition and technical knowledge. Members were involved in a set of relationships over a period of time and communities developed over concepts that matter to inhabitants (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). In addition, these communities shared a repertoire of ideas, commitments, and

recollections. Communities develop various resources as utensils, documents, tools, routines, vocabulary, and symbols that carry the accumulated knowledge of the population.

Learning Communities

Learning communities have been established as an effort to provide students with the social and academic support necessary for students to persist and become successful. Although they are not the same in every institution, each has its own theme and guiding parameters by which they attempt to establish relationships and avenues for student growth. Examples of names that have been used are learning community, living–learning community, living–learning program, residential program, and leadership learning community. Enhanced student success is the outcome of the formation of this environment.

Even though many variations and definitions of learning communities exist, there are some common academic and social features such as the same cohorts of students taking two or more classes together (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). This variation ensures that students see one another frequently and spend a substantial amount of time engaged in the same educational activities. When faculty members teaching the common courses structure assignments that require students to apply what they are studying to other courses and assignments, the experience of learning communities is even more powerful (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). When these common courses are taken collectively, these features reinforce the intellectual and social connections between students and help build a community surrounded by participants (Gabelnick et al., 1990).

Recently, living–learning communities have become as particular as students' tastes (Marchand, 2010). Residential suites and floors focused on Harry Potter and robotics were constructed alongside the mainstay "first-year experience" residence (Marchand, 2010). The increase in innovation was meant to retain upperclassmen on the campus by letting students who

live together share specific interests (Marchand, 2010). At Ball State University, students from all majors have the option to not only live in a newly renovated residence hall; they have a penthouse to encourage students to produce films and projects in emerging media (Ball State University, 2014). The University spent $60,000 in renovations to one of the University's main residence complexes by adding a green screen, video equipment, editing software, surround sound, and a high definition television (Marchand, 2010).

Living–learning communities have existed at the University of Vermont since 1973 (Marchand, 2010). There are 5,000 students who reside at the college and approximately 580 students lived in Vermont's living–learning communities. This university offered Harry Potter themed quarters that focus on social justice and was opened during the 2010-11 academic year. The structure of this living–learning community required that student leaders selected who they wanted to have live in their community

According to Lenning and Ebbers (1999), learning communities take four standardized forms:

1. Curricular learning communities are comprised of undergraduates who are co-enrolled in two or more courses (often from various disciplines) that are connected by a common subject.

2. Classroom learning communities maintain the classroom as the locus of community-building by featuring cooperative learning techniques and group process learning behaviors as integrated pedagogical methodologies.

3. Residential learning communities categorize on-campus living arrangements so that students taking two or more common courses reside in close proximity. This increases the opportunity for out-of-class interactions and supplementary learning opportunities.

4. Student-type learning communities are specially planned for targeted groups, such as academically underprepared students, historically underrepresented students, students with disabilities, honors students, or students with similar academic goals and interests, such as women in science, technology, engineering, and math.

Extending beyond the classroom, the majority of learning communities integrate active and collaborative learning behavior and encouraged involvement in complementary social and academic activities. In addition, students who were actively involved in various out-of-class activities were more likely to connect with an affinity group of peers; this was important for student retention, personal development, and success (Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

Historical Foundations

When using the title of living–learning community, three men are associated with this approach. These men were Alexander Meiklejohn, John Dewey, and Joseph Tussman. The following will expand on what these men individually contributed.

Alexander Meiklejohn

Numerous individuals gave Alexander Meiklejohn credit for being the founder of learning communities (Brower & Inkelas, 2010; B. L. Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnicke, 2004; Stassen, 2003; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). This man, who was well educated in philosophy, viewed higher education as the path to develop critical thinking and instigate social transformation. He alleged social change would open students' eyes to the world around them (Nelson, 2001). Meiklejohn envisioned college as an intellectual sanctuary and saw college as a haven for fostering ethics and intellectual capacities. He also thought college should not be just a mode for gainful employment. Meiklejohn believed the emerging structure of the research university was becoming antithetical to the task of preparing students for democratic citizenship

and lacked community (B. L. Smith, 2001). Meiklejohn was not exposed to racial integration in

the 1910s, so this man was futuristic when he addressed a desire to learn and not to focus on skin

color as a deterrent (Nelson, 2001).

While at the University of Wisconsin, as the chair of the philosophy department,

Meiklejohn initiated an experimental college of liberal arts (Nelson, 2001). The project was

based on professors as advisors and mentors who lectured and provided tutoring with voluntary

student attendance. It was the student who was allowed the opportunity to decide on the topics of

his/her written work. Meiklejohn believed the purpose of collective residence was to promote

intellectual growth, not merely gain employment. In doing so, this would also have contributed

to foster social and intellectual interaction (Nelson, 2001). The goal of his method was to inspire

learning while building a learning community. In addition, he did not want to sacrifice student

freedom. Though this program was a beloved concept and a favorite of the new president of the

University of Wisconsin, the program faltered and was abandoned after only five years of

implementation. Although it did not last long, the Experimental College had a profound impact

on its students and recent histories described it as a high point in the university's history, often

referring to it as "Camelot on the Lake" (Smith, 2001, para 6).

John Dewey

Another man associated with learning communities is John Dewey. Around the turn of

the 20th century, Dewey instituted lab schools because he believed present day learning

environments were not conducive to effective learning (Smith, 2001). According to Dewey

(1981), learning environments were products of both passive and active intricacies. Dewey

believed students must find meaning in education along with growth and reflection. While

Dewey was neither a progressive nor traditional educator, he chose to call himself a pragmatist

meaning he took a practical approach to learning and envisioned an environment that functioned

as a community (Bobilya & Akey, 2002). Lifelong lessons, according to Dewey, take place in

the classroom, and he supported cooperative learning rather than solitary work. Currently there is

a resurgence of interest in Dewey. His writing regarding the structure of classrooms and the ways

in which they do or do not reflect the way students learn resonates with contemporary research

on effective learning environments (Smith, 2001).

Joseph Tussman

Tussman was a former student of Meiklejohn's and was the impetus behind the 1970s

college transformation (Minkler, 2002). During the 1960s, Tussman founded an experimental

college at the University of California that was designed after Meiklejohn's school (Minkler,

2002). His publication of a book won national recognition. Sadly, his experimental college lasted

a mere 3 years due to the fact that it had limited student appeal, counterproductivity, and lack of

faculty cooperation (Minkler, 2002).

Mentoring and Living–Learning Benefits and Deterrents

What might be understood as worthy mentoring by one partnership in one circumstance

does not always apply to another partnership or circumstance (Hayes & Koro-Ljungberg, 2011).

One partnership may create synergy and transformation; another partnership may voice stasis

and resistance. Clarity about the relationship and the roles the participants might assume can

often be a catalyst for an effective relationship. Mentees who are perceived by their mentors as

being unforced, apathetic, untrustworthy, manipulative, resistant, or not capable of authentic

communication may prove to be obstacles in the alliance of productive mentorships. Serving the

needs of both parties may involve early identification and elimination of conflicts and barriers.

Promoting open negotiations may foster necessary growth and exploration (Hayes & Koro-Ljungberg, 2011).

Learning communities were not "silver bullets" (Zhao & Kuh, 2004, p. 21). There has been speculation on their effectiveness. Some students chafed at the consideration of cooperative learning responsibilities. In addition, some faculty found collaborating with other staff and faculty complicated (Tinto, 2003). While there is a sound theoretical framework on which learning communities are based and promising evidence from this and other studies, learning communities are complicated phenomena. More research needs to be undertaken in order to determine the features that work best and are more compelling than others (Pike, 2000).

It has been suggested that learning communities, in and of themselves, do not manufacture positive effects; rather, their effects are indirectly related. For instance, learning communities need to be augmented and enhanced regarding student involvement, which in turn will positively affect student success (Pike, 2000).

Attrition and the Link to Academic Failure

Evident factors in student attrition are cited as poor academics and students' lack of preparation. Gardner (2005) posited this claim when she addressed problems in nursing education. While a professor of nursing in California, Gardner studied the retention rate of her nursing program over a four-year period. During that time, a minority retention project was initiated. Even though the project got underway, 17 students left the program in the time period. It was concluded that 80% left because of academic reasons.

Last and Fulbrook (2003) conducted a two-phase Delphi study in the United Kingdom to understand factors leading to attrition. In Phase 1, the authors gathered six student nurses' (freshman to juniors) perceptions through the use of a focus group. Then, perceptual data were

gathered through one-on-one interviews with nine medical professionals and three educators. During Phase 2, 32 senior nursing students served as an expert panel and participated in a three-round Delphi study with a 75% consensus level. A questionnaire was developed from the initial-phase themes and was used during the three rounds. The results of the study cited academic failure as the main reason students leave nursing education.

Another study by Peterson (2009) confirmed the inability of students to master academic success. Academic success and its relationship to self-esteem, self-efficacy, and students' GPAs in a generic baccalaureate nursing program were all examined. Sixty-six students participated and data were collected using tools that measured self-esteem and self-efficacy. A comparison was made between first semester GPAs and student program admissions. This study concluded with 29 students failing their program at the end of the study. The attrition rate of the study was 43.9% (Peterson, 2009).

Summary

This chapter emphasized the importance of mentoring and the benefits and deterrents of the living–learning community. The NSSE benchmarks are listed and have been instrumental in examining retention strategies. Historical perspectives surrounding mentoring have been provided and have shown to be effective in academic success. Academic failure is often the reason for attrition in nursing. Social learning theories regarding Astin and Lave have been addressed in this section. Using the NSSE benchmarks framework provide the foundation for the use of Astin, Lave, and their theories.

Chapter 3 includes a detailed description of the research methodology used in these qualitative case studies and includes sections on the research design, sample population, data collection, interview questions, method appropriateness, and data analysis.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter describes the methodology that was used to research the differences in

participant perceptions of the effectiveness of a nursing living–learning community. The subjects

under observation were students who resided in a nursing living–learning community. An

attempt was made to interview those students who once lived in a living–learning community at

one time and, for whatever reason, decided to relocate. This chapter includes the statement of the

problem, the research questions, subquestions and hypothesis, the research methodology and

design, sampling procedures, coding, data collection, and ethical considerations. This study

utilized a qualitative research approach that used open-ended questions and searched for themes

among those surveyed.

Statement of the Problem

There are many significant factors that can either enhance or deter students' learning in

higher education. One of the factors involved is the type of residence in which the student lives.

Institutions are responding to the demand for educational improvement and have introduced

living–learning communities within an on-campus environment as one of those responses. Most

of the living–learning communities focus on promoting educational enhancement and bettering

outcomes for incoming freshmen students (Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007) as attrition is

often evidenced in the freshman year (Astin, 1993). Not only is attrition costly for the university, the student is often strapped with mounting debt and the burden of repaying money to an institution.

As institutions address attrition, they have the opportunity to promote greater academic support and engagement of the student, including nursing students. However, there is limited information as to how the student perceives the efficacy of the living–learning community living arrangement. This study attends to those perceptions and considers relevant implications for retention.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this research:

1. What influence has the living–learning community had on students' perceptions of their development and achievement?

2. What influence has mentoring within the living–learning community had on students' perceptions of their development and achievement?

3. What influence has the living–learning community and mentoring had on students' willingness to remain in or leave a program?

Research Design

Using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I employed a qualitative comparative case study research methodology for investigation of two living–learning communities at two public universities located in Indiana. Qualitative research uses interviews and coding to determine various themes and attitudes among those being studied (Krathwohl, 2009). In addition, qualitative data analysis uses primarily an inductive process, moving from specific data to general categories and patterns (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The process

through which qualitative researchers synthesize and make meaning from the data is referred to as inductive analysis. Inductive analysis allows more general themes and conclusions to emerge from data rather than being imposed prior to the study. Coding begins by identification of small elements of data that stand alone; codes can further be classified as segments and these divide the dataset. Some segments have more than one code (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). As McMillan and Schumacher (2010) note, it is essential to (a) highlight notes for future ease of coding; (b) look for themes and repeating events, routines, and concepts; (c) develop types of classification schemes of how people categorize others and things; and (d) test each code for completeness. Krathwohl (2009) pointed out that while the researcher does not want to get caught up in an unproductive track, leads should be followed to their full potential. As themes were considered, challenged, and reconsidered in light of the data, a reasonable explanation or theory for the effectiveness of the living–learning community was sought.

A case study is an in-depth analysis of a single entity and provides a choice of what to investigate (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Creswell (2008) referred to a case study as "an in-depth exploration of a bounded system (e.g., an activity, event, process, or individuals) based on extensive data collection" (p. 476). Two case studies were conducted and the results were compared. Multiple case studies enable the researcher to explore differences within and between cases. Replicating the findings across the cases was the goal. Because comparisons were drawn, it was essential that the cases were carefully chosen in order for the researcher to predict similar results across cases (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Research and Data Analysis Methodology

In order to determine positive and negative attitudes surrounding the living–learning community, a comparative case study using interviews was conducted. The sessions did include

questions surrounding retention and the use of mentoring. The participants voluntarily

participated in approximately one-hour interviews. Krathwohl (2009) suggested consulting the

literature of others who have studied the same phenomenon and exploring themes and

explanations. However, using this interviewing method for the study was appropriate because

limited data existed on students' attitudes on living–learning communities.

Often, qualitative research is written as a case study and case studies have their origins in

the medical and legal professions (Krathwohl, 2009). Case studies are bounded by a particular

individual, situation, program, institution, or time period. They are ideal for illustrating the

complexity of causation or are sometimes a step in a larger study where cases are combined in

support or an overall explanation. If the phenomenon under investigation is not bounded, it will

not be appropriately studied as a case study (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009). Case study research

is unique in the fact that it leads to different kinds of knowledge and is more concrete—it

resonates with the researcher's experience because it is illuminative and tangible. Case studies

are appropriate when the researcher wants to answer a descriptive question. Case studies can be

described as *heuristic* when the study goes beyond the readers' original knowledge and provides

the researcher with new insights into the way things are and describes relationships that exit

among participants in the study (Gay et al., 2009).

A case study methodology can inform professional practice or evidence-informed

decision making in both policy and clinical realms (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Rigorous qualitative

case studies allow researchers opportunities to describe or explore a phenomenon of interest. In

addition, this form of inquiry supports deconstruction and reconstruction of various types of

phenomena. Due to both the flexibility and rigor, case studies are valuable tools for health

science research (Baxter & Jack, 2008). According to Yin (2003), a case study design should be

considered when (a) the focus of the study is to answer "how" and "why" questions, (b) you cannot manipulate the behavior of those involved in the study, (c) you want to address contextual conditions because you believe they are relevant to the phenomenon under study, or (d) the boundaries between the context and the phenomenon are not clear.

Case study research excels at exploring an understanding of complex issues and adds strength to what was already known (Soy, 1997). This form of methodology emphasizes detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their relationships. Several critics of the case study have postulated that the study of a small number of cases offer no grounds for the establishment of reliability or generality of findings (Soy, 1997). Reports on case studies from many disciplines are widely available in the literature and researchers continue to use the case study research method with success in carefully planned and crafted studies of real-life situations, issues, and problems (Soy, 1997).

Several well-known case study researchers such as Stake, Yin, and Simons have written about case study research and suggested various techniques for the organization of data and successfully conditioning the study (Soy, 1997). These various researchers proposed six steps that should be used:

1. Determine and define the questions,

2. Select the cases and determine data gathering and analysis techniques,

3. Prepare to collect the data,

4. Collect data in the field,

5. Evaluate and analyze the data, and

6. Prepare the report.

In a qualitative research study, the researcher becomes the data collection instrument and the creator of the analytic process (Polit & Beck, 2004). It is an obligation to identify any personal or professional information that may have an effect on data analysis, collection, or data interpretation (Polit & Beck, 2004). Currently, what I see in my nursing classroom where I teach may bias my interpretation of data. Therefore, I used member checking to help reduce bias.

Member checking is basically what the name implies—it is an opportunity for members (subjects) to check (concur) particular aspects of the interpretation of the data they provided (Doyle, 2007; Merriam, 1998). In addition, member checking is often a "way of finding out whether the data analysis is congruent with the participants' experiences" (Curtin & Fossey, 2007, p. 92). Routinely, participants are given transcripts or portions from the narratives they contributed during the interview sessions and are asked to authenticate the accuracy of the transcript. Participants may be asked to clarify, edit, elaborate, and at times, delete their own words from the narratives (Carlson, 2010). Member checking can be performed as an individual procedure or can take place with more than one person at a time, such as a discussion with the researchers or in focus group settings (Carlson, 2010). To establish credibility, prior knowledge or experience with the problem chosen to study is paramount to the data collection process (Polit & Beck, 2004).

A strategy that also enhances data credibility is the use of multiple data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Sources may include but are not limited to archival records, documentation, interviews, physical artifacts, and direct observations. A database was used to improve the reliability of the case study while it enabled me to track and organize data sources including key documents, tabular materials, narratives, photographs, and audio files can be stored on a database for retrieval at a later date. The database organized the material according to source material, the

time and date of data collection, and provided search capability and storage (Baxter & Jack, 2008). I noted the description of the setting, described the structure of the two universities, included esthetic observations, and immersed myself in the surroundings. Description provided the reader with rich, depicted data.

The study consisted of the interviewer as the instrument. Interview questions were open-ended and recorded for approximately one hour. According to Krathwohl (2009), "the most basic process of analysis is coding" (p. 316). The use of coding allowed for interpretation. Even though there is no standard order to coding for analysis, most researchers complete analysis after they have collected their data. Data, including data related to literature collected at the site, contextual observations conducted at the site prior to interviews, and the interview data, were searched for counterintuitive and unexpected material. This qualitative data analysis involved the process of analyzing linguistic features, including looking for metaphors, connectors, and transitions (Krathwohl, 2009). Thoughts, behaviors, and experiences can often be expressed with the use of metaphors. Themes often emerge after the use of deducing what underlies different words. Historically, coding for simple projects was done with the physical manipulation of text. Although a software package designed for qualitative studies was not used, color coding was used as an initial analytical tool to identify categories of concepts. These data findings were considered through the lens of the NSSE framework (NSSE, 2010), Astin's (1993) I-E-O model, Lave and Wenger's (1991) notions of social learning, and Wenger's (1998) extensions to communities of practice. Member checking allowed the research participants to validate or dismiss any data that is not congruent with their thoughts. I contacted the participants after the data collection to verify whether what I had interpreted was an accurate description of their thoughts.

Role of the Researcher

My qualifications include over 21 years of nursing experience in psychiatric nursing and nine years of teaching experience in many facets of nursing education. Furthermore, having had a very supportive and caring teaching mentor may have an impact on the way I view mentorship. Mentoring in undergraduate programs was usually accomplished by being proactive and seeking out information from those ahead of me in course work. Realizing that not all individuals are proactive did enhance my ability to examine the data. Currently, I see students struggle without using all the resources provided. For example, the university at which I am employed provides supplemental instructors to conduct study sessions on a weekly basis. Recently, I learned that few students were using these resources.

It was my personal opinion that living–learning communities provide students with resources to succeed; thus, this may have influenced me. I can look back over my education as an undergraduate and wish I had been provided a living arrangement with others. Bracketing and explicating proved a helpful approach for controlling for personal bias, suppositions, ideas, or presumptions (Polit & Beck, 2004). Qualitative analysis was further supported through the use of field notes and analyzing audio recordings.

Population and Sampling Procedures

The research study was conducted at two Midwestern universities in the spring 2014 semester. The population consisted of individuals attending nursing school who reside in the living–learning communities or had resided at the living–learning communities at one time. These two universities were located in the Midwest and the data collection was between January and May of 2014. Therefore, this study provided me with perceptions that reflected a change of time in the living–learning communities. There were approximately 14 students interviewed.

Originally, I had hoped to recruit 15 participants from each university. All levels of baccalaureate and nondesignate students residing in the living–learning residence were asked to participate. This study was not limited to the length of stay or the amount of time that they had resided at the university. This study excluded those who had never resided in a living–learning community. Male and female students, at least 18 years of age but not older than 25 years of age, who were attending the study university were the target population. This population is known as the Millennial Generation or Generation Y (Jackson & Woolsey, 2009). Information regarding the millennials has been provided in the literature review. There were three available time slots for the students to participate and no more than five students were to be allowed to participate in a focus group at one time; this arrangement was best suited for focus group study. The sampling was also known as purposeful and fit well within the parameters for comparative case studies.

Field Testing of Questions

Prior to the research, a field test of the questions was conducted. Field testing questions is useful to define the problem and is a necessity for those with little qualitative research experience (Krathwohl, 2009). My field test consisted of approximately five individuals who resided at a southern Indiana university in September 2013. Interviews lasted for approximately one hour and were not recorded. I sent out a request to participate in the survey at the end of summer 2013. The survey was anonymous and questions were evaluated. I made certain that the substantive information that I obtained regarding living–learning communities was not included in the actual study. In addition, I asked the participants about any additional information they would like to share. By asking questions in an environment similar to that of the actual study, I received feedback from the participants about the questions and environment in which to conduct

interviews. My questions were modified based on the outcomes of the field test and I conducted the field questioning in a similar environment given feedback from the participants. I wanted my participants to feel comfortable and relaxed when answering the questions. They were eager to participate and took time to reflect on their thoughts. Once they got comfortable, which took about five minutes, I gathered their information and participants expanded on others' feelings. This group cohesiveness and free flowing thought confirmed to me that interviews would be best conducted in a group setting rather than individually.

Data Collection Procedure

After university Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I met with the representative from the two universities. I limited the study to the first 15 students from each university who signed up to be research participants and who met the age criteria established for the study. Participants were given a Walmart gift card for their participation and that information was included in a flyer prior to the study. The study was conducted in a room provided by each university that was close to the living–learning residence hall. An informed consent was provided prior to the students' participation in the study. Introduction of the researcher, purpose of the study, directions for being in the study, and information regarding confidentiality were explicitly outlined.

The two universities were visited prior to the data collection and I met with the individuals overseeing the living–learning community in order to secure any attending literature about the living–learning community and to understand the overall purposes and goals that the director may share. Overall, the purpose of the visit was to better understand the context of the living–learning environment in order to enhance my understanding and interpretation of participants' views. I was allowed to observe the general areas of the living–learning community

and I did. Because respondents listed the director in their interviews, this person was given a

pseudonym. I hired a CITI-trained transcriber after interviews were completed. Color coding was

used to help identify themes. Themes were linked to the literature review; this will compare and

contrast the results of the literature and hopefully, added a new dimension to the existing

theoretical and practical understanding of support systems and mentoring in the living–learning

community.

Ethical Considerations

After the defense of the project, application was made to Indiana State University for IRB

approval. Data were obtained via a secure video recording. All additional information was kept

confidential and not linked to any identification. Participants were provided information

concerning the data collection, researcher, voluntary participation, withdrawal from the study,

and confidentiality. I sent a letter introducing the project to each school in the study. Participants

were assured their participation was strictly voluntary and that they may withdraw from the

project at any time. The responses from students agreeing to be participants in the study were

coded with a number and only I knew the identity of the respondents. The information from the

subjects was separated by the university and no university was identified. All data were kept in a

locked file in the locked office of my home to maintain confidentiality. The responses from the

participants were collected so that opinions contained no identifying remarks and will be

destroyed after three years. Participants were given pseudonyms to be used in the transcription of

the data.

Summary

This chapter described the research study's design and methodology. What, if anything,

will mentoring be considered regarding students' perceptions to stay or leave a program or a

living–learning community? Does the living–learning community make a difference? In what way is there a difference? What could be improved or adjusted? Is mentoring superior to the residence hall as told by the inhabitants? These are questions that have not been previously asked or answered in a study. The sample and the research population were described along with the sampling procedure. Survey instrumentation regarding qualitative methods was addressed. The role of the researcher has been explained. Data collection and analysis were listed. A field test of questions was conducted prior to the full study. Field testing provided details that were surprising, rich, and specific. In conclusion, ethical considerations were acknowledged.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The present study was designed to gain understanding and perspectives of mentoring at

two living–learning communities. The subjects consisted of both men and women. Participants

all lived or had lived at two living–learning communities in Indiana. All subjects who

participated lived or had lived at the living–learning communities in the last four years. Chapter

4 includes the results of this research and the events leading up to the actual data recordings.

Textual descriptions in Chapter 4 show specific key words, patterns, and themes emerging

during the analysis of collected data.

Informational Session

Prior to the collection of the data, two informational sessions were conducted at the two

sites for the study. With assistance from two major university administrators, this step went

effortlessly and I was able to glean information regarding the atmosphere and the subjects. I will

begin to describe the atmosphere and the conditions of the informational sessions. Following

describes the events leading up to the informational session with Cohort 1 students.

During the harsh winter, I set out to conduct my first informational session on

Wednesday, January 23, 2014. The temperature was zero and the wind was intense. I arrived at

the university around 11:00 in the morning and obtained a map as to see where I was going. This

was a very large university with close to 40,000 students attending. The university, having been

in existence for over 100 years, is not known as an institution serving first-generation students as the majority of their population. A well-manicured campus, the buildings have massive art located on the outside of several of them. The mix of students that I viewed in my time on the campus was eclectic and several were international students. I noted that the living–learning community was not close to the nursing school, but there was bus service provided to the students. Walking in good weather may take approximately 20 minutes to get to the school of nursing from the living–learning community.

Parking was challenging but after navigating my way, the informational recruitment session was held in the school of nursing. This school was brick and had been in existence for approximately 50 years. On display were pictures of former faculty and graduates of nursing; this provided a historic reflection and I appreciated viewing past uniforms. The building, although not large, had three levels and state-of-the-art classrooms with seats that swivel easily to enable grouped activities. Prior to the informational session, I viewed the laboratory in the basement and was very impressed with their on-site simulation rooms. Simulators provided a wide array of scenarios from a birthing mom to a neonate. In the evening, prior to the session, I saw students working with others going over what looked like study material and perhaps test-out procedures. It was quiet in the building during the evening, yet many of the administration were still busy working in their offices. All of the administrators in the building were very welcoming and excited that they could assist with me with my research.

Although I had hoped many would attend, only two women attended the informational session and the learning resource educator was also in the session. I explained my research purpose, question, and plan to the students and allowed them time to question and sign the informed consent forms in a manner that maintained confidentiality. Subsequently, I took all

IRB materials with me to the research sites. Confidentiality was stressed and the subjects

appeared excited to participate. Not only did I explain what and why this was being done, I was

enthusiastic about what I would find from my interviews at this university. We ate pizza and had

soft drinks; this allowed me to begin establishing rapport with the individuals even though, at

that time, I was not aware of whether these individuals would be participating in the study. This

session lasted for no more than 45 minutes. It was explained to me that there was an individual

who could not attend the informational session but did want to participate. Later, I did contact

that student to inform her of the study, to share and explain the informed consent, and to inform

her of the time of the data collection. She was agreeable to participate in the research and sent

me the consent via the mail to participate. Thus, the cadre of participants for Cohort 1 was

established.

Next, I traveled to the Cohort 2 university allowing me to conduct my research in order to

offer the informational session at that site. This date was January 30, 2014, and it happened to be

37 degrees. The university population was much smaller than the previous university with

approximately 10,000 attendees. It is a newer university and has been around for less than fifty

years. The buildings were modern with classroom buildings in the middle of the campus and

housing located on the outskirts. Navigating this university was much easier due to the fact that it

is a much smaller campus. I immediately found the building housing the college of nursing and

other health care-related programs.

When I arrived, I quickly met the collaborating university administrator and she proudly

showed me the college's simulation center. She was the director of the learning resource center

and pleased to show me the facility. I saw two faculty and they were busy operating the

equipment. Students were quietly working that day on computer programs and the noise level

was low. Upon my introduction, I allowed the administrator to review my questions and I thanked her for allowing me to conduct my research at the institution.

This situation was different from the previous university in the fact that my informational session was conducted in the living–learning community. In the first scenario, I conducted the informational session at the school of nursing. At this site, I conducted my informational session at the living–learning community and there was no administrator present. After spending approximately an hour with my host, I quickly found the nursing living–learning community. It was somewhat closer to the school but still would provide a 15 minute walk in good weather. This campus also provided transportation for their students.

Immediately after entering the living–learning community, I began taking notes. I saw posters of nursing related slogans like "nurses call the shots." The living–learning community was relatively new and well kept. I wandered to the basement and marveled that it provided a view of the woods. The living–learning community was very close to woods and nature but you would only know this from the view in the back of the building. The study room I sat in prior to the informational session was in the basement; it had a lot of sunlight and, being away from the campus, seemed peaceful on that day. No one was in the study room but later I was able to see what the residential rooms looked like at the living–learning community. They appeared large with two bedrooms on each side of a lounge area. Two were assigned to a bedroom. Both of the bedrooms have bathrooms and this is a very important fact in living–learning community housing; many remarked they do not like sharing a bathroom with others (college student, personal communication, January 30, 2014). Adjoining the rooms was a television room or what could be used as a lounge area. Thus, the rooms are like mini-apartments. The living–learning community had a nursing newspaper on the counter in the main lobby, but other than that, there

were minimal artifacts. I did view all the various residential assistants' names on the wall. Once again, the setting was not over stimulating and the areas were all clean and well-kept like the other university.

At 6:30 in the evening was when the informational session was conducted. The session was held in the multipurpose room of the living–learning community. It was a large room with tables, a coffee table, and two full-sized couches. The room had a piano and a refrigerator as well. The ceiling was vaulted. There were two doors to the room and the room housed a projector and several outlets for presenters.

I was concerned that I would not have a good response rate because of the weather, but the concern was for naught. I had 11 students come to my session and after completing the same recruitment procedure with these subjects as with Cohort 1, I left the room and gave them time to complete the informed consent forms. All 11 decided to participate in the study; thus, Cohort 2 was established. Like the others, the students had pizza and soft drinks and went on to their other activities after an hour. During the informational session, several asked questions about nursing in general and I did my best to give them the answers that seemed to satisfy them. For example, one asked about what a psychiatric nurse does and I conveyed to them my past experience in the field. I also shared how psychiatric nurse practitioners were greatly needed due to the lack of individuals going into psychiatry.

During the session we also had time for other informal sharing. Most of the students voiced they were the first in their families to attend college; several said their parents were very proud of them and they felt supported at home. Many said they explored the college before deciding to attend. Only a few said they looked into the college due to the existence of having a living–learning community.

Data Collection Review

The data collection consisted of three individuals from Cohort 1 and 11 individuals from Cohort 2. The three subjects in Cohort 1 were women and the 11 subjects in Cohort 2 consisted of seven women and four men. Despite my wish to conduct interviews with up to 30 subjects, this was the ultimate outcome with time and cost limiting my study. From Cohort 1, none of the three students were still residing in the living–learning community. In Cohort 2, all students were still residing in the living–learning community. To protect the identity of each participant, pseudonyms were utilized. This was expedited by having the subjects pick their pseudonyms prior to data collection. All the participants brought assorted viewpoints and represented diverse backgrounds, which enhanced and enriched the study. Cohort 1 consisted of three women. Their names were Ivy Churchill, Peyton Sawyer, and Reece Weatherspoon. These women were no longer living at the living–learning community but they were able to share vivid recollections of their time in the living–learning community. These women were almost finished with the nursing program

Cohort 2 consisted of both men and women and was divided into three groups. The first group consisted of five participants with the names Katniss Everdeen, Loren Conrad, Ron Burgundy, Robert Bush, and Mylee Cyrus. The second group of Cohort 2 consisted of two participants with the names Emma Watson and Bill Cosby. The third group in Cohort 2 consisted of four participants with the names Erica Snow, Jessica Simpson, Trevor Smith, and Elizabeth Carter. These individuals all presently lived in the living–learning community and had become friends. Because the composite of Cohorts 1 and 2 represented women and men who were currently living in the living–learning community or had previously lived in the living–learning community, rich and diverse perspectives provided data for this study.

The data collection for Cohort 1 was done with an audio recorder in the school of nursing. Although it was hoped that interviews were going to be done at the living–learning community, arrangements were made by the administrators to do them in the evening in a room provided by the school. The room was small but allowed for intimacy and thoughts were free flowing. Data collection was completed on February 20, 2014.

Findings

Cohort 1

The research questions guided the type of data intended for collection and restricted the interpretation of the data while the theoretical underpinnings of Lave and Astin provided the lens from which to view the findings (Astin, 1993; Creswell, 2008; Lave & Wenger, 1991). The NSSE benchmarks will also be addressed during the information presented in Chapter 5. The following were the questions with the use of pseudonyms. These responses were separated according to the university.

The first visit consisted of the exploration of the research-intensive university. I frequented the living–learning community on two occasions that day. One was prior to the data collection and the other after the collection was completed. I wanted to obtain a feel for the milieu and establish the culture of the surroundings. What I found was an enormously large environment with many stories. This building looked dated, but on the inside, it had been updated and painted a contemporary color. The building was so large it housed an inside grille that was contracted out by another establishment. Like the other living–learning community, there were photographs along the wall displaying the resident assistants (RAs) and various paintings of people who were prominent at the time of the building construction. This building was very quiet during the day; several rooms with windows were available but unoccupied. I

wandered to the basement. The basement consisted of a gigantic room with a baby grand piano,

foosball table, pool table, several tables and chairs, and a handful of students with computers and

earphones. I felt I was hardly noticed because those present did not bother to look up; they

continued to work on their laptops. All washers and dryers were located in an area downstairs

along with mailbox slots. On the main level, there were barely any magazines, handouts, or

artifacts.

Upon examination, I continued my journey to the school of nursing where I then prepared

for my interview. Once again, I had purchased pizza and soft drinks and given them gift bags

with chocolate inside and a gift certificate. I was pleased to see the administrator meet me and

she allowed me to use a small room at the school. This room, although small, was comfortable

and we had a round table to discuss what would happen and conclude the recording. The

following is the beginning of the one hour long interview.

Research question 1. The first research question asked, "What influence has the living–

learning community had on students' perceptions of their development and achievement?" The

majority voiced that they felt glad they had participated in a living–learning community. The

subquestion "Describe what you appreciate about the living–learning community. What have you

found helpful?" elicited more of a specific response. Responses were that students could come to

the university and live with others who could relate or work on things together with. One student,

Reece Weatherspoon, used the phrase "the LLC made it easier to cope." Peyton Sawyer offered,

> I've appreciated the friend, knowing people and getting to know other nurses and living
>
> with them and doing homework. Cuz I'm from out of state so it was really helpful and
>
> not knowing anyone coming here that again, I would be living with other people that I
>
> could go to for help and whatnot. Then I also appreciated the fact that our resident

assistant was also a nursing student, so that was really helpful to have her guidance and

she knows what we were going through so she was able to help us a lot.

Peyton Sawyer did not come here for the living–learning community. She came because of the

direct admit program. This program allows students to be directly admitted into the nursing

program without a wait list or applying at a later date. Some universities do not directly admit

into the nursing program. Peyton mentioned the RA and how she valued the RA being a nursing

student. This student had a brother who had lived in an living–learning community and

encouraged her to as well. Ivy Churchill added,

> I think the biggest thing I appreciated the most was just coming to [institution] and
>
> knowing that I would be living with other nursing students. A lot of kids that went to my
>
> high school came to [institution] but they weren't my super close friends, so it was nice
>
> to know that I would be living with people who I could go to class with and work on
>
> homework with and things like that.

As I reviewed the commentary from participants in Cohort 1, I identified key words and

phrases that helped me categorize a theme among the responses from the participants. Those key

words and phrases included "living with others who can relate," "working together," "cope,"

"get help," and "guidance." These yielded a theme of *mutual support*. It appeared that students

perceived that the living–learning community creates the conditions to allow participants to build

mutual support among peers as it allows students to build relationships with those who

understand on a first-hand basis what it is to be a nursing major. Hence, being empathetic was

seen as important to the students. The proximity (living with other majors) allows for peers to

work together and get guidance from other peers who have been in the program longer. This

mutual support allows peers a real as well as a perceived means for coping with the pressures of

the major. It is further noted that the topic of the *resident assistant* was first introduced in this section of questions and this remained a thread throughout most of the study. One participant "really appreciated" the fact that the RA was a nursing student.

When asked the subquestion "Is there any aspect of the living–learning community that you did not find helpful, and if so, please describe what would not be helpful? If so, please describe that aspect," two of the three cohort participants remarked they would like all nursing students to reside on the same floor; however, this did not seem to be a problem because some nursing students had created close bonds with other majors. An example of this was shared by Peyton Sawyer:

> I really don't think that there were any negatives that I can think of, cuz I mean, it was nice to live around everybody. There were people that weren't nursing students on the floor. My roommate was one of them, but I'm the maid of honor in her wedding now, so that turned out well [laughter].

Ivy Churchill had a similar experience:

> My original roommate was in nursing, but she had to leave for financial reasons. Then even though I was still living in the nursing learning community, I had to live with an international student, cuz that had to replace her spot. I didn't necessarily get the benefit of having a nursing roommate because my original nursing roommate had to move out, but it wasn't extremely detrimental at all.

At this university, if the roommate is a nurse, the student may not be placed with another nurse should the original roommate move out or transfer. This particular living–learning community houses over 700 students and many of the students on the residence hall floor are not nurses.

Key words or phrases I identified associated with this subquestion included "rooming with nursing students" and "close bonds." The theme emerging from this subquestion, *social dynamics*, was related to the unexplained social dynamics of the living–learning community. Although it would be preferred or expected by the participants that all students be nurses on the living–learning community floor, it was not necessarily a disadvantage if this was not the case. Both of these individuals had roommates who were not nursing students and they offered no negatives found at the living–learning community. Rather than having an educational advantage, these individuals suggested a social connection was also important. This along with the previously identified theme of *mutual support* implied that there are several dynamics working together in the living–learning community residence hall.

The next subquestion was "What might need to be changed or modified to make the community more helpful?" Ivy Churchill responded,

> I think one thing that would make it a little more helpful is if more people in the nursing learning community actually decided to live in the nursing learning community. We had people who were in it with us that didn't live with us. I feel that maybe we didn't get the full benefit of knowing everyone as well in the nursing learning community. Maybe they felt a little outcast as they were coming to class and things with us, but at the end of the day they weren't coming home and living in the residence hall with us.

Peyton Sawyer agreed, saying, "I would agree with what Ivy said in that it would help if everyone lived together, but I can't think of anything else that I would improve."

Peyton Sawyer said,

> The only thing that I can think of is to make it bigger, cuz there were only 20 of us, and our class started off as a class of 100 nursing students that got accepted. I think

expanding it a little bit might be more helpful. There were I think 50 girls on our floor

and only 20 of us were nurses. Maybe have 30 or 40 people living together, just cuz it

builds a network of people.

Ivy Churchill commented,

Yeah, we can get an exact number for you later [laughter]. What was I going to say?

Yeah, so there were 14 of us who actually lived there. Maybe 20, 25 of us in the learning

community and then everyone else were off campus, living in other dorms, living in

sororities, whatever. If we had more people actually at [residence hall], we could have

just connected more, met more people, made more friends.

This commentary produced key words and phrases such as "everyone living in the

nursing learning community", "benefit of knowing everyone," "outcast," "network," "more

people," and "more friends." These key words and phrases suggest another theme related to the

dynamic of the living–learning community —the theme of *networking*. The students appreciated

the ability to relate to others in their major and felt that it would be helpful for the living–

learning community to grow in ways that promote the expansion of networking among nursing

students. Given the earlier identified theme of mutual support it may be surmised that this

appreciation extends to the fact that an expansion of networking possibilities provides

mechanisms within which students can seek support, both academic and social, from peers. Due

to one participant's response, one may discern that the program is stressful and coping strategies

are necessary. Student responses suggested that living together would be more beneficial than

just taking classes together. The women also felt that, with 50 residents on the floor, it would be

more beneficial for a larger percentage of the residents to be nurses. At their time of residency,

the participants stated that only 20 of those 50 residents were nurses. These students also voiced

that nursing students had the opportunity to live in other residence halls and they suggested additional nurses living at the living–learning community would improve cohesion. In addition, it was mentioned that nursing student who did not reside with the others may feel as "outcasts." Participants thought that more students together would produce a larger, and hopefully, stronger network.

The next subquestion was "How has the living–learning community assisted you or failed to assist you with your academic growth?" Ivy Churchill offered,

I think initially it helped me with academic growth just because I had people to study with, people to collaborate with, and [with whom I] bounced ideas off of and asked questions. I think I came to [university name] pretty determined to succeed, so I don't know how much of a role it played, but it certainly wasn't detrimental at all. I think, I mean the community was over freshman year, so I don't know that the effects of that have really lasted the three years, sophomore, junior, and senior year, but it was helpful laying a solid foundation.

Peyton Sawyer said,

I would agree with what Ivy said. I mean, it was a nice foundation and it was nice to have for those initial college classes, you didn't know what to expect and then having everybody else around you that was willing to support you was really nice to have. As far as continuity over the past three years, as Ivy was saying . . . I mean I talked to the ones that are in my semester, but since we have split semesters, you don't really see the other people as much. I mean I think it helped a lot freshman year just to have that cohesive group.

Peyton went on to say,

> We had anatomy and chemistry and stuff freshman year. It was nice to have everybody
>
> on board with that and help each other study with that." Because these students took
>
> challenging core subjects such as anatomy and chemistry in the first year, they shared
>
> clever things that the resident assistant did, such as putting up anatomy charts by the
>
> bathroom or charts of lab values on the wall.

Peyton Sawyer said, "Our RA would put charts and whatnot on wrapping paper and tape 'em by
the bathroom cuz you always had to walk by it when you went by the bathroom." Peyton went
on to add,

> She would put charts and stuff about for if we were studying for anatomy, she'd put
>
> charts on wrapping paper, on the back, on the white side, and then she'd post 'em up by
>
> the bathroom cuz then you'd always have to walk past it. She did that a couple times.

Ivy Churchill remarked,

> I think just the network of people that I met living in the nursing learning community.
>
> Actually, I'm still friends with a lot of them. I don't know, it's nice to keep in touch. This
>
> summer I had an internship in St. Louis, and that's where Kristen is from. We would
>
> sometimes text back and forth joking about St. Louis things. I don't know. That's not
>
> really academic growth but it was just nice to network and I don't know. It was cool.

Reece Weatherspoon remarked, "I have the same class load as others. I had study groups at
[name] and this helped."

Key words and phrases such as "collaboration," "determination," "cohesion," "RA," and
"network" were identified in this section of questioning which validated the *foundation* theme.
As I considered these together in light of the other themes associated with the dynamic of the

living–learning community, I determined the theme revealed relates to the foundation the living–learning community provides for student socialization into the program, for matriculation through the program, and as a basis for lifelong associations. Students felt they needed a support system or a strong security base. Determination, collaboration, and laying a foundation imply having a solid support system to build on and to bolster needed fortitude to continue when times get challenging. Students valued being sustained. Participants voiced the significance of cohesion.

The importance of the RA was reinforced in students' comments. The RA did creative things to assist in absorption of new information. This theme of the *importance of the RA* was woven into many of the responses. The phrase "still friends" takes on a powerful meaning as a possibility nursing students will be friends for years to come. This may produce relationships of lifelong associations. The continuation of a relationship is mentioned as a benefit. This was formed due to living with others who have a common goal. Friends were not necessarily the RA but acquaintances from living in the living–learning community. Friends and "still friends" yield a theme of *strong relationships* that may last after the college experience. Laying a foundation was a key phrase for security, solidarity, and friends were very important to this aggregate. The importance of relationships evolved and the value of belonging emerged. One student mentioned belonging when she suggested some not living in the living–learning community may feel left out. She used the term "outcast." Being members of a unique group took on special meaning.

Research question 2. The second research question asked, "What influence has mentoring within the living–learning community had on students' perceptions of their development and achievement?" The subquestion asked, "What is your understanding of mentoring?" Participants voiced their definition in terms of a mentor as a person and what that

person does rather than offering the definition in more academic terms. The students indicated that a mentor is someone who helps both for good and bad times with key words like "helps" and "sets an example" exemplifying the central notions. Peyton Sawyer added,

> To me a mentor is someone who helps someone either at their level or below or even above to understand what they're going through, what resources are available and how your there for them no matter that. Whether it's passing or failing, you're always gonna be there to help 'em out and do whatever you can to help them further and better themselves.

Ivy Churchill stated, "I would say a mentor walks alongside the person they're mentoring. This helps them accomplish whatever mentoring task they're working on. Sets an example about whatever it is they're trying to pass on to their mentee." Reece Weatherspoon remarked, "Someone who helps you when you are overwhelmed or confused. Someone to give advice."

This section of commentary produced key words like "helps" and the phrase "sets an example." Participants looked to their mentor to give advice and to act as a role model. From these key words and phrases I came to understand that the mentor is envisioned by these students as one who provides an *unconditional positive regard;* thus, the theme was established. Mentors are there for students no matter what and mentors assist with the betterment of the individual mentee. According to these women, the mentor may or may not be at their level.

The following subquestion substantiated this belief. The subquestion asked for students to "Please describe a time when you were mentored in the living–learning community." "What did you find helpful?" "How did this help you do better as a student?" Several said that the RA played a pivotal role in student success. Peyton Sawyer said,

I guess for me, mentoring, the RA that we had, played a huge role in just helping, cuz since I was from out of state, she really helped me acclimate myself and make sure that I was here. Cuz I had family and relationships, to say the least, back home that I would have mental breakdowns and I knew she was always there and she'd always help me along. She was just a great asset to have on the unit, not on the unit, I've been in the hospital too much on the floor.

Peyton conveyed this individual still keeps in touch and that she will be living and working in the same city as her former RA. Peyton said, "Yeah, it's a relationship that's carried over throughout the years."

One individual spoke of a faculty advisor who served as her mentor. Ivy Churchill indicated that,

we did have a faculty advisor for our learning community, and I would say she was a mentor. She was our instructor for our dynamics of nursing class. I think we learned a lot from her just like what is nursing? I think it was crazy. Some of us came into nursing school not really even knowing what nurses were. Just knowing that we wanted to do it [laughter]. She taught us what nursing was and what makes a good nurse and just things like that.

Peyton Sawyer quipped,

I think similar to what Ivy said earlier is that people don't come to [name] if you're not internally motivated at some point or by something in your life. I think that the learning community just enhanced that and made that come out. Cuz just for example, when I came here, I knew I wanted to get involved in stuff, but I wasn't really sure quite what I wanted to do, and I found my way, I guess, found my niche that I have stuck with the past

three, four years, whatever you wanna say. I think just having that internal motivation and just really excelling in that is really important, and the learning community definitely helped with that.

Reece Weatherspoon remarked, "My professors have been very helpful. They are understanding and say "they have been there. They are open and understanding and I did appreciate them."

The commentary associated with these subquestions produced a key word "RA" and reinforced the theme of the *importance of the RA*. The RA provided mentoring and gave emotional support at a time when students were vulnerable. This was evidenced by having students not living around their families. In addition, this supplemented the theme of strong relationships via the lifelong friend because the relationship of the participant and the RA has continued. The faculty advisor was considered a mentor and was the one who taught them about the profession into which they were going. Ironically, many come into nursing without knowing the totality of the profession. One participant mentioned faculty and an appreciation of her professors.

Another theme was introduced within the conversation of mentoring, and that was related to having the self-determination or internal motivation to persist. Interestingly, the student identified the role the living–learning community played in helping maintain determination. This would seem to enhance the emerging construct surrounding the dynamic of the living–learning community.

Along the lines of the subquestion regarding doing better as an individual or professional, the questions were asked, "How did this help you as a student?" "How did this help you develop as an individual and/or professional?" Ivy Churchill voiced,

I think one big thing that our faculty mentor did in class was she referred to all of us as colleagues. From day one, she treated us like professional nurses, and if you were participating in class and whatever, she would say, "Listen to your colleagues." We weren't little freshman who didn't know anything. We were treated as professional nurses from day one.

This explanation suggested students appreciated being thought of as "colleagues" and "professionals." These individuals had a desire to do well and self-determination from the beginning. The implication is that even beginning students would like to feel valued and to be treated as if they mattered. This insight enhances understanding of an earlier identified theme, unconditional positive regard, through consideration of respect.

The other subquestion addressed mentoring. "Was there any aspect to the mentoring that you did not find helpful? And, what could be done to make it better? If so, please describe that aspect. What might need to be changed or modified to make the mentoring more helpful?" None commented that there was a time mentoring was not helpful. Ivy Churchill posited, "I really don't think so. I don't think there's anything that was not helpful." Peyton Sawyer concurred, "I would agree. I don't think there's anything that I would change or do different with the whole learning community." This group suggested that modifications could be having another person other than an RA to go to for mentoring, perhaps someone who has lived at the living–learning community in the past. This might be accomplished by teaming up with another student no longer living at the living–learning community. Peyton Sawyer added,

I think maybe to have a couple of people you can go to aside from just our RA and then the faculty professor, if there were any upper classmen that wanted to do it as well. I mean, we have –they have a program within the school that's specifically for freshmen.

It's a mentor/mentee program that all freshman somewhat have to do, I guess. Just to

continue that and maybe to have a little bit better participation within the learning

community. Someone-maybe another upperclassmen that's lived in it, that can come back

and help them out or [student stopped speaking].

Ivy Churchill chimed in:

I would agree with what Peyton said. I would also say that even though our RA was a

nursing student, it was-I don't know how intentional it was that she was a nursing

student. The school nursing is not in charge of hiring the RAs. The resident Res. Life is in

charge of that, so I don't know how intentional that was. It certainly benefitted us, but I

don't necessarily think that every single LLC has had a nurse as an RA.

Reece Weatherspoon added, "My RA was a nurse but she was not around. She was not here

often. I thought she was not personally involved like she could have been."

This subgroup of questions suggested nothing should be changed regarding mentoring

itself. The only suggestion was that an additional person or persons would be helpful; perhaps

more upperclassmen sharing ideas and strategies for success. Having the RA and the faculty

professor may not be enough support according to the students. Thus, "more participation" was

a key word. Students felt it was important that the RA also be a nurse. At this particular

university, the school of nursing does not hire the RAs and that was added to the conversation.

One participant felt her mentor was not personally invested. This remark suggests that not only

being a nurse is important, it is vital to be invested in others' success, especially if one takes on

the role of the RA. Thus, another theme was introduced—the vital importance of mentors being

invested in others' success. There were no participants that found the mentoring experience not

helpful.

The next subquestion regarded the seeking out of a mentor, "If you have not been mentored would you ask to be mentored if you felt it would benefit you?" Unanimously, all the individuals said if they had not been mentored they would not have asked. I was very surprised by this response. Ivy Churchill stated,

> I don't know. I feel mentoring, if you do it right, is a labor and time-intensive thing, and I don't necessarily know that I would want to ask someone of that, just because it is expecting a lot of them. I think if I was in some desperate situation maybe I would, but I think just because I would like to have a mentor, doesn't necessarily mean I would ask for one, if that makes sense.

Peyton Sawyer agreed,

> I feel if it was something that was already provided to you, then no. I'm in agreement with Ivy whereas if you had to ask someone for that role and to do that duty, I think like she said, that's a lot to ask of someone. Then again, I feel nursing students are willing to help younger or underclassmen and whatnot. I don't think they wouldn't completely just be, "No, I'm not doing it." I don't think they'd completely shut you out.

These women would not ask to be mentored if one had not been provided. One student, Reece Weatherspoon, said, "I would find it out for myself."

This explanation suggested that participants would not ask to be mentored if they had not been. While one participant stated, "I don't think they'd completely shut you out," asking to be mentored was not seen as a probability. Imposing on others was implied by one participant when she stated, "it would be a lot to ask of someone."

Key words were "helps" and "sets an example" which one student attributed to the RA. The theme of a *role model* is implied. The importance of the RA is a theme throughout much of

the interview. This theme of the involvement of the RA was according to one individual "huge" in helping her navigate the college transition. Mentoring was done at this university but students would not seek it out if it were not provided. Faculty served as mentors when they referred to the students as "colleagues" and treated them respectfully as the students saw it. This was a very determined group of women who had been groomed for success in college. One said they were "internally motivated" to excel. Thus, this is a theme of *self-determination*. None of these students found mentoring not helpful. Most students did not list something they would change in this category. Ironically, all the women agreed they would not ask to be mentored and I thought this odd as so much data supports mentoring as beneficial to learning. Asking to be mentored was seen as a weakness and this cohort did not want to be seen as dependent.

Research question 3. The last group of questions addressed the willingness to remain or leave a program. Specifically, the research question asked, "What influence has the living–learning community and mentoring had on students' willingness to remain in or leave a program?" The first subquestion was "If you have found the living–learning community helpful, how has it assisted you to remain in the nursing program?" A key word *venting* emerged and that the students felt others at the living–learning community allowed them to them *vent* at times. Ivy Churchill said,

> I definitely found it helpful. I don't know that I would ever leave the nursing program, but the friends I have made in the learning community have made it easier to endure the program [laughter] and just cope with it. I don't know, I feel you have, when you lived in a nursing learning community, you just had people to vent to about the frustration sometimes, and I think that's continued as time has passed.

Peyton Sawyer agreed, "Like Ivy said, it was nice to have somebody to *vent* to that actually

knew what you were going through and could understand and relate to you." Again, this set of

commentary addressed the key word of "venting." Having others to commiserate with allowed

students to air their frustrations. Venting was seen as a coping mechanism and could be

subsumed under the previously identified theme of mutual support.

The next subquestison asked, "If you were mentored, what role has mentoring played in

your desire to remain in the nursing program?" The term "opportunity" became a key word. Ivy

Churchill commented,

> I think one thing I've learned from our faculty here is that there are lots of opportunities
>
> in nursing. I think freshman year, when I was just learning about the profession, I saw
>
> every single nurses as being a floor nurse, but now I know there are other opportunities.
>
> There are opportunities in public health, in research, in teaching. I honestly don't see
>
> myself being a floor nurse forever, so I really appreciate that those other less known
>
> aspects of nursing were made known to us. It's been encouraging to just stick with the
>
> program, cuz I don't have to be a floor nurse if I don't want to be. I can do all these other
>
> things, management, all of that.

Peyton Sawyer added,

> I would agree with what Ivy said again, just because I think that [name] since it is a
>
> research-based institution, I think they really push for continuing education. Since that's
>
> been so well known to us just by having professors that have been so successful in the
>
> field. I mean, we have professors that have written numerous research articles, started
>
> committees at different facilities. There's all sorts of things. It's really nice to know that

different. Like Ivy said, to know that there's more stuff out there besides just the floor

nurse.

Peyton continued,

I think the faculty instilled a good foundation at the start. It's cool because one of our-

well, the faculty advisor that we had in the LLC is now one of our professors in one of

our last nursing classes so it completes the circle [laughter].

Several of the students were grateful that they learned other avenues of nursing besides

bedside nursing thus providing them more "opportunities" for their careers. Even at this early

juncture in her career preparation, one student did not see herself remaining a floor nurse

indefinitely. Mentoring as offered by this faculty promoted a wider vision of career offerings that

helped her to persist. Students commented their professors were successful and inspired them to

expand their career "opportunities." Research was identified as important to the university and

was seen as a factor contributing to the trust students were willing to assign faculty in their roles

as mentors and role models. Many students felt that faculty had influenced them in a positive

way and that students had a solid foundation to build upon.

The final subquestion addressed other thoughts the students might have held: "What other

thoughts or perspectives would you like to share about the living–learning community or

mentoring?" Suggestions from this question included keeping an "open mind." Peyton Sawyer

stated,

I think it's important to keep an open mind no matter what you do just because, I mean,

in [residence hall] as far as [name] is concerned, it's one of the father [older] dorms. At

the time we were in it, it did not have air conditioning. I mean, there were a lot of aspects

that could have made us choose differently, but since that is where it's at and that's what

you wanna do, keep an open mind and don't completely shut everything out. Especially

with mentoring, is keep an open mind cuz you don't know what you can find out about

yourself from learning from others.

Two subjects had expressed because their living–learning community did not have air-

conditioning at the time, it was not the preferred residence hall. However, looking back, the

students said that this did not make a difference and they could not recall that being an

inconvenience. This group recognized people "behind the scenes" ensuring smooth operations

within the building because none had to complain about loud noise and study areas were always

provided. Expense was the one reason this group gave for not maintaining residence at the

living–learning community. Peyton Sawyer stated,

> The main reason I didn't live either in the dorms or on campus is just the expense. It's
>
> much cheaper to live off campus. As far as living on campus my freshman year, I would
>
> not have done it any different, cuz I think you would be completely lost if you didn't. I
>
> know one of my roommates now did not live in the dorms at all. I think she regrets that
>
> just because you didn't really get that cohesive, I mean, it sucks. You're in a bathroom
>
> with 52 other girls, but at the same time, you get to know stuff about yourself and you
>
> really learn more about yourself.

Peyton also went on to add, "there were 50 of us on the floor or so, right around 50, yeah. It was

that aspect of it, but again. I wouldn't change it for the world." Although 50 students lived on the

floor, only 20 were nursing students. One of the participants mentioned that living off campus

was economically advantageous and quite the norm for the college. Ivy Churchill stated,

"Especially out of state people who already have tuition that's a little out of control [laughter] to

begin with." One participant said you would be "lost" if you did not live on campus the first year. Reece Weatherspoon added,

> I would like to say how great and helpful the LLC was in general. Nursing is great. It [the living–learning community] was so helpful and executed well. My father and I looked into it prior to college and I knew I wanted to live in one.

The importance of the RA came up again. Peyton Sawyer stated that "even if the RA does not mentor, they unknowingly act as one." Ivy Churchill agreed.

Thoughts and perspectives regarding this commentary produced the key words of "open mind" and a key phrase of "self-reflection." Working together, a theme of *self-reflection* is established. Certainly, to engage in self-reflection, one must enter with an open mind and be willing to gain perspective from any influences including academic, social, and even physical when considering the environment within which one must operate. One participant said you would be "lost" if you did not live on campus the first year. From this, one may surmise that accurate self-reflection begins in a safe and reflexive environment such as the living–learning community described by these students. RAs were seen as mentors, even if they were not aware, and seen as contributing members of the living–learning community. The lack of air-conditioning was not optimal, nor was sharing a bathroom with several other women, but reflecting on the experience, it was not detrimental.

Several themes emerged during the interviews with Cohort 1. This aggregate expressed their satisfaction for the living–learning community. The theme of mutual support was identified by the women. Dynamics emerged in the commentary regarding relationships that were based not only on commonality, but diversity. The theme of expansion was listed for more friends and

a stronger network. The living–learning community provided a solid foundation for many and this foundation allowed them to grow. Strong relationships developed and these were vital for continuation in the program.

Mentoring was seen as unconditional positive regard and all had felt they had been mentored. However, they would not ask to be if it were not provided.

Most were inspired by their professors and thanked their professors for serving as role models and providing opportunities for them to understand alternatives within the profession other than the traditional floor nurse. Two students commented positively about how the professors had influenced them on their career decisions. Students appreciated the fact that they were treated with respect and even addressed as colleagues. Colleagues help guide each other and provide support.

Several voiced how instrumental the RA had been to them in not only maintaining motivation, but that this individual also functioned as someone to "vent to" and to give them advice. "Venting" became a key word and important to the students as a way to cope. One participant said RAs act as mentors even if they are not aware of it. RAs provide support and guidance and, as one mentioned, they can even do creative things to assist with knowledge assimilation. One participant said students "would be lost" if they did not reside in a living–learning community.

Several commented more students that were nursing students should live in the living–learning community. This provided the concept of working through problems and keeping students connected or involved. Students wished there were more nurses living in the community and one suggested those that did not live in one may feel "outcast." This was especially true for

those who are in the learning community but may not reside in a living–learning community residence.

The participants expressed how lifelong friends had developed and that the foundational experience of the living–learning community was beneficial for continuing. One participant remarked she would stay at the living–learning community for all four years but that cost was a factor; apartment life was said to be more affordable. Nevertheless, opportunities for self-reflection and looking inward were offered within the dynamics of the living–learning community; one female student, Peyton Sawyer, from Cohort 1 summed the notion by stating, "[You] get to know stuff about yourself and you really learn more about yourself." Such opportunities for reflection further supported student willingness to self-determine. In short, within the reflexive dynamic of the living–learning community, students experienced the conditions within which their determination and self-motivation increased.

When the interview session ended, I thanked the participants for their time and explained member-checking again. I told them they would get a copy of the transcript in the mail within a couple of weeks and they could either confirm or deny their feelings and the accuracy of the document. Later, two participants said they agreed with what was conveyed and I did not hear from the other individual. The two who were agreeable told me via email it was correct with what they had wanted to say. I also told them I would send them copies of the research after it was finished. When the session ended I then returned to the living–learning community to see what the atmosphere looked like after hours. Still quiet, there were more people around the day room; yet, it was not crowded or a hub of activity.

Cohort 2

The data collection for Cohort 2 was done on the evening of February 13, 2014. It was another extremely cold day and I was thankful that the subjects could come to the sessions despite the harsh conditions. This session started at 3:00 pm in the living–learning community. Another session took place at 4:00 pm and the last session took place at 5:00 pm.

The digitally-recorded sessions were held in a small room located in the basement of the living–learning community. There was one table and chairs with a couch and a coffee table. The coffee table provided the support for the audio recorder. Again, pizza and drinks were provided but the subjects were more concerned and focused on answering the questions. The following is the beginning of what became three groups consisting of five, two, and four subjects doing one-hour interviews. The groups consisted of both men and women providing different perspectives.

Research question 1. This question asks what influence the living–learning community has on development and achievement. Specifically, the question asked, "What influence has the living–learning community had on students' perceptions of their development and achievement?" The subquestion "Describe what you appreciate about the living–learning community. What have you found helpful?" was initially asked of the participants. Miley Cyrus offered, "I found it helpful that everyone is in similar classes, so if you have a question on homework, you can just go to someone, like your roommate or someone that lives next to you and it's not hard to find someone."

Emma Watson commented,

> I really like the support that the living–learning community offers. With all the people
>
> taking similar classes, you have similar schedules. You understand what kinda stress
>
> you're under, so you can support each other in that and help each other. It also helps

having a RA who's in the same major because they know how to help you with your

anxiety or tell you what to expect in certain classes, so that's really nice too.

Bill Cosby stated,

> Just it's really convenient having people with the same major immediately down the hall
>
> from you or just next door. Cuz I've had to set up meetings for math or something,
>
> something that's not related to my profession, and that takes time. A lotta people
>
> sometimes can't make it because schedules conflict. Being in a living–learning
>
> community, your schedules are usually synchronized together so you don't have to plan
>
> around each other, usually. It's just a lot more convenient this way.

Another voiced that "individuals are more focused" and "were not partying every night."

Katniss Everdeen spoke,

> I appreciate being around other people who are going for the same profession and being
>
> able to go to someone for help in a class. We have similar classes. That's really helpful.
>
> It's also really nice that people in the LLC are more concerned with their studies, not
>
> partying every night. It's not super crazy around here or anything. It's easier to focus in
>
> your room and stuff.

Laruen Conrad remarked,

> I appreciate having people that I can go to and ask questions because like she said,
>
> everyone else is in similar classes as me and they help answer the questions I have and
>
> also that everyone down here, or on the first floor, is more serious about their studies and
>
> we stay concentrated.

Ron Burgundy quipped,

> Mine's along the same basis. I mean, it's really nice that if you're in your room studying and you can't figure something out or you have a question, you can literally just go next door pretty much or somewhere on your floor and ask somebody that's in your class. Also, as far as classes go, you'll pretty much always have somebody that you know in a class and that's kind of nice too, I mean most of the time. Some of the classes that aren't LLC, you won't know anybody, but that's okay too, I guess. Yeah, and also just people are a lot more focused on their studies, like they said, rather than the general population of students. It kind of helps to keep you motivated and more focused on studying to help get into a program.

Elizabeth Carter shared,

> I just found it helpful to know somebody. That way when classes got started, you could find people that you live with on your floor to sit with and if you have a question, you could ask them.

Robert Bush added,

> Well, at the start of the semester, you had this group of people that you were doing all this stuff with, so you got to know people a lot faster. College became a lot more homey a lot more quicker. Then there's what Ron said about people in classes that you know. If you do have a problem, like a problem with a class, then chances are there is someone on the floor that's taking the same class and you can ask them for help, so that's really helpful.

Emma Watson voiced,

> I really like the support that the living–learning community offers. With all the people
>
> taking similar classes, you have similar schedules. You understand what kinda stress
>
> you're under, so you can support each other in that and help each other. It also helps
>
> having an RA who's the same major because they know how to help you with your
>
> anxiety or tell you what to expect in certain classes, so that's really nice too.

One participant, Erica Snow, who is an RA commented,

> . . . being available for them. For me it's different since I'm older than them, but I have
>
> the same classes since I'm the RA. For them with studying, going to each other for
>
> questions, I think is probably one of the biggest things. But for me now, it's knowing
>
> people who are in my clinical groups and stuff like that, that I met when I was in the
>
> LLC.

Jessica Simpson added,

> I think that your first semester, or your first year of college in general is very stressful. I
>
> think that everybody you live with is on the same page as you, professionally and stress
>
> level and all that. That's a lot of support that you have in those classes.

Trevor Martin stated,

> Also the same thing, being able to go get help if you need it. Just being able to come
>
> straight in as a freshman and meet lots of different people from all over and connect with
>
> them in a way that everybody . . . you have shared that connection. That builds a bond
>
> right away and you can develop friendships from there.

One student appreciated the "homey" feel of the living–learning community as he evoked

images of comfort, security, and support. The fact that schedules were "synchronized" was

highlighted indicating the importance of such in finding common times to meet or find others available for support. This coupled with the key phrase of just "going next door" to find support (convenience) yielded an understanding of the importance of proximity in creating the conditions for students to find and create the mutual support the living–learning community environment should offer.

Again, as in Cohort 1, the theme of *mutual support* resurfaces. "Friendship" was a word used once more. This implied that the living–learning community is a place not only where students can study, they end up bonding and forming relationships that carry through the program. In support of this assumption about friendships carrying through the program, the RA commented about relationships already being established that proved helpful when moving into clinical groups. The concept of the RA appeared again and the theme of the *importance of the RA* was reiterated, especially the importance of the RA being in the same major.

The key words of "serious," "more focused" and "motivated" about studies permeated the groups. All this seems to work together to help maintain focus. It seems elements are set up to create and maintain a dynamic—one that helps students maintain focus and find mutual support. Apparently students valued proximity to others in the same major and the mutual support helps to provide as these contributed to motivation and determination to persist. Thus, the theme of *self-determination* was repeated by this group in concert with what was found in Cohort 1.

The next subquestion asked, "Is there any aspect of the living–learning community that you did not find helpful, and if so, please describe that aspect." Instantly, Bill Cosby piped up:

> The only thing that jumps to mind immediately, and it's not something that really can be
>
> changed because it just happens this way, but it'd be nice I guess, if there was more men

in the LLC than there; I mean I love everybody here. I love the women, but it's just I'm

around women 24-7 and it's just nice to be around guys sometimes.

Emma Watson concurred,

I would have to agree with him. My entire floor is all girls. Not that anything's wrong

with that, but to have guy friends and stuff is fun sometimes. Other than that, not really

because I just, everything seems to work well for me living here, so-[stopped talking].

Two participants in that group echoed that same sentiment. It would appear that having a

coeducational environment would be seen as a positive factor in the social dynamic supported by

the living–learning community, though students were willing to acknowledge this might not

always be possible.

Students suggested a class, UNIV, was not seen as helpful in terms of the living–learning

community. The UNIV class is a class that is offered in the fall and spring semesters. The

courses are listed as 101 and 102 and they address resume writing, GPA calculation and the

courses also provide guest speakers. These courses, many thought, did not need to last two

semesters and took away from time they needed to spend studying their sciences classes.   Erica

went on to describe the UNIV class 101:

It's just the 101 intro to university class that oh yeah, I take together . . . [the] LLC

coordinator teaches that class. Since they're nursing and health professions, they have the

head of the radiology will come, try to talk to them about the different professions and

just acclimate them to college in general I guess, but depending on what your specialty is,

you can—that's why I had trouble 'cause I was in honors and the LLC. It was the same

class, but they wanted me to pick one or the other. That was kind of hard.

Moving along into the next subquestion brought back a topic that was earlier addressed.

The question was "what might need to be changed or modified to make the community more helpful?" One student voiced she preferred having an RA who was a nurse. Katniss Everdeen offered,

> Well, I just recently experienced this change. We had an RA that was a nursing student, and this semester now we have a new RA and she's not a nursing student. We kind of have that disconnection, and it's really helpful if she . . . our last RA could help us . . . show us how to manage certain things for going for nursing.

Erica Snow had another perspective:

> Another thing that I've noticed is that since they're freshman, a lot of them end up changing their majors. Maybe half of the people, by the time they finish their freshman year, aren't even nursing anymore. They're still all living together, so I don't know. I almost wish it were something where when we're older, we got to be together 'cuz I feel like as a junior I needed more support system for nursing classes than I did as a freshman.

Erica went on to add:

> I feel now I would have benefited a lot more from having someone reminding me, we have all this going on. 'Cuz I know anatomy as a freshman is really overwhelming, but I don't feel like freshman year is anything compared to starting clinicals and all that kind of stuff.

Commentary from this section brought forth key phrases of a wish for more of a "coeducational environment," the notion that an RA who is not a nursing student was not beneficial, and assistance when they are further into their programs. Although students wished for more representation in men in the living–learning community, they acknowledged that program majors tend to be women. This group of students reiterated the *importance of the RA*

being from the same major as they perceived that circumstance as a more positive contribution to the *mutual support* offered within the living–learning community. Hence, this appears to be a theme in both groups. Whereas participants acknowledge it is difficult in beginning classes, they suggest that the program continues to be more challenging later and many leave the nursing program in their early years. Participants remarked as they got more into the program, especially into clinicals, it would benefit them to have ready access to a support system that could be offered by an individual further along in the program. This may suggest that motivation and self-determination may be better promoted through having an RA who is in the major.

The subquestion of academic growth stayed on a positive note. The question was, "how has the living–learning community assisted you with or failed to assist you with your academic growth?"

Emma Watson had this to say:

> If anything, I think it's helped me more. From what I've heard from other dorms, people hang out, have their doors open, music playing all the time. It's really helpful here because we all know we have a lotta studying to do and we all have the same major, so it's not like if you're in another major, you don't have to study as much for a certain class. It's really helpful. It's always usually quiet and especially studying together and everything. When you're in other dorms, you probably don't have as many people to study with just down the hall.

Robert Bush added,

> Well, you have other people taking the same classes so if someone's studying more than you; it motivates you to study more. You don't want to be left behind, and you just have a way to compare your studies with other peoples and improve yourself.

Ron Burgandy concurred,

> Yeah, kind of the same as him. All of us competing to get into a certain program and you
> see—I mean, everybody on these floors for the most part are really highly motivated
> about their studies and that helps keep you motivated. I know in high school when I
> started to struggle, it was just loss of motivation. Being around all these people that are
> highly motivated, it helps just keep you motivated and helps you study more.

Erica Snow commented,

> Probably just with providing me with the support system of people that do help me. Two
> of my closest friends in the nursing program are people that lived in the LLC. Even
> though I wasn't specifically really close with them when we lived together, it was just
> somebody that I recognized when I did start my nursing courses. They're really there for
> me and help keep me keep track of deadlines and that kind of stuff.

Jessica Simpson added, "I think that living—what she said. That living with the people that I go
to class with, we can help each other, remind each other and support each other I guess."

Trevor Martin was in agreement:

> I'm going to say the same thing because even going to all these same classes, we share
> physiology classes where you have this group of people in the LLC that you say, you
> forgot something the teacher said in the lecture on a particular subject. You can go over
> and say, "Hey, what did she say about this and how does this work?" And all that and
> then they can remind you and be, like, "Well, thanks, that's really helpful."

Katniss Everdeen mentioned this angle: "I think it also gives you confidence because if you're
studying the same material, you can go with—talk with someone about what you know and make
sure you're on the correct path."

Several students echoed the key phases "studying together" and the key word "motivated." One woman offered "support system" in regard to staying focused and keeping up with the course loads. Several commented that one studies more at the living–learning community and so were able to remain highly focused. One participant listed "confidence" as beneficial. Thus, *mutual support* as well as *self-determination* emerged again as themes as students study with each other and continue through the rigors of the program together. This assertion is further underscored by other key words emerging from responses to the first research question. The key words of "convenience" and "similar classes" indicated students appreciated living with other nursing students taking similar classes as they were able to get answers to their questions quickly from someone living in proximity.

Aspects of the social dynamic in the mutual support systems created in the living–learning community were addressed in a way unique from cohort 1 students in that some students wished more men would live in the living–learning community but they realized this may not change. "Friendships" again was listed as a keyword. Friends help students stay motivated and one women listed confidence as being a byproduct of the supportive dynamic. This again substantiated the themes of *mutual support* and *self-determination* suggesting that not only do living–learning communities provide academic support but personal relationships are also formed. This group pointed out the fact that that program gets more difficult and continued support is necessary. The idea of the RA being a nursing student and the importance of this is again listed as necessary to making the living–learning community more helpful, especially as program rigors increase as one moves further into it.

Research question 2. The second research question asked, "What influence has mentoring within the living–learning community had on students' perceptions of their

development and achievement?" The subquestion asked "What is your understanding of mentoring?" Most participants expressed that the mentor was someone who served as a role model and someone who they could approach for assistance. Bill Cosby voiced,

> My understanding of mentoring is having a person or people there to assist you with not only academic but life, too. Just to help you grow and help you become more knowledgeable in any aspect that you need help with.

Katniss Everdeen offered, "I think of someone who can help you, or be a good role model basically and you can follow in their footsteps and make you grow as a person academically, socially." Elizabeth Carter explained, "My understanding of mentoring is, someone or a group of people that are there to help you and help you develop your studies, especially in college." Lauren Conrad remarked, "I think of it as someone ahead of me, like she said, who is there to give me advice, and they have to be a good person too and be giving accurate advice not bad choices." Ron Burgundy said, "Yeah, I think of somebody that's already been through what you're going through at this moment so they can tell you what worked and what didn't work and give you advice and just be a good role model."

Key words were "advice," "help," "good role model;" this insinuates a theme of *experience* in that mentors are seen as experienced individuals worthy of emulation and to whom trust could be assigned. These students all saw mentors in a positive light and many felt that they (mentors) were usually older and had previously taken classes. Miley Cyrus stated, "I think of someone who you can look up to and someone who has maybe gone through it already, so who you can relate to."

Next, the subquestion asked about a previous time each had been mentored. They were "Please describe a time when you were mentored in the living–learning community. What did

you find helpful?" RA, Erica Snow, added,

> When I was in the LLC as a freshman, my RA was trying to apply to the nursing
>
> program. It was a really stressful time for her because she didn't know if she was gonna
>
> make it in or not, and she ended up not making it in. She shared with us what stopped her
>
> from making it into the program and the things that ended her studying, that kind of
>
> thing, so we could avoid making those mistakes that she did. That was real nice.

Jessica Simpson said,

> I think my RA was my—has been my—or my RA that was here first semester, we got a
>
> new one over Christmas break, but she was a nursing major and she really calmed our
>
> nerves at the beginning of the semester and said that, "It's not as bad as everyone tells
>
> you that it's going to be, but you do need to study hard." She was just there for support
>
> and guidance.

Trevor Martin agreed,

> I want to say also the RA is probably the biggest mentor. I mean, they're your resident
>
> assistant, being one of the residents; they're the person that you can go to whenever you
>
> need help. The fact that they're also, in the LLC, they're also your . . . . they're further
>
> ahead in your program of study, so they know what you're going through right then, so
>
> they can help you.

Elizabeth Carter added,

> I would also say my RA. She's just helpful. If you have any type of basic questions about
>
> what's to come or any of your classes, she can answer that. Then also on a personal
>
> aspect, when you have issues with people that are on your floor, she knows everybody, so
>
> she can help with that too.

Emma Watson offered,

> I've had a lotta friends who are sophomores who have taught me a lotta new things,
>
> which I think gave me an advantage to expect so I wouldn't get behind in my studies so I
>
> know to keep on top of things. Also my RA because she talked me through how the
>
> semesters gonna go and it'll get harder. It's really overwhelming the first week of
>
> college, so it was nice to talk to her and figure things out.

Miley Cyrus added, "I would say maybe with our RA last semester, she was in nursing classes,

so if I had a question about maybe a class or just nursing in general, I could go to her and ask her

about it, so maybe that." Ron Burgundy remarked, "Yeah, I think of somebody that's already

been through what you're going through at this moment so they can tell you what worked and

what didn't work and give you advice and just be a good role model." Katniss Everdeen stated,

"My RA also helped me how to best organize for anatomy and how to stay on top of my

studying along the way."

Ron Burgundy had this to say:

> Yeah, I know early on I was really stressed out about anatomy and I wasn't happy. I think
>
> it was the second test grade that I had. I was really stressed out about and I was eating
>
> lunch with my RA (name). She asked me how the grades were going and stuff and I told
>
> her I wasn't happy with my last test grade. She was able to calm me down and not be so
>
> stressed out I guess about it and to focus on the next one.

"Support" and "guidance" are key words in this commentary. Also the implication of

encouragement is emergent. This suggested a theme of mentors being used in *anticipatory*

preparation which may also be associated with the theme of self-determination and the mutual

support provided by living–learning communities. Role modeling is again mentioned and the majority of students continued to reveal the importance of the RA.

Along the lines of the subquestion regarding doing better as an individual or professional, the questions were asked, "How did this help you do better as a student?" "How did this help you develop as an individual and/or professional?" Bill Cosby gave his stance:

Just being around everybody, you see the different opinions and every side to an issue that you all are faced. If you come to a certain problem, then one person might have a view about it, but then somebody else will have a different view and a third person will have a different view. Then you can meld all three of those views together and come up with the right answer and a solution to the problem. Just it helps you work together with other people and I think that helps you become more professional.

Emma Watson added,

The support really helped me, just knowing that, I mean technically some of us are all competitors to get into the program when you think about it. You use each other to take advantage of each other in studies, and in the end you help each other both equally the same, which is nice. That way you can take away the competitive edge. Yeah.

Several of the students again listed the RA in this category as well. This is demonstrated by the following comments. For instance, Elizabeth Carter offered,

Well, I would say the questions, when she [the RA] answers our questions, I mean, that's always helpful because you know where to go next and what you need to do to fix any problems. Then also, personally, I would say she was able to give us some pointers on how to handle the situation when things went wrong socially.

Ron Burgundy said,

> Like I said earlier, I think a lot of it was the motivation 'cause I'm a lot better student now than I was in high school. In high school I was not near as motivated as I was, and I think being her and seeing all these highly motivated people helped me stay motivated. Also, [it] just gives you a level of comfort 'cause I mean, during welcome week, we had meetings and stuff with our LLCs and got introduced to everybody early. Knowing everybody makes you feel more comfortable also, so I think that helped too. A lot less stress.

Robert Bush went in another direction:

> If you do get a bad test grade, knowing that if you work hard, that one bad grade isn't going to hurt you. You can always suffer a bad grade, but make up for it yet and still keep going on. You can relax and stay focused without working too much.

Trevor Martin explained,

> Okay, well, I mean whenever you go ask the question, they (RA) can answer it right there on the spot. Obviously that helps you right then. I mean, you could also ask them about how to handle things for a class that you're getting ready to take this semester and if they've taken it before, how did you study? What helped you? I can see how that would definitely help you in your studies, help you do better in that.

Jessica Simpson remarked,

> I think that going into college I had a lot of anxiety and worry about whether it was gonna be getting admitted into my program and stuff like that. She (RA) was able to calm me down, show me that it's okay if you failed your first test. You have more to come, and you don't need to worry and stress yourself out so much.

Erica Snow added her perspective as an RA:

> I guess maybe this isn't the exact answer you're looking for, but as an RA, I try really
> hard because when I was a freshman, I felt really overwhelmed because I feel like the
> other classmates sometimes try to make it seem like it's gonna be harder than it is
> because they're going through a hard time, so they want to show how hard it is to
> everybody else. It makes them feel like they're not just slacking or whatever. I was really
> overwhelmed thinking that I was gonna be able to do it. I make a real effort to, like she
> (Jessica) was saying, tell you it's not as awful as everyone makes it out to be. It's gonna
> be hard, and you have to study hard, but trying to give more positives to the . . . to what's
> to come. Make it seem like at least it's worth it if nothing else.

Several participants mentioned the key word "RA" and the phrases of the RA "being
there for them," "encouraging," and being credible resources thus producing another aspect of
the theme of *anticipatory preparation*. RAs calm fears and ease students through the transition to
being nursing students. Lauren Conrad stated, "Yeah, knowing that my RA gave me tips and that
that obviously worked for her because she's a nursing student now. That's how I knew it was
credible." The RA, Erica, stated she tried to help others and promote reassurance. This was
confirmed by a couple of the students who had concerns regarding test scores, but fears were
allayed by the RA putting those scores into perspective in regard to courses and the program. As
motivation also was determined to be a key word, it would appear that receiving this sort of help
and reassurance from an RA promotes motivation and, as such, may also be aligned with the
theme of self-determination. Additionally, RAs can give guidance in personal matters reifying
the notion of the importance of the social aspect of mutual support.

The question of "What might need to be changed or modified to make the mentoring more helpful?" was posed and the subquestion simultaneously queried, "If there was any aspect to the mentoring that was not found helpful? If so, please describe that aspect." The participants pinpointed a class that was not perceived as helpful and this happened in two different groups. Although the topic of the UNIV class resurfaced, academic observations merged with the mentoring question in their responses. I felt that the answers, while congruent, had no bearing on mentoring even though both sets of groups included this as a detriment to their time. Erica Snow remarked,

> I will refer to the UNIV class, 'cause [name] is the course coordinator for that class. It was a weekly thing, and I think that we spent an hour in there. There were some weeks that I felt like there wasn't really something to talk about. Being a stressed out nursing student, trying to study for anatomy and stuff like that, it's really frustrating when you sit in a class that doesn't seem to have meaning at that time. I know that there's positive ideas behind that class, but I feel like it needs to be developed more to be successful for us. I feel like they have a book they read over the summer and I feel like that covers a couple of classes, and then they have some people come in and talk about different programs and that covers a few. But then it just starts to feel like they're just really stretching for something to do during that class time.

Jessica Simpson agreed with the comments about the UNIV class:

> I would agree with that statement, and also this semester we got a new RA and she's an education major. She can't really help us with our anatomy questions or our stresses. She can't really relate to it. She used to be a nursing major but she has switched majors. She can kind of relate to us, but not as much and that's just I feel like a little bit of a setback.

This comment was made by Emma Watson:

> Well, there's a class once a week and you go. We just do different activities involving healthcare or help professions. We have guest speakers, which I enjoy the guest speakers to see all aspects of the health profession because we all work together. Sometimes I just feel like I have other things to do like study when it really doesn't help me academically.

Trevor Martin responded, "I feel the same about the UNIV class as Erica. Other than that, yeah, I really don't have anything else to add." Another notion regarding mentoring that was not helpful was shared by Erica Snow:

> I feel like now I would have benefited a lot more from having someone reminding me, we have all this going on. 'Cause I know my anatomy as a freshman is really overwhelming but I don't feel like freshman year is anything compared to starting clinicals and all that kind of stuff.

This commentary again addressed the importance of the RA being a nursing major. One student commented on the fact that non-nursing RAs do not "relate." The key word is "setback," implying that those no longer in the nursing major can no longer relate. This further substantiated the theme of the importance of the RA, particularly of the RA being a current nursing major. Participants vocalized that the major is going to get more difficult and they will continue to need guidance.

The last question in this category addressed whether one would ask to be mentored if they felt they had not been. It asks, "If you have not been mentored would you ask to be mentored if you felt it would benefit you?" All of the subjects agreed they would ask if they felt they needed mentoring. Trevor Martin stated,

I would ask just because it's always nice to have a person to be able to go to. I mean, a

mentor isn't a person that has to be available day and night, all the time for you. Just

having one and being able to ask them questions when you need it, would be okay. I

mean, it's not like they're gonna be slaving over you.

Emma Watson remarked, "I feel like I've been mentored through friends who've been through

the process before, so that was really helpful." In this sense, mentoring took more of a personal

theme rather than an authority theme. The RA, Erica Snow, had this to say:

I feel like I had a mentor when I needed one, and another thing that they're probably not

aware of is that the further on in the nursing program you go, they actually pair you. Like,

when you become a sophomore, you're paired with a junior, and if a junior would to

continue with their senior, they have . . . they set up a mentor program like that. In my

experience, it really hasn't been that successful because the way they do it is just send

you an email saying, this is your person. You would have to make a real effort to become

close with that person. I feel like if they set it up where it was an in-person things at least

the first time to meet that person, it would help. Cause I know as a sophomore, my

mentor didn't contact me that way. I had to go to her, and I feel like there are people who

wouldn't ask like I did. I think there is a program in place, but it could use a little

improvement.

Key concepts in this category centered on mentors as givers of "advice." Mentors were

viewed as role models and someone to help students and give them guidance. Most saw the RA

as the one person who served the role as mentor. The RA was viewed as calming fears and

preparing them for what lay ahead through preparation and council as was identified within the

theme of *anticipatory preparation.* Motivation was listed as an element the living–learning

community provided. This cohort seemed to express that their colleagues kept them motivated and "highly motivated people" helped at least one young man stay engaged. Unlike Cohort 1 students, none listed their faculty as mentors and none of the participants brought up their faculty in any way. One explanation for this is that students are not as advanced in their education as those students in Cohort 1.

Some pointed out they were not motivated in high school and the nursing major requires motivation and determination to succeed. Several participants acknowledged the major requires persistence and it gets more difficult as you go on. Again, mentors can be paired with older students but one voiced they did not like the way the pairing was established and communicated to them. One participant said, "the system required mentors to 'hook up' with their mentees on email." It was suggested students may not go to their mentor if they were contacted online. Another suggestion was the class specifically held for the living–learning community. This was the UNIV class. Most felt that this was not the best use of their time and this emerged during the questions regarding mentoring.

Research question 3. The last group of questions addressed the willingness to remain or leave a program. Specifically, the research question asked, "What influence has the living–learning community and mentoring had on students' willingness to remain in or leave a program?" The first subquestion was "If you have found the living–learning community helpful, how has it assisted you to remain in the nursing program?"

Erica Snow took the lead:

Maybe just because I had other people that I knew were gonna stick it out with me because sometimes it feels like you can't do it and if other people are saying, well, you can't drop out 'cause I'm not dropping out. Just let's push through this together. Let's

study together. Other than that, just the friendships that we make, and we will want to

stick with those people.

Jessica Simpson concurred, "I agree with her completely. You're just there for each other and

you know that if they can make it through, then you can make it through." Trevor Martin added,

I agree with both of them, but I would also say just that the help you get from the other

people in your LLC for your classes, ensure that you're gonna be doing better in your

classes. Well not sure, but it helps you do better in your classes. You're not gonna be as

stressed out if you were just on your own. You have somebody to hold hands and get

through it together, and you have that help whenever you need it, yeah.

Elizabeth Carter remarked, "I would say networking is a big thing because especially later in our

career as a student, if you have questions, you know all of these people that you met your

freshman year in LLC that you can go ask. I think that's helpful."

Bill Cosby spoke of the atmosphere:

I guess it's assisted me in remaining in the nursing program because nearly everybody in

the LLC is going towards nursing. Maybe some dental hygiene, maybe some rad tech, but

it helps me stay in the nursing profession because everybody else is excited about the

nursing profession, so just being in that atmosphere also excites me.

Robert Bush addressed the value of having others: "You don't feel alone with it. It's really tough

and it can be stressful, so you have a lot of other people in the same boat, so the burden doesn't

feel as big." Ron Burgundy concurred, "Yeah, it's the big group atmosphere of it. Obviously it's

really stressful your freshman year, but knowing that your living with other people that are

dealing with the stress and if the energy stays positive, then it just helps you cope I guess."

Commentary from this set of questions produced the theme of *mutual support* again and the reintroduction of *networking*. Participants felt that students that are ahead of them help to inspire them. Friendships are mentioned once more in this section and the concept of not being on your own, togetherness makes the program attainable.

None of the subjects had left the nursing program so the subquestion of "If you have not found the living–learning community helpful, how did it influence you to leave the nursing program?" did not pertain to the students. In talking with the students it became clear that, because the living–learning community at this institution is not offered for all four years of the program, students left the living–learning community as part of the normal progression of the program. All found it helpful but those who had left the living–learning community had done so due to the expectation of the one-year residency.

The following subquestion of "If you were mentored, what role has mentoring played in your desire to remain in the program?" elicited more of a response. Bill Cosby concluded,

> Just from mentors, people have come through the classes before, I could tell that they're excited about it. They've continued with it and they're still excited about it, so I feel like I still will be excited about it when I reach that point too.

Emma Watson expanded on excitement: "I agree, I've had many friends say, 'Oh I got to do this today in nursing school, and it excites me.' They're excited to see me start and see me be excited about the program as well." Trevor Martin said, "Well, my mentor being my RA mainly, they're a great help for a source of information, like you said before. Also I'd like to point out that my RA also influenced me to become an RA myself, so I'm applying for it." Elizabeth Carter concurred, "I would say with my RA being my mentor, she must makes-tells us that the nursing program is doable. Just because people say it's impossible, doesn't mean it's impossible."

Ron Burgundy added this:

> Yeah, I mean, just having the RAs and the people around that are in the programs
> already, and they're able to tell you that they got through their freshman year and that
> they're enjoying nursing school. I've hardly heard anything negative about the nursing
> school here, so that motivates you to stay in.

Katniss Everdeen voiced, "I've heard stories from my RA's clinicals and some of them have
been pretty amazing stories. It just keeps you motivated to experience that myself one day."

Key words I identified in association with this subquestion were "excited," "contagious,"
and "influenced." These words imply the theme of motivation and helping transmit a positive
expectation. This section reiterates the importance of the RA as being an influential mentor and
how the position of RA can be a positive inspiration for others. It also demonstrates the role the
mentor can play in supporting self-determination and the implied internal motivation required to
persist in a program.

To further understand, I asked the participants, "If you have found the living–learning
community helpful, how has it assisted you to remain in the nursing program?" Ron Burgundy
offered,

> Yeah, I mean, just having the RAs and the people around that are in the programs
> already, and they're able to tell you that they got through their freshman year and that
> they're enjoying nursing school. I've hardly heard anything negative about the nursing
> school here, so that motivates you to stay in.

Robert Bush stated, "Just having gotten that help before, you know that help's going to be there
later. You have that safety net, that feeling that you do have help you can go to if you need it."

Many participants anticipate the experiences the major has to offer. Lauren Conrad explained, "What I was mentored for was anatomy; that is the weed out class. Knowing that, getting mentored for that and helping me [get] better for that, that's what's helped me." Miley Cyrus chimed in, "I would say just hearing other people's stories and knowing how great an experience it will be when I finally get there."

Several of the students mentioned the key words of "excitement" and one offered "enjoyment." The key word of "motivation" also appeared again. It would seem that the mentoring provided by the living–learning community, much of this through the RA, contributes to the internal affect needed to promote the self-determination to remain in, and even anticipate with confidence, the rigors of the program.

The last subquestion asked, "What other thoughts or perspectives would like to share about the living–learning community or mentoring?" Subjects took their time to reflect on this and the comments were overwhelmingly positive. Elizabeth Carter stated,

> Okay, I would say the LLC is really a great place to live and I'm really liking it because you do form bonds with the people you live with. If you have dinner together with the people on your floor or attend programs together, it's really helpful to know those people and know there's gonna be people on campus that you know. I think it made the adjustment from living at home to living on campus a lot easier because you didn't feel like you were alone.

Trevor Martin commented,

> Well, this is gonna sound kind of cheesy, but I think that the LLCs are a great help because of what they're designed to do, the LLC is living. They have a safe environment, like Erica said about it, is that they have a lot less violations here in the LLC building

than the other one. It's a generally safer building to be in or just in an LLC in general to live in. Second learning, it's a great environment for you to learn from. You can go ask questions if you have any 'cause you're in the same class as the people on this floor. And in the community, you're building relationships that you could potentially have for the rest of your life.

Robert Bush added,

I think that everyone should try and do a LLC if there is availability for their major, or original interest of study 'cause it just helps that much more to have people around you. It boosts your academic and it boosts your outlook on the college experience in general.

Katniss Everdeen stated,

I think the main thing is just a comfort thing for the most part, relieves anxieties, especially before you even come. You know that you're going to get to know these people well and be able to create close relationships with many health professions in your field.

Ron Burgundy voiced,

I mean, I think overall, I think this actually has helped me become a better student and be more motivated, like I said earlier 'cause I wasn't nearly as motivated in high school as I was now. I think it really actually helped me, or gave me a positive change, educationally wise.

Robert Bush agreed, "I think that our college experience definitely would not have been as satisfying without it." Several continued with the key concepts of "community" and "working together." Members found other disciplines to have smaller groups but, according to Emma Watson,

I definitely think the LLC is a group of people set aside from others. We all work tougher, whereas other people in different dorms, they may have smaller groups but overall, we all come together no matter what profession we are striving to be in.

Bill Cosby again echoed the theme of *small groups* and small groups not always being so cohesive. His perspective went like this:

I'd say if anybody coming into college that has a living–learning community, I'd say go for it because it's definitely beneficial. Because, like she said, the people in the other dorms, they have maybe small groups, but I talk to people that aren't in the LLC but are going for a nursing major and they struggle a bit more because they don't have the support and the, I guess knowledgeable background that everybody pools into one like we do it here in the LLC. The people not in the LLC tend to struggle a bit more because they're not surrounded by everybody who's in the same classes and the same atmosphere.

Emma came to the campus specifically to live at the living–learning community.

One last comment was made by the RA, Erica Snow, and it was unique in the fact that it focused on the introductory class. Erica commented,

I think in my freshman year I kind of left the LLC honestly a little bit bitter about it just because of the UNIV class. Like I said, I felt like it lacked a lot of, like, I felt it had potential and it just didn't really do what I expected it to do. As far as the people I lived with, I loved them, but I just think that I was so burnt out from that class that just seemed so empty, that I was annoyed by it. Now looking back at it, I really appreciated the people I met, especially just like I said a couple of times, because of the support system I have and the people that I know because of it.

Erica went on to add a statement addressing a concept I had thought of that may be associated with my bias. She remarked,

> Another comment I have is that, like I said earlier, I feel like it's helpful for the freshman, but where I am now, I feel like it would be more useful to live with nursing students. I feel like that would be something really interesting to look at. Is there a way to set up a living environment where junior or senior nursing students could live together? I know a lot of students do that off campus, but I think if it were something that were already set somewhere, it would help people be able to congregate in that way.

Key words of "bonds," "friends," "motivated," and "small groups" appeared in this commentary. This suggested notions of closeness or intimacy associated with the mutual support built within the living–learning community. The key word of "excitement" became evident by their responses as students were anticipating clinical hours; this branched into notions of looking forward to a pleasant experience in developing proficiencies and capabilities in their field. Themes from this group of questions emerged again regarding the importance of the RA and building networks of mutual support through the forming of bonds with other nursing students. RAs were seen as calming fears and preparing students for what lies ahead. Because the role of RA is so vital, it has turned into a coveted position. Several of the students were applying for the opportunity to become an RA. The key word of "motivation" came up again in this group of questions. Many felt the living–learning community and mentoring helped them "stay motivated" and, as freshman, motivation took on a new meaning. The importance of staying motivated is to keep up with studies and not get behind. Getting behind in studies is common because of the demands of the major. Safety came up in the responses and some viewed the living–learning community to be safer and more conducive to their studies.

Several of the students remarked how much they enjoyed the living–learning community and wished they could have kitchens in the residence. This opinion regarding kitchens came up later after the interviews took place. None had listed cost as a factor to leave but one individual did voice the opinion that as nursing gets more rigorous, she wished she could continue to live with nurses because she anticipated the need for continuing support in the years to come. The RA who participated in this study suggested having a living environment for the nursing students as the courses got more arduous.

Emergent Themes

This section presents the themes associated with the research questions for each cohort. It is important to take into consideration these are different institutions with different populations and these students are at a dissimilar point in their education.

Regarding Research Question 1, Cohort 1 students produced themes concerning *mutual support* and the *significance of the RA*. Students thought more individuals would build a better, larger "network of people" in relationship to supports that could be shared. *Social dynamics* of the living–learning community, particularly rooming with nursing students and forming close bonds, were emphasized. The phrase of "friends for life" appeared indicating that the supports were and may continue to be valued beyond the life of the program or life within the living–learning community. Thus, the importance of *networking* was established for academic as well as social supports. Participants voiced that everyone living in the nursing learning community were vital to the success of the program and added a "strong foundation." In this category of questions the importance of the RA was also illustrated as a provider and facilitator of mutual support.

Research Question 2 addressed mentoring. Mentoring was operationally defined by these participants as *unconditional positive regard* so this theme was noted. The importance of the RA again resurfaced. The RA provided mentoring and emotional support when these students were vulnerable. Faculty advisors helped students understand the totality of the profession and were seen as helpful. It was also concluded that faculty acted as mentors and role models. Faculty instilled the need for further education and the value of professionalism.

Research Question 3 addressed the views of participants as to factors that helped them persevere in the program. *Mutual support* was listed as a theme throughout the commentary. Appreciation was noted for faculty helping students identify and understand the various opportunities the participants are afforded within the profession. *Self-determination*, or finding the internal motivation to persist, was found as a theme among these students as they considered factors that helped them to remain in the program. These students would not ask to be mentored if they felt they were not. In short, the living–learning community seemed to provide a reflexive environment that contributed positively to these students willingness to self-direct themselves in pathways that would support their success within the nursing program. One student recommended "keeping an open mind." The experience allowed her to develop in ways she did not anticipate. Looking back at her time in the residence hall she implied, "I don't remember the inconveniences, I only remember my friends I made there."

Regarding Cohort 2 students, Question 1, again the theme of *mutual support* emerged. Participants spoke of *self-determination* as a theme by the use of phrases such as similar classes and being more serious and focused about their studies, the significance of the RA, and how vital it is that the RA be a nursing student. Friends were mentioned and how these friends help one another. Self-determination became a theme as evidenced by the words; serious and more

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focused. The living–learning community facilitated the students remaining "motivated" and dedicated to their studies. The RA was again seen as support through the program as one moves forward. In some instances, the RA position was an occupation that students had tried to obtain or were going to try to obtain. The social dynamics of this aggregate were similar to Cohort 1students regarding rooming and forming close bonds. Coeducational living was suggested to enhance social dynamics.

Research Question 2, pertaining to Cohort 2 members, introduced the topic of development and achievement with a focus on mentoring. This cohort listed mentors as contributors of advice and good role models, leading to the theme of *experienced*. Most listed the RA as the one who successfully filled this role and to whom trust could be assigned. *Anticipatory preparation* emerged as a theme as students were excited about what was in store for them. Additionally, the RA was seen as a central mentoring figure in the anticipatory set of questions.

The last research question addressed the views of participants regarding the usefulness of the living–learning community in promoting persistence in the program. This produced the desire for mentoring to continue through the program, thus, *mutual support* and *networking* again became themes. Mentoring was viewed as a component that needs to persist throughout the program. Mentoring helps facilitate *self-determination* and supports internal motivation. When the program becomes more rigorous, students still need mentors to assist them. Students in this group commented on the environment as both reflexive and adaptive.

Summary

In this study, I interviewed 14 participants and the same questions were asked of each participant in identical order. Cohort 1 participants consisted of three women and Cohort 2 consisted of 11 men and women. In order to capture direct quotes and thoughts, the viewpoints

of each participant was recorded. The results of the data analysis consisted of the following themes: *mutual support,* the *RA, social dynamics, networking, coeducational living, unconditional positive regard, experienced, investment in others success, importance of the RA being a nursing student, self-determination/internal motivation* and *the motivation to persist, anticipatory preparation, opportunity, self-determination,* and *self-reflection.*

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The U.S. is projected to experience a shortage of (RN) s due to the increasing age of

Baby Boomers and the establishment of the healthcare reform act (AACN, 2014). According to

the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Employment Projections 2012-2022, released in December 2013,

nursing is listed as among the top occupations in terms of job growth through 2022. As the

global population increases, the elderly sector is increasing and the need for nurses will be

paramount to meet the demands for the aging population (AACN, 2014). The only solution the

universities can agree upon is to educate more nurses. The implementation and sustenance of

living–learning communities may aid with retention and reduce academic failure prevalent in the

first years.

The purpose of this qualitative study using semi-structured focus group interviews was to

explore the perceptions of 14 students that had either lived or were living in a living–learning

community in service of learning those factors or dynamics that contributed most positively to

the effectiveness of the living–learning community in promoting student achievement and

persistence. Participants consisted of both men and women from two Midwestern Universities in

Indiana. Chapter 5 includes an overview of Chapters 1-4. In Chapter 5, I present findings and an

analysis of the data, themes emerging from

the data, and interpretations along with future recommendations based on the results obtained from my research.

Discussion of Findings

Questions provided to the separate cohorts produced both similar and diverse results. However, similarities and differences were articulated through common overarching and supporting themes that revealed the dynamics created within the living–learning communities examined. Articulation of these dynamics may contribute to a clearer understanding of perceived effective practices and those perceived as not so useful in the construct of a living–learning community. While discussion of these dynamics occurs within the framework of my research questions, components of the various theoretical constructs I have selected will help to situate findings in a manner that contributes to the larger dialogue on living–learning communities.

My first research question, "What influence has the living–learning community had on students' perceptions of their development and achievement?" was the introduction for the first subquestion. The first subquestion was phrased, "Describe what you appreciate about the living–learning community, what have you found helpful?" Commentary from Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 students gave rise to the themes of *mutual support* and the *guidance of the RA*. Under those arching themes were thematic concepts such as anticipatory preparation, social dynamics, and networking. Cohort 1 and 2 students found networking to be vital to their persistence.

These themes align directly with the NSSE benchmark of Active and Collaborative Learning, and with the benchmark of Supportive Campus Environment (NSSE, 2010), as they describe the dynamics perceived as effective in promoting student satisfaction and persistence in

programs. Moreover, drilling down into student perceptions associated with these themes provides a useful description of the preferred environments (E) that influence student outputs (O) in terms of achievement and persistence in the program as captured in Astin's (1993) I-E-O model. In that Astin's model contributed to the roots of the NSSE (Kuh, 2001), nesting these together in the discussion is logical.

Addressing the theme of *mutual support*, participants in Cohort 1 liked the fact that they were living in an environment with others who could relate. They liked working together, found it easier to cope, get help, and obtain guidance—all preferences associated with the subthemes of networking and anticipatory preparation. Associated with the theme of *social dynamics*, close bonds were formed and some of these relationships were going to continue for a long time. One female participant stated, "I have friends I met there and now they are my core." Cohort 2 participants had many friends and would go next door if they needed information or needed to know how or who to study with. Having other students in similar classes in close proximity was convenient for them and they found this important to not only achievement but also to a sense of camaraderie. It has been reported that the single most powerful source of influence on the undergraduate student's academic life is the peer group and the amount of interaction among peers has far-reaching effects on nearly all areas of student learning (Astin, 1993). It would seem that this finding is borne out in the current study.

Cohort 2 members echoed other, similar sentiments associated with the theme of *mutual support*. Moreover, they felt their residence environment was serious, more focused and reflexive, and helped one remain motivated in one's studies. This being said, self-determination was presented as a theme subsumed under mutual support. Students felt more in control of the outcomes they could achieve in the program, and more confident about matriculating from the

program as a result of living in the focused and reflexive environment. Research supports that the more often students interacted with peers and faculty, and the more strongly they felt supported academically and socially by their residence hall environment, the more likely students would achieve their learning outcomes (Kuh, 2008).

Thus, environmental conditions such as students living in a focused, reflexive community in proximity with others who can relate and guide by virtue of sharing a major and having or having had similar classes was seen by these students as contributing to their achievement and willingness to persist in the program. Environmental conditions that allowed for opportunities to network and create positive social relationships was seen as also contributing to similar outcomes. These conditions worked dynamically together to illuminate those factors associated with the NSSE benchmarks of active collaboration and learning within what the students perceived as a supportive campus environment. They perceived these conditions as contributing to the outcomes desired by the universities achievement and persistence in the programs.

This question also elicited the introduction of the importance of the RA. The RA was a vital thread through most of the commentary as the RA was seen as the central person who would support, guide, give advice, and help nursing students. Students in both cohorts were strongly in agreement with this perception. It was at this juncture that preference for the RA to be a nursing student specifically was noted. This sentiment was expressed by both of the cohorts.

The next subquestion asked," Is there any aspect of the living–learning community that you did not find helpful? If so, please describe that aspect. What might need to be changed or modified to make the community more helpful?" This produced the theme of *social dynamics* of the living–learning community. Cohort 2 students presented the idea of coeducational living as a preferred element in the living–learning community. The concept of coeducational living was not

expressed by Cohort 1 members though this may be due to the fact that these students no longer lived in the living–learning community. Because there were only three respondents, it may also be that this was not a concern for only these three while others may have raised this issue. In terms of the nature of the social dynamics of the living–learning community, it would appear that there may be a comfort level involved in having others of the same sex living in proximity in the living–learning community environment. A male student expressed his wish for more male students to be present. This is in keeping with the suppositions of Astin (1993), who suggested that men are more likely to affiliate with men during college and women are more likely to affiliate with women; as a consequence, men are more likely to be influenced by the values and behavior of other men and women are more likely to be influenced by the values and behavior of other women. In this institution there was a predominance of female students in the major and this was reflected in the living–learning community population. It is interesting also that although one male student raised the issue, he was seconded by a female student. This may indicate that there is a desire for more of a balance between the sexes in occupancy in the living–learning community, or at least a desire for a yet unknown number or percentage of members of the same sex in the living–learning community. Because I did not follow up with additional questions during the interviews, further investigation is required to produce more detailed insights.

Several Cohort 1 students suggested a need for more nursing students living in the living–learning community. They wanted a larger network of people and expressed the desire to make more friends. However, Cohort 1 students lived in themed housing that had few nursing students on their floor. One commented, "There were only 20 of us, and our class started off as 100 nursing students that got accepted." This complements the NSSE benchmark of enriching

educational experiences (NSSE, 2010) in that experiencing additional friendships and diversity

outside the major not only enhances students' knowledge about other cultures and disciplines but

also about themselves. These involvements are seen to augment the academic program by the

words students used such as "connecting more." Building friendships was seen as important to

these women and more friends would be an added benefit to increase opportunities for

networking and for building mutual support. This was voiced by a Cohort 1 female student. She

remarked that her roommate was not a nursing student but she will be the maid of honor in her

wedding. Thus, Cohort 1 students made many diverse friendships and some had lasted for years.

The dynamics in this situation demonstrate that valuable connections are formed in spite of lack

of commonality. Networking dynamics reveal the benefits of knowing everyone and yet being

made to feel "outcast" if you were not part of the community. This was suggested by a female

student in Cohort 1. It is implied by this remark that those not living in the community may feel

alone or not connected. This is not clear because there were no students who left the living–

learning community involved in the research. This commentary suggests those that live in the

living–learning community are feeling cohesive and may not include others from the program

that do not live at the residence hall.

Another NSSE (2010) benchmark in this commentary reflects active and collaborative

learning. Collaborating with others in solving problems enables students to master difficult

material during and after college. Students wished for more friends and wanted more networking

opportunities that suggested the students want more involvement with colleagues. Astins' (1993)

environment (E) section of the I-E-O model addressed this segment along with the (O) outcomes

segment. Environmental factors and the peer group, along with discussing course content with

others, has far reaching effects. Outcomes include but are not limited to: applying and using

more critical thinking skills, taking advantage of opportunities to apply knowledge to new settings and expressing more commitment by volunteering (Brower & Inkelas, 2010). Considering these comments, students expressed the wish for the RA to be a nursing student. By having the RA be a nursing student, students seemed appeased because of guidance offered and commonality. There was reported to be a "disconnect" from the replacement RA who was not a nursing major, reinforcing the notion that guidance and commonality are important to the mutual support students seek in learning as well as negotiating the complexities of college life.

Another item that was identified as not helpful was the UNIV class. It was deemed as "not fitting into the schedule" of one of the female residents. One student volunteered that the class took "up some time that could be used doing something else, like fulfilling with another class so I have later time to study." Another student offered, "Being a stressed out nursing student, trying to study for anatomy and stuff like that, it's really frustrating when you sit in a class that doesn't seem to have meaning at that time." In other words, the UNIV class was not seen as immediately useful in getting students ready for more demanding classes.

One expressed the concern of having college freshman change majors. One female student from Cohort 2 commented,

> Another thing that I've noticed is that since they are freshmen, a lot of them end up
>
> changing their majors. Maybe half of the people, by the time they finish their freshman
>
> year, aren't even nursing [majors] anymore. They're still all living together, so I don't
>
> know.

Although friendships have been formed, the mutual educational support derived from living with others in the same major and solving problems collaboratively is lost. Thus, retention may suffer.

One must also be mindful that the major continues to be challenging as student progress through the program. One student wished that there was something in place for when students got older. She voiced, "I almost wish it were something where when we're older, we got to be together 'cause I feel like as a junior I needed more support system for nursing classes than I did as a freshman." This commentary reveals that students feel the need for support throughout their programs.

"How has the living–learning community assisted you or failed to assist you with your academic growth?" This subquestion produced the overarching theme of the *importance of the RA* with the subthemes of foundation, anticipatory preparation, and self-determination embedded. The NSSE (2010) benchmarks of the supportive campus environment and active and collaborative learning again became apparent.

Cohort 2 students were excited for what the future held and mostly credited the RA as the single person most pivotal in preparing them for what lie ahead. The RA was seen as the individual in closest proximity to Cohort 2 students and was deemed to be most willing to not only answer questions students posed in anticipatory preparation for current program challenges but also to provide information in anticipatory preparation for what the RA believed would be necessary for students as they moved through the program. Many students listed self-determination and the living–learning community providing a solid foundation to enable them to persevere while also crediting the RA as a major influence in the genesis and evolution of students' sense of self-determination in service of persistence and success.

Networking, friends, and creative activities of the RA were also listed as vital in helping students succeed. One student in Cohort 1 explained a chart that was hung by the bathroom so that walking by, one could view it. This chart was a visual representation of anatomy that

reinforced learning pertaining to that science class. Students in the living–learning community were currently in that anatomy class and it had been referred to as a "weed out" class. This student remarked the RA would put up "what we were studying at the time, maybe different systems and stuff." In this case, the drawing could be seen as peer tutoring for the students and anticipatory guidance on the part of the RA. This act further demonstrates attributes of a reflexive environment, especially on the part of the RA who sought to create such. This is an example of a complementary learning activity regarding the NSSE benchmark of active and collaborative learning (NSSE 2004; NSSE 2010). Moreover, Cohort 1 students deemed the cohesive group as instrumental in continuation in the program and they said the living–learning community provided them with a "solid foundation." The support system of the living–learning community was identified by both cohorts as being helpful. Astin's (1993) E component is emphasized with such environmental dynamics created and sustained by the RA.

Again, mutual support in the form of networks of strong relationships, academic and social support, proximity to classmates, a reflexive environment, and anticipatory preparation provided by the RA helped sustain students through the challenges encountered in the program. West (2000) defined group reflexivity as "the extent to which group members overtly reflect upon, and communicate about the group's objectives, strategies (e.g., decision making) and processes (e.g., communication), and adapt them to current or anticipated circumstances" (p. 296).

Self-determination materialized in the student's answers and this presented an interesting insight related to Astin's (1993) I-E-O model, particularly in relationship to the inputs portion of the model. Inputs "refers to those personal qualities the student brings initially to the educational program (including the student's initial level of developed talent at the time of entry)" (Astin,

1993, p. 18). Examples of inputs may include educational background, demographic conditions, political orientation, behavior pattern, degree aspiration, financial status, disability status, major field of study, career choice, reasons for attending college, and life goals. First generation college students need more help in college and are more prone to drop out (Astin, 1993). Several participants from Cohort 2 were first generation college students yet they characterized themselves as being "highly motivated" and influencing others to be motivated as well. One young man remarked he was not motivated in high school but found himself motivated by the environment in which he was now living. It would appear that inputs can be significantly molded by a well-structured, reflexive environment such as has been described. Moreover, this environment seems to encourage development of a sense of self-determination that likely contributes to persistence in programs.

The next question asked, "What influence has mentoring within the living–learning community had on students perceptions of their development and achievement?" Specifically, "What is your understanding of mentoring?" Comments from this question produced the overarching theme of the *importance of the RA*, the role of faculty, and subthemes such as unconditional positive regard, experienced, self-determination, and opportunity. These concepts align with the NSSE benchmarks of student interactions with faculty members and active and collaborative learning (NSSE, 2010).

Within the NSSE benchmark of student interactions with faculty members, one notes that the students in this study are learning firsthand how experts think inside and outside of the classroom by listening to their stories about committee work and research. Cohort 1 students found their instructors as respectful role models. Not only did their students respect them but they also showed respect to their students referring them as "colleagues." Moreover, faculty

helped students in Cohort 1 learn of the multiplicity of professional opportunities available to them outside the role of floor nurse. Students were influenced by faculty doing research and working on committees. In regard to this, one woman said her professor influenced her to be "more than a floor nurse." Instructors encouraged the further development of the students' self-determination and opportunity was demonstrated by instructors' role modeling accomplished behavior.

Mentors were seen as caring, invested, colleagues who supported their mentees under all circumstances, hence, unconditional positive regard. According to Mullen (2009), mentors who treat mentees as repositories of information to whom they can make deposits undermine the value of mentoring. These perpetuate actions seen as oppressive, dehumanizing, and degrading. Those mentors who encourage relationships that are steeped in humanity are based on respect and equality Students in Cohort 1 described mentors as "walking along side of the person they're mentoring" and "someone who helps you when you are overwhelmed or confused. Someone to give advice." The act of advice giving is supported by the research of Ambrosetti and Dekkers (2010). However, though students in both cohorts informally nodded to faculty demonstrating these qualities, it was the RA who garnered the most attention in terms of actualizing the role, particularly in Cohort 2. Hence, there appeared to be some overlap of the RA responsibilities between the roles of collaborative learner and pseudo-faculty representative. Although students certainly did not perceive the RA as a faculty member, they did indeed turn to the RA for mentoring within the program in the form of anticipatory preparation, and in the form of providers of a reflexive environment through which self-determination was developed. Specifically, it was the RA who was identified in most of the commentary as the one who mentors and enables students to succeed. This was demonstrated by a male student in Cohort 2

receiving a bad test score and he was "stressed." His mentor (RA) encouraging him to continue forth. Moreover, it was suggested by both cohorts of students that the RA needed to be a nursing major. As RAs are upperclass students with more experience in the program and specific classes, she or he was seen as one able to contribute directly to the mutual support and reflexive environment students valued. Many students also saw the RA as someone who listens, comforts, and was simply present when needed.

The NSSE benchmark of active and collaborative learning (NSSE, 2014) consists of working with others to solve problems; yet, in this environment, opportunities for mutual support and mentoring were increased through the strategies engaged by the RA and enhanced by the living–learning community providing for proximity. This was validated by Cohort 2 when a male student said one can probe someone next door when you have a problem or question. Again, the example of the anatomy chart provided by the RA demonstrates that not only was the RA responding in anticipatory preparation for what she knew the students would need to help ensure success, she was also creating an opportunity for active and collaborative learning among the peers and herself. In short, she was mentoring these students through engaging them in ways that build networks of mutual support.

Cohort 1 students came to the university knowing they were self-determined. Anticipating college would be challenging, these women were determined to succeed no matter how rigorous the program became. Comments were made that included,

> People don't come to [university name] if you're not internally motivated at some point or by something in your life. I think that the learning community just enhanced that and made it come out. Cuz for example, when I came here, I wanted to get involved in stuff, but I wasn't really quite sure what I wanted to do, and I found my way, I guess, found my

niche that I have stuck with the past, three four years, whatever you wanna say. I think

just having the internal motivation and just really excelling in that is really important, and

the learning community definitely helped with that.

This concept aligns with Astin's (1993) inputs, as these students were vastly different in their

academic pre-college preparation as compared to Cohort 2. Cohort 1 members were appreciative

that their professors introduced the multiplicity of opportunities within the profession and that

their professors encouraged them to join professional organizations and perhaps do research.

Both Cohort 1 and 2 group members viewed the RA as pertinent to their academic and

social successes. Both of the aggregates identified the RA as dynamic, they were still friends (in

some instances), and the RA was supplemental to strong relationships. RAs help participants

through the rigors of the arduous program. This was more prominently voiced by those students

in Cohort 2. Students in both cohorts attached particular importance to the ability of the RA to be

"invested" in the growth and the matriculation of others. Participants at both universities noted

that their RAs did not seem personally invested on occasion. This implies that, if one takes on

the role of the RA, one should be willing to promote another's achievement. Of course, having

the background knowledge of the rigors of the nursing program by virtue of being a more

advanced nursing student does place one more strategically to supply the support needed.

Astin's (1993) I-E-O model once again is demonstrated by the students in the fact that the

environment highly contributed to the students' satisfaction and success. The environment

"refers to the student's actual experiences during the educational program" (Astin, 1993, p. 18).

Included in the environment are the outcomes measured and everything that happens during the

program that may impact the student. It is posited that some environmental factors may be

antecedents such as joining a college organization or exposure to institutional policies. These

environmental factors may include the personnel, curricula, instructor, facilities, institutional climate, and program. Given students' remarks, it would appear that proper training or orientation of the RA to the dynamics he or she is charged with creating and maintaining is paramount. The RA not being invested from time to time creates friction and uncertainty for the student as found in the comments in both cohorts.

The next subquestion, "Please describe a time when you were mentored in the living–learning community. What did you find helpful?" This subquestion produced the overarching theme as the continued importance of the *RA* along with subthemes listed as *self-determination/internal motivation.* Student attrition is high during the first year and these students can be described as vulnerable at this formative stage (Tinto, 2005). Participants from cohort 1 were internally motivated and driven—self-determined. Those from cohort 2 had to acquire self-motivation skills with one male student even noting he lacked motivation in high-school. His colleagues and the RA assisted him with these skills. Cohort 1 identified a faculty advisor for the learning community as a mentor. It was reported by a female in Cohort 1 that many students did not know what nursing was. This faculty advisor taught them what nursing was and what makes a good nurse. Initially, some students come into a career that they do not know the complexities of. Astin's (1993) inputs are characteristics one possesses upon the entrance to the University. This is an example of how students differ in their abilities and how they can transform because of their environments and their peer groups. Once more, the environment in the I-E-O model of Astin assists with the transformation of students into the nursing occupation. Specifically, the mentor, whether that individual is an RA or a faculty member, must be cognizant of the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and contextual background with which the student comes equipped and then be sufficiently invested in the student to

promote the conditions that provide for mutual support and reflexiveness. Moreover, the

construct of the living–learning community must create the conditions wherein the mentor has

the opportunity to learn specifically of the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and contextual

backgrounds of the students.

These experiences mold the student and, in some instances, have encouraged the student

to persist. This was evident when a male student became discouraged and fatigued. When

directly asked this research question, he responded, "If you do get a bad test grade, knowing that

if you work hard, that one bad grade isn't going to hurt you." Growth is the outcome of

struggling and working through challenges. This process allows individuals to mature into

professionals and allows for the betterment of the individual. The reflexive environment

supported by a well-attuned mentor promotes such.

The next subquestion was "How did this help you do better as a student? How did this

help you develop as an individual or professional?" This subset of questions produced the themes

of *respect* and *anticipatory preparation*. Cohort 1 students identified a faculty advisor who was

instrumental in affording students respect. She would treat students as professional nurses and

call them "colleagues." Students felt as if they were not "little freshman who didn't know

anything." This relationship is aligned with the NSSE benchmark of student and faculty

interactions (NSSE, 2010). NSSE implications state that inside and outside interactions with

faculty are vital to student success (NSSE, 2010). Teachers serve as advisors, guides, role

models, and mentors for continuous learning. This bonding experience is core to student

achievement. According to Wiseman (1994) nursing faculty members act as role models for

their students, whether for first semester prelicensure, faculty members, or seasoned graduate

students. This illustration is an example of how valuable the professor has been to the student.

Students are seen as respected by the faculty and treated with dignity. Professors are instrumental with the development of the student and the student evolving into a nurse. According to Astin (1993), the peer group, the faculty interaction, and faculty relationship represents the most significant aspect of the students' undergraduate development. Interacting with faculty is found to have widespread effects on student success; this may be achieved by doing research with a faculty member or visiting a faculty member in their home among other activities (Astin, 1993).

Cohort 2 students again articulated how the mutual support from other people was instrumental in continuing forward. RAs gave tips in how to succeed and students were excited about stories and what they could anticipate regarding clinical experience. This was demonstrated when a male student in the group suggested he was motivated by other "highly motivated" people in themed housing. It was acknowledged that the RA "answered questions and was there to help fix problems and gave pointers when things went wrong socially." Thus, the NSSE supportive campus environment benchmark emerged again along with Astin's E component of the I-E-O model (Astin, 1993; NSSE, 2014). Specifically, the dynamics of the environment must create the conditions for mutual support both in between-student interactions and in student–faculty interactions. This also extends to student–RA interactions when the RA is actively functioning as a mentor. Several students in Cohort 2 proclaimed that being "around everybody" helped. Being around everybody "just helps you work together with other people and I think that helps you become more professional." This atmosphere is enhanced by affording students the necessary respect for them to perceive themselves as valuable to those within the environment.

The next question, "Was there any aspect to the mentoring that you did not find helpful? If so, please describe that aspect. What might be changed or modified to make the mentoring

more helpful?" produced commentary regarding the themes of *investment in others success* and the *importance of the RA,* especially that RA being a nursing student. One female in Cohort 1 was disappointed in her RA not being "personally involved." Personality mismatches and mentor skills (or lack of them) have been found to be main causes of negativity in traditional mentoring relationships (Eby, McManus, Simon, & Russell, 2000). This sentiment of discontent was also echoed by another female in Cohort 2 when she said changing RAs was a "setback." She explained the nature of the setback in this way: "She can't really help us with our anatomy classes or our stresses. She can't really relate to it." This participant said that she had an RA who had changed to an education major so there was a lack of commonality. Disharmony and conflict could be a result of changing the RA to someone who is not majoring in nursing. Yet, RA-student disharmony is not the only concern of those students in the living–learning community.

Cohort 2 students also mentioned their dissatisfaction with the UNIV class. This class is designed to help students assimilate into college life. However, students identified the UNIV class as not being beneficial to their learning. The class was seen as useful to an extent, but some sessions were not seen as a pertinent use of time. Specifically, most Cohort 2 students felt that this class did not need to be required for both semesters (fall and spring) and, although it was informative for guest speakers to present, it was not necessary to take up one credit a semester. This aspect aligns with the NSSE benchmark regarding level of academic challenge where students prefer to be challenged by setting high expectations and making those expectations attainable. The next cohort addressed mentoring through their values regarding living conditions.

Cohort 1 members desired all nursing students to live in the living–learning community: this would expand the network of individuals providing mutual support. Additionally, it would

enable the making of friendships that would extend past the college nursing program. However, this remark was not substantiated by Cohort 2 students. It was suggested by Cohort 1 that having an upperclassmen share ideas and strategies for success would be beneficial. Perhaps even having another person besides the RA for mentoring, maybe someone who had previously lived in the living–learning community would be seen as a positive suggestion. The NSSE benchmark for this information suggest when students have commonality they can dynamically participate in active and collaborative learning (NSSE, 2010). In the nursing major, it is vital to share information and have close proximity with likeminded individuals. Students need similarity which can best be abetted by sharing common interests. Astin's (1993) E, which deals with the environment, is again incorporated into this material. By having an environment with individuals who share the same major, the experience and goals are further promoted. If it is done correctly, having a mentor in the same field enhances performance. Thus, mentors should share a connection and relate not only to each other, but to the nursing students. If one accepts the position of the RA, it is imperative to become involved with others and be invested in the success of mentees.

The last subquestion from this section expands upon mentoring by asking the question, "If you had not been mentored, would you ask to be mentored if you felt it would benefit you?" While both groups agreed on the fact that they had been mentored, Cohort 1 members felt it came from the natural dynamics of communal living and that they would not have specifically asked for mentoring. One student stated, "It is a labor and time-intensive thing and I don't know if I want to ask someone of that, just because it's expecting a lot of them." This substantiates the theme of *self-determination* and the value of the RA. The students in Cohort 1 stated they were very prepared and self-determined before beginning college and that they would never have

searched for a mentor. It was as if they viewed asking to be mentored as a form of dependency or a weakness. I derived at this from the quick, automatic responses and the fact they these students seemed to be self-reliant and independent. One female student from Cohort 1 replied, "I would find it out for myself." This suggests her strong self-determination. While the responses of cohort 1 were to disregard mentoring, literature states that a mentee who is near the end of the journey will need less mentoring than one who has just begun that learning journey (Le Maistre, Boudreau, & Pare, 2006). Mentoring encompasses all of NSSE's (2010) benchmarks: student interactions with faculty members, active and collaborative learning, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environments.

However, students in Cohort 2 answered quite differently. One male student said he would definitely ask for mentoring. Another student quipped, "We have a lot of resources with advisors and I think there are some student advisors maybe." Yet all Cohort 2 students remarked they would ask. This group of students did not see mentoring as asking a lot of someone. One male student remarked, "It's not like they're gonna be slaving over you." Erica Snow did not care for the way mentoring was established at her Cohort 2 university; she stated,

> In my experience, it really hasn't been that successful because the way they do it is just send you an email saying, this is your person. You would have to make a real effort to become close with that person. I feel like if they set it up where it was an in person thing, at least the first time to meet that person, it would help. 'Cause I know as a sophomore my mentor did not contact me that way. I had to go to her, and I feel like there are people who wouldn't ask like I did. I think there is a program in place but it could use a little improvement.

Astin's (1993) I-E-O theory of inputs consists of different traits that diverse students bring to the university campus. It is through this mixture that Cohort 2 students embraced mentoring. This stands in direct contrast to Cohort 1. Cohort 1 prided themselves in self-determination and a perseverance to work hard. On the other hand, Cohort 2 became more motivated by their peers and, as time went on, became cohesive. Again, these aggregate groups are unique in how they perceive concepts to be and in what they expect from college life, as well as how they view campus support.

The last group of questions merges the living–learning community and mentoring together. The main research question was, "What influence has the living–learning community and mentoring had on students' willingness to remain in or leave a program?" The subquestion was "If you have found the living–learning community helpful, how has it assisted you to remain in the nursing program? NSSE's (2010) supportive campus environment permeates this set of commentary and states that student performance is enhanced through positive relationships in a diverse environment. These positive relationships promote high academic performance by being "focused" and being exposed to different viewpoints. *Opportunity* and *self-determination* were the overarching themes, as well as *self-reflection*. Networking was also listed as imperative to social and academic dynamics. This vigorous collaboration is set forth when individual students make new friends, attend similar classes, create meaningful relationships, and work together to problem solve. This partnership is witnessed firsthand when participants give reasons for staying in the living–learning community.

Students in Cohort 1 said they would not leave the program because of their level of self-determination. Moreover, friends they had met allowed them to "endure the program." This cohort of students remarked they were glad they had someone to whom they could "vent." This

venting promotes a safe environment where students can express pent-up emotion to a trusted colleague. This cohort liked the consistency of individuals in the nursing program. Mutual support resurfaced as individuals assisted their contemporaries to obtain greater achievement. It seems that new found friends allowed them to persevere in the nursing program.

The subquestion of "If you have not found the living–learning community helpful, how did it influence you to leave the nursing program?" was not appropriate for these two cohorts due to the fact that all participants were still attending the program. It was unanimous that the nursing students enjoyed the living–learning community.

"If you were mentored, what role has mentoring played in your desire to remain in the program?" was another question in this category. *Opportunity* emerged as the theme of this annotation. Again, student interaction with faculty members continued to be a variable in the program; indeed, both of these universities demonstrated a supportive campus environment. Several of the students were grateful that they learned other avenues of nursing besides bedside nursing, thus providing them more opportunities for their careers. Even at this early juncture in their career preparation, one female student did not envision herself remaining a floor nurse indefinitely. One female student from Cohort 1 said prior to school she had envisioned all nurses "as floor nurses." This implies working in the hospital with direct patient care. Since attending college, she knows there are other possibilities.

Mentoring as offered by this faculty promoted a wider vision of career offerings that enabled her to persist. Students commented their professors were successful and inspired them to expand their career opportunities. Research was identified as important to the university and was seen as a factor contributing to the trust students were willing to assign faculty in their roles as mentors and role models. Many students felt that faculty had influenced them in a positive way

and that students had a solid foundation to build upon. Cohort 1 members identified faculty as instrumental in professional development and encouragement. Students were inspired by faculty members that had gone on to conduct research and form committees. This conflicts with the literature. Most students from large research state institutions do not value professors who are working on professional achievements and view this as time taken away from them (Astin, 1993). Thus, this demonstrates positive role modeling has occurred at this university. Cohort 2 students did not identify faculty as influential but did list their student peers as supportive and indicated they gave guidance.

The subquestion "If you were mentored but did not find it helpful, how did that influence your willingness to leave the program?" did not apply to these two groups. All students remained in the program and were overall satisfied with their programs and universities. In fact, these students were very proud of their universities.

The last subquestion was "What other thoughts or perspectives would you like to share about the living–learning community or mentoring?" *Self-determination* became the overarching theme. Another important dynamic was "self-reflection." One female individual from Cohort 1 stressed the importance of keeping an "open mind." She discussed that her residence hall did not have air-conditioning and referred to it as the "father dorm" due to its age, but looking back, not having air-conditioning was "not a big deal." She valued the friends she had made at the living–learning community and emphasized that in her response. In short, remaining open-minded and focused on relationships that enabled mutual support outweighed the limitations of physical facilities. Still, in relationship to physical facilities, students in Cohort 2 identified safety as an issue in other dorms and violations occurring elsewhere. Thus, it would seem that safety would be key to positive perceptions of the living–learning community.

Before the interview was concluded, I asked them about the qualifications of a good RA.
Peyton Sawyer commented,

> I think somebody that's willing to help others out, that has that internal motivation that
> they want to do more than just be a floor nurse, I think. I think it's the people that want to
> go further and want to do more with their lives. I know that sounds cliché, but I think
> those are the people that are gonna make the impact at different levels within themselves
> around others and their career in general.

I asked if RAs mentored. Peyton responded, "not all of them, but I think even unknowingly they
act as one." Mentoring and self-determination have gone hand in hand regarding the success of
women at this university.

Cohort 2 students focused on the theme of self-determination as well. These participants
remarked that other groups may be "smaller groups" but the nursing living–learning community
was more cohesive and intimate. This cohort remained persistent in their quest to stay in and
matriculate from the nursing program. One participant found the living–learning community to
be beneficial due to being in proximity to other students in the same classes and the same
atmosphere. All agreed they liked the living–learning community and were glad they had the
experience of living in one. Cohort 2 students took more of a "we are all in this together" stance
and valued each other staying in the program. This was not apparent with Cohort 1 students.
Once again, the Astin's (1993) E resurfaced as the supportive environment enables participants
to endure through the rigorous program.

Implications for Practice

This qualitative study examined living–learning communities through the framework of
the NSSE benchmarks (NSSE, 2004; NSSE, 2010) along with the lenses of theorists Lave,

Wenger, and Astin's I-E-O model. These benchmarks and theorists have long been used for the

foundations of best university practices (Astin, 1993; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Popkess &

McDaniel, 2011). I will begin by explaining the underpinning of the NSSE effective educational

practices.

The NSSE, developed in Bloomington in 2000, is an instrument that measures freshman

and senior college student's engagement (NSSE, 2010). The survey consists of five national

benchmarks of effective education practice. Those benchmarks are (a) level of academic

challenge, (b) student interactions with faculty members, (c) active and collaborative learning,

(d) enriching educational experiences, and (e) a supportive campus environment (NSSE, 2004).

By setting high levels of academic challenge, colleges and universities stimulate high

levels of student achievement as aligned with Benchmark A. Due to the rigors of prerequisite

classes such as anatomy and chemistry, and the general rigor associated with the nursing

programs, this is accomplished in the nursing schools at the universities. However, these rigors

can render the student vulnerable and attrition is likely to occur. As revealed through the data in

this study, a properly structured living–learning community provides students with a mitigating

environment of mutual support wherein networking and collaborative academic and social

problem-solving can occur. Students are thus encouraged by each other to continue in the

program. The theme of mutual support further insinuates that this is a stimulating environment

that promotes critical thinking and complex task mastery. This was suggested by students from

both cohorts. Cohort 1 students asserted the need for help and guidance. Cohort 2 students

addressed the subtleties of synchronized schedules for living–learning community members as

important to ensuring time and dedicated space for securing help, solving problems, and

engaging in positive social interaction. Universities need to ensure structural elements for mutual

support (collaboration, etc.) are in place. Students from both cohorts indicated that this living–learning community dynamic promoted them being more focused and motivated about studies which, in turn, stimulated persistence in the program. Anticipatory guidance and preparation were listed as vital to continuation in the program for both cohorts. Given this, the importance of a carefully selected and trained RA becomes apparent. Commentary from students in both cohorts revealed the RA as a central figure in promoting an environment wherein mutual support is fostered. Moreover, in the experiences shared by both cohorts, the RA was seen as the key individual for providing anticipatory guidance to ensure students endured and achieved through the rigors of the program. The RA was the individual students turned to first in anticipatory preparation for what lay ahead in the program.

Student interaction with faculty members is Benchmark B. Respect emerged as a sub-theme in this category. Students in Cohort 1 liked being appreciated and being referred to as a colleague. By interacting with faculty members, students learn firsthand in and out of the classroom. Those that reside in a living–learning community have more accessibility to their instructors by virtue of living on campus in dedicated housing. Hence, students living in the living–learning community have a greater chance of developing this relationship with their faculty members and such opportunities should be overtly attended to by persons developing the dynamics within the living–learning community, particularly those individuals at the program and university levels. As a result, professors become role models, guides for continuous learning, and mentors. This was evidenced by Cohort 1 students and one remarked her professors influenced her to become more than a floor nurse. This statement reinforced the sub-theme of opportunity and students were grateful they learned other avenues of employment within the profession besides bedside nursing. One female participant, even at this early juncture in her

career preparation, did not see herself remaining a floor nurse indefinitely. Mentoring as offered by this faculty promoted a wider vision of career offerings that helped her to persist. This was observed in Cohort 1 as one participant voiced, "We were treated as professional nurses from day one." Two students remarked highly regarding their professors and how they appreciated them and their guidance. These students in Cohort 1 wanted other opportunities in nursing; however, they were closer to graduation.

Professors inspired students to continue with their educational pursuits and to further their careers. One female participant stated how she appreciated her professors. Faculty research was identified by these students as important to the university and was seen as a factor contributing to the trust students were willing to assign faculty in their roles as mentors and role models. Many students felt that faculty had influenced them in a positive way and that students had a solid foundation from which to build.

Benchmark C is listed as active and collaborative learning. Applying what they are learning to different settings is conducive to student learning. This is demonstrated within the living–learning community by collaborating with others and assisting with problem solving. As considered in relationship to NSSE Benchmark A, a carefully structured environment allowing for networking facilitated by synchronized schedules provides a convenient opportunity to collaborate. Such an environment was seen as a useful means for negotiating the rigors of program coursework and for providing a mutually supportive social climate conducive to student persistence. Most participants from both of the cohorts considered the RA, especially if the RA was a nursing major, as contributory in enabling active and collaborative learning along with giving unconditional positive regard. One example was the RA who designed anatomy study charts and hung those on the door of the residence. Many students felt the RA had given them

anticipatory guidance and, as a result, comfort. Residing in the living–learning community facilitated an active and collaborative process and could be viewed as instrumental to student success regarding this benchmark. Again, this emphasized the value of an environment of mutual support with extended opportunities for networking. Members of the living–learning community got together and problem solved. Cohort 1 students suggested expansion, with phrases like more friends, more people, while Cohort 2 members went to each other for advice. One student embraced the sentiment of other students in desiring greater contact with experienced students who had been through more of the courses and knew more of the faculty. Thus, the notion of cross-generational participation in the living–learning community was embraced. Although a participant nearing the end of her program indicated that the cost of living in the living–learning community was a limiting factor in making this hope a reality, it may be useful for university-level planners to consider options. Perhaps opening more dedicated RA positions to nursing majors who are upperclass students may be reasonable. Conversely, structured opportunities outside of a class setting may provide the interactions sought. However, one must remain mindful of how little free time is available to students in a program with a heavy clinical and study load complicated by outside employment responsibilities.

Enriching educational experiences is listed as Benchmark D. This benchmark addresses academic diversity and through the use of self-reflection, students mature into their roles in society. Enriching educational experiences include those that challenge the student and promote the use of self-determination. Again, this was apparent in Cohort 1 students and possibly occurring in Cohort 2 students.

Benchmark E is the supportive campus environment. Mutual support was a theme embraced by both cohorts. Student perceptions in this study indicated that mutual support not

only enhances student achievement but also promotes self-determination and, consequently, persistence. These qualities are necessary to matriculate from the program. It is documented (NSSE, 2010) that students perform better and are more satisfied at colleges that commit to student success. Mutual support, again, is embraced as a theme paramount to the living–learning community dynamics and students rely on each other and especially, the RA. The RA was seen as a central figure in promoting the environment of mutual support through the giving of unconditional positive regard, providing anticipatory guidance, and by promoting self-reflection in service of building students' capacity for self-determination. One female student in Cohort 1 added the theme of self-reflection in a broader sense associated with the program, especially through the informal mentoring and role-modeling provided by the faculty. Self-reflection is stimulated by a supportive campus environment that is safe and reflexive.

This benchmark also emphasizes social relations and campus friendships. Students in Cohort 1 lived with other participants not sharing a mutual nursing major, and yet, they still became intimate friends. The sub-theme of social dynamics evolved. Both groups developed close bonds while living with others that have common interests. Even those who did not share the same major were able to form close ties. Coeducational living was suggested by Cohort 2; both men and women were in favor of having more men in the living–learning community. Thus, the data seem to indicate that universities seeking to enhance the social dynamics of the living–learning community should consider the cost/benefit calculus of integrating the sexes and other majors in proximity within the living–learning community.

Noteworthy findings from the 2013 NSSE survey included,

- First-year students who participated in at least one high-impact practice (learning community, service-learning, or research with a faculty member) reported greater

gains in their knowledge , skills, and personal development, were more satisfied with their entire educational experience, and were more likely to say they would choose the same institution if they were to start over again. (p. 15)

- Only 40% of students identified an academic advisor as their primary source of advice regarding the academic plans. About one-third of first-year students and 18% of seniors identified friends or family as their primary source of academic advice, and another 18% of seniors identified faculty members who were not formally assigned as an advisor. (p. 22)

This implies that students seek help from those they have close connections with. That being said, residing in a living–learning community would provide such for students who are struggling to get help and seek advice. This was confirmed by the research study with the remarks from both the cohort group members. Students reported forming close bonds, and networking in their residences. Due to the rigors of the nursing program, mutual support is vital and beneficial for continuation and matriculation. Those individuals living on campus, and preferably in a living–learning community, would continue to remain engaged and able to navigate the complexities of the nursing program.

Data derived from student commentary reveals that the NSSE benchmarks are addressed substantively through the dynamics created in the living–learning communities studied. Moreover, the data reveal that the benchmarks are symbiotic, especially as these are given life within the dynamics of the living–learning community. Understanding the dialectic in this relationship is enhanced through the themes identified and these provide specific implications for practice as revealed in the preceding analysis.

Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) are two social learning theorists who established

the learning theory of communities of practice in their compelling book *Situated Learning:*

Legitimate Peripheral Participation. Communities of practice are viewed as groups based on

knowledge that is gained by extemporaneous communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and they are

centered on the passions and common interests of a group. These individuals grow and learn

through regular interaction within the community. Wenger (2007) identified three major

elements separating a community of practice from other groups or communities: domain,

communities, and practice.

Wenger's (2007) first element illustrating the separation of a community of practice from

other groups or communities is the notion of domain. Domain indicates that the community is

more than friends or a network of connections; therein lies a specific domain of shared interests.

The nursing profession has subjects of shared interests, such as a preference for the sciences and

a genuine passion for helping people. Members take on a commitment to the domain and a

competence emergent from the networking that takes place within it. This competence separates

members from other people. Nursing students must remain proficient in particular competencies

to persist in the major. Skills such as phlebotomy, taking vitals, accurate assessment, and

medication administration are deemed necessary to continue in the nursing major. There are

competency test-outs and high stakes testing throughout most of the program related to these and

other competencies to assure proficiency. Experienced nursing students often help novice

learners. Mutual support in this fashion is necessary for learning to occur. This theme was

pronounced in the data associated with this study. According to both cohorts, much of that

support was given by the RA. Ideally, it can be surmised that nursing students in the living–

learning community would like an RA who is also a nursing major. That person would provide

guidance and anticipatory preparation. Nursing students could go to the RA for advice, support, and unconditional positive regard. Most of those characteristics were mentioned as mentoring traits. It is paramount that RAs make a personal investment in others in the program and prepare them for difficult times ahead. For example, one male participant voiced that the RA did not let him remain discouraged when he had a substandard test score. His comment went like this:

> Yeah, I knew early on I was really stressed out about anatomy and I wasn't happy. I think it was the second test grade that I had. I was really stressed out about it and I was eating lunch with my RA. She asked me how the grades were going and stuff, and I told her I wasn't happy with my last test grade. She was able to calm me down and not be so stressed out about it and to focus on the next one.

Wenger's (2007) second element illustrating the separation of a community of practice from other groups or communities is the notion of communities itself. Within this notion of community, members pursue their passions and interest through joint conversations, shared information, and shared activities. It is vital that they build relationships which allow them to help and learn from each other. In respect to the environment in which to build relationships, coeducational living was addressed in Cohort 2 as a quandary in that the living–learning community is primarily women. One male student suggested desiring to live with more men. One woman concurred with his statement. Several studies indicate the character of the residence arrangement may be more important than the location. For example, there is evidence to support "differential effects" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 247) of same sex versus coeducational housing and that coed arrangements may have more beneficial consequences. In coed housing, opposite-sex relationships are fashioned more effortlessly and sex-stereotyping declines; self-consciousness and anxiety in social settings diminish. Nevertheless, both male and female

nursing students shared their passion and enthusiasm for the profession. This was pronounced in Cohort 2 participants by the eagerness and anticipatory excitement in their words. Students were excited about future clinicals and anticipatory preparation was evidenced. One female student remarked, "Everybody else is excited about the nursing profession, so also being in that atmosphere also excites me."

Wenger's (2007) third element illustrating the separation of a community of practice from other groups or communities is the notion of practice. Within this notion, ways of looking at and handling problems in the profession and in preparation for entering the profession evolve through members of a community of practice. Time and interaction are necessary in order to establish this relationship. This practice can be accomplished through the living–learning community and nursing students living together. This was displayed in Cohort 2 students when mentors and mentees got together and discussed intricacies of the program. Mutual support enhanced problem solving by structuring opportunities for collaborating and working on a project or trying to figure out answers to assignments. The challenges and benefits were succinctly captured by one male student when he added,

> The support really helped me, just showing that, I mean, technically some of us are all competitors to get into the program when you think about it. You use each other to take advantage of each other in studies, and in the end you help each other both equally the same, which is nice. That way you can take away the competitive edge. Yeah.

This leads to the understanding by novice students that anticipatory support is always there, and while presenting competitive aspects, also best allows for persistence among all students. It is also demonstrated to be a factor in remaining in the program. One woman said, "Yeah, knowing that my RA gave me tips and that that obviously worked for her because she's a nursing student

now. That's how I knew this was credible." RAs facilitate this community and are a key element in its success.

Many of the attributes found in the corporate culture are found in a community of practice. For example, a shared vocabulary, resources, stories, and tools all add to the knowledge of the community. This is much like the environment of the nursing living–learning community. For example, participants in Cohort 1 viewed maps of anatomy to help them with their studies thereby building a shared vocabulary among shared resources. This map was created by a RA. Moreover, nursing has its own language similar to most subsets of a community. The program starts with basic language and gets progressively field-specific as time goes on. In addition, assimilation into the community uses resources such as learning labs with simulation that are shared by students in order to encourage them to use robotics substituting for real life situations. Students in Cohort 2 were excited about clinical stories from students further along in the program. Students are expected to matriculate through the nursing program in a sequential fashion and it would seem that data from this study supports that a well-structured living–learning community is at least the basis for the community of practice needed to matriculate through such a program

One attribute of community not embraced wholly by the students was the UNIV course. Cohort 2 students considered the UNIV class as unnecessary and not pertinent to their curriculum. This may be due to the fact of where they were in their education. It might be the case that these participants need more education to appreciate the fact of knowing more about other occupations and other nursing career options. To counterbalance that comment, one student did add, "We all know we have to strive for excellence, I would say, in order to be accepted in our program cuz this is one of the highest ranking nursing programs in the state." Perhaps the

most appropriate implication for practice in relationship to this aspect of community is finding ways to make the relevance of the course clearer. It may be that pairing students with upperclassmen for discussion of the course proceedings may be helpful. Certainly, it would be useful for curriculum developers to work with such upperclassmen to discover aspects that might be modified for the course.

Lave was known for her research observations among Yucatan midwives and used the terms "cognitive" and "apprenticeship" when discussing situated learning. Lave believed individuals learn from the periphery and evolve into the larger community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Her research refers to integration for beginners or novice members of the community. In the beginning, new members usually serve an apprenticeship and learn at the periphery of the community. Later, members acclimate and competency increases through collaborations and engagement. This is what was described as happening in both of the living–learning communities. Students encouraged their peers to continue, especially as reported by Cohort 2 members. Participants in both cohorts reported strong friendships, studying and solving academic problems together, and they conversed with others regarding social, as well as academic and professional topics. The RA was seen by participants as the central figure in enabling this community though the RA could not do so without the university attending to particular structural elements. Implications for practice to consider in respect to selection of the RA are the traits that one must possess in order to be an effective RA as indicated by the findings of this study. It is significant to recruit a "proper fit" for a qualified RA. According to the data from this study, those qualities on which selection should be based include investment in others, experience, continuation of the nursing profession, outside investment, and time for the student protégé. This RA would benefit all by being a nursing student. One women said there is a

"disconnect" from having an RA who is not in the nursing major; thus, employing an RA who is not from the major will work against the dynamic the living–learning community is attempting to create.

Again, all groups had agreed upon the fact that they had been mentored and this appeared as a central feature in the community of practice. While mentoring was seen as a positive educational experience, Cohort 1 students would not ask to be mentored if they felt they had not. This implied that asking to be mentored would seem as a weakness or a dependency issue. Or, it may be that the students did not want to be seen as imposing on another's time. This also suggests participants in Cohort 1 had more self-determination prior to attending college. One participant remarked,

> I think similar to what Ivy said is that people don't come to [university name] if you're
>
> not internally motivated at some point or by something in your life. I think that the
>
> learning community just enhanced that and made that come out. Cuz just for example,
>
> when I came here, I knew I wanted to get involved in stuff, but I wasn't really sure quite
>
> what I wanted to , and I found my way. I guess, found my niche that I have stuck with the
>
> past three, four years, whatever you wanna say.

Cohort 2 students did not view mentoring in the same manner. One participant added,

> I would ask just because it's always nice to have a person to be able to go to. I mean, a
>
> mentor isn't a person that has to be available day and night, all the time for you. Just
>
> having one and being able to ask them questions when you need it, it would be okay I
>
> mean, it's not like they're gonna be slaving over you.

Mentoring programming, while effective, was listed by Cohort 2 as having a program in place that could use modification. One female in Cohort 2 remarked that,

in my experience, it really hasn't been that successful because the way they do it is just send you an email saying, this is your person. You would have to make a real effort to become close with that person. I feel like if they sat it up where it was an in person thing, at least the first time to meet that person, it would help. 'Cause I know as a sophomore, my mentor didn't contact me that way. I had to go to her, and I feel like there are people who wouldn't ask like I did. I think there is a program in place but it could use a little improvement.

Given these insights, it may be useful for universities to review carefully the aspects of the mentoring program in place. It would seem that the expectations for mentors should be clearly delineated for both faculty and students. This would avoid miscues and the unsureness of boundaries—students and faculty would not run the risk of "imposing" on another's time. Among the expectations, consideration should be given to the forms of communication that are most welcoming and appreciated so that a collegial atmosphere is supported. Finally, a system of gathering insights from students and faculty alike would ensure timely and appropriate refinement of the mentoring program.

Astin (1993) posited that student involvement has beneficial effects on a variety of developmental outcomes. Basically, student involvement is likened to the Freudian notion of *cathexis* or what learning theorists frequently refer to as time on task. Early research reported by Astin demonstrated that almost any form of student involvement in the college experience propagates both learning and student development (Astin, 1984).

The "inputs-environments-outcomes" model developed by Astin has served as a conceptual framework for many studies (Brower & Inkelas, 2010). In the I-E-O model, student outcomes result from not only student inputs, which are precollege characteristics, but also

college environments. These may include classes, programs, or policies with which other students come into contact during their educational experience, or it may involve the community one resides in. Astin (1993) asserted that studies addressing the impact of the college experience will be biased unless they control for the input of the students. Using Astin's I-E-O model, past research has demonstrated that students who lived in a living–learning community applied more critical thinking skills and voiced they had made a smoother transition to college both socially and academically (Inkelas et al., 2007). This was also reported to be smoother for first-generation students (Inkelas et al., 2007). In this study, many students from Cohort 2 were first-generation students. This may suggest that Cohort 2 students have a greater need for a specifically structured living–learning environment due to being first generation college students. However, a Cohort 1 female participant said, "As far as living on campus my freshman year, I would not have done it any different, cuz I think you would be completely lost if you didn't. I know one of my roommates now did not live in the dorms at all. I think she regrets that just because you really didn't get that cohesive." Thus, the importance of the living–learning environment was embraced by both cohorts. Although cohort 1 students noted financial reasons as detrimental to staying in a residence hall, all students agreed the program gets even more challenging as one progresses through and the mutual support offered through the living–learning community would be useful. Universities are well-advised to consider the cost/benefit calculus between revenue generated by student housing and the cost of attrition of students.

Although Astin's (1993) research found input variables (i.e., characteristics of the individual students at the point of freshman entry) could be significant predictors of several student outcomes, he found peer group interaction effects as the single most powerful source of influence on the undergraduate student's academic and personal development. In his study, Astin

addressed self-selection patterns based on peer affiliation—this was single sex colleges, student housing, and powerful self-selection factors at work. Students also tended to form same sex friendships and same sex clubs and organizations during the undergraduate years. Hence, this could be the reasoning behind participants in Cohort 2 wanting more male students in the living–learning community. In terms of implications for practice, universities may wish to promote as much male student participation in the living–learning community as possible. Because living–learning community residents tended to be freshmen, it may be useful to reach out to men who are upperclassmen to participate in activities and mentoring even if those men are not living in the living–learning community.

Astin's (1993) study also showed that, next to the peer group, faculty represented the most significant aspect of development for the undergraduate student. Cohort 1 students voiced the importance of and reverence for their faculty. As would be expected, overall student–faculty interaction has its strongest affirmative correlations with students' perceptions of satisfaction with faculty (Astin, 1993). Astin charged universities with shortchanging undergraduate education, stating universities value acquisition of resources and enhancement of reputation over education and personal development of the undergraduate (Astin, 1985). This opinion was not reflected by Cohort 1 students. The interviews and responses of the participants implied that students developed both educationally and personally. Participants in both cohorts were moving forward in their educational lives and some were making plans for their occupations.

It is ironic that Astin (1984) used the term motivation in his article but did not prefer to use it, instead, using the term student involvement. He surmised that involvement was a more useful construct educational practitioner. Cohort 2 students often used the word motivated to refer to the psychological concept of involvement. Unlike Cohort 1, Cohort 2 students needed

others to remain motivated. This word resurfaced in two questions during the Cohort 2 student interviews. Whereas Cohort 1 students were self-motivated and self-determined, Cohort 2 students depended more upon others for motivation. One man used the term several times in describing his transcendence from high school to university life. He remarked that he was not motivated in high school and being around others who are focused helped keep him inspired.

It was Astin's (1993) belief that one of the most precious institutional resources may be the student's time and participation. Students in both Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 suggested studying together and being together was the key factor in motivation—involvement in Astin's framework. In considering implications for practice, it would seem that universities are best served by remaining mindful of the importance of proximity in structuring the living–learning community. Of course, proximity to other students promoted more collaboration among students, and the RA was seen as a key enabler of such; however, proximity to faculty may further support other forms of mentoring that not only help students to achieve academically but also to understand the many opportunities within the profession thus contributing to persistence.

In conclusion, the consistency of the recommendations for practice is borne out by data considered within each of the relevant theories selected for analysis. This consistency gives weight to the importance of the recommendations for consideration. The NSSE benchmarks (NSSE, 2013) have been examined for many years as keys to student success. The consideration of these as applied to building or refining the dynamics of the living–learning community that best contributes to student persistence and matriculation is underscored by the perspectives shared by students in both cohorts. Lave and Wenger (1991) emphasized the community and the community being its own entity. This was observed through the many dynamics embraced by the students. Though it is important to support the living--learning community as a dynamic

microcosm of the college, it is also important to value the leadership qualities of the RA and the developmental life-stage the RA is experiencing. This implies that some RAs are concluding their education and may not have the personal investment or time that someone younger could give. The university needs to be cognizant of these factors when appointing this position. Moreover, considering a male student for the position of RA may also address some of the issues of inclusiveness shared by some of the students. Astin (1993) posited the I-E-O model, and both the university cohorts display examples of evolving relationships and variables leading to success. It could be concluded that the implications are those seeking motivation and reassurance would best benefit by themed housing.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study was conducted at two universities in the Midwest. Initially, this study was conducted in an effort to supplement a quantitative study on students at an living–learning community regarding benchmarks and outcomes based on the study done by Dr. Deborah Vincent (Vincent, 2013). Prior to my study, there had been few if any qualitative studies regarding the nursing living–learning communities. Due to the similarity of findings between the two cohorts in my report, I feel this qualitative study brought richness to the ideas of mentoring and the living–learning community.

Findings from this study indicate need for further research into the role of the RA in regards to the nursing living–learning community. Supplementary research should address what characteristics of an RA would be most desired in a nursing living–learning community and what other modifications to the services provided by the RA within that specific community would be welcomed by students.

It is ironic that Cohort 1 students represented a major institution and only three women participated in this research. Perhaps this was due to the fact that many students had other things happening at this time and that the weather was so dismal. Cohort 2, on the other hand, appeared to represent more students from their program. This may be because Cohort 2 students were easier to recruit due to the fact that they still resided in the living–learning community. In addition, it would also be beneficial for some of those participants to be men. Perhaps by visiting on-campus classrooms and explaining the research and rationale, I may have included more participants. Certainly, the outcomes of this study may be affected by including a larger population representing differing levels of students' progression in the program.

Due to the attrition of freshmen nursing students, it would behoove universities to explore reasons why students change their nursing major to determine if the living–learning community might provide some mitigating interventions. This was discussed during the interview and was expressed by one of the cohorts. There remains a nursing shortage in America, so persistence not only aids the university's retention data but it also addresses a national health concern.

Because of the increasing rigor of the program as student matriculate through, students felt that supports being in place for the future course challenges would be beneficial. Many students find it stressful and overwhelming in senior level classes due to the rigor and curricular demands of the major. Should additional supports be envisioned, research into the effectiveness of such interventions is indicated in order to ensure effectiveness.

Further research should address advantages of coeducational aspects of the living–learning community. This research should consider advantages and ways to include more men living in residential themed housing. Such studies could be linked to student satisfaction and retention of all students but men in particular. It would be advantageous to capture the views of

those individuals who once lived at a living–learning community and for some reason decided not to continue or had decided to change majors. Certainly, negative factors that did not emerge in this study may be ferreted out through such a study. Additionally, repeating the study at other locations throughout the US would add more insight into this study.

It would be interesting to enter the living–learning community environment to carry out a socio-cultural anthropological study. Understanding the norms and expectations of the culture would inform interpretations of participants' insights. Furthermore, an extended time period taken to do an anthropological investigation in the environment would provide greater depth of understanding.

This study should be replicated but interviews should be completed one person at a time. While conducting the interviews in this study, no one had decided to refrain from answering any question. However, I am inclined to believe that discussion in the small group interview sessions had influenced the development of certain terms or keywords. Because all the subjects were interviewed together in groups, the power of suggestion may have had a biasing impact on others answering questions. For example, I would find myself asking a question and a participant added, "I agree." Though not time effective, this might reduce the number of those inclined to agree with comments from peers. It is also a recommendation to interview those in the same level in the program as this would help to pinpoint particularities for given level groups.

Summary

There is research to support many benefits and lasting effects of living in the living–learning community even for a one year experience. Students who have lived in the living–learning community during their first year in college have been shown to have higher levels of self-confidence, were more likely to mentor others, and had demonstrated more civic

engagement up to three years later (Brower & Inkelas, 2010). Findings from this study revealed theoretical underpinnings are at work in the living–learning community and have proven successful. However, slight modifications to the living–learning community will not only enhance an individual's education, it may even be possible to reach out to those not continuing to persist in the nursing major. By giving voice to the students, students articulated they are pleased with themed housing and it has made a life changing difference.

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APPENDIX A: ORIENTATION LETTER

Dear Nursing Student:

The shortage of nurses is a serious trend with repercussions in the practice world of nursing. Several major reasons for the shortage of nurses have been identified through various research and survey studies in organizations related to Nursing and the Health Profession. Phenomena that are not well understood in the literature is the perceptions of nursing students in the living–learning community and attrition decisions in the first formative years of nursing. Gaining a richer, deeper understanding of students in the living–learning community is vital to success.

I am a doctoral candidate attending *Indiana State University* in the CIMT program. My qualitative dissertation study explores the perceptions and lived experiences of the nursing student. My study will be conducted in the State of Indiana.

I am seeking nursing students who live in themed nursing student residence halls (Living–learning communities) to participate in my dissertation study. Student nurses should be in their first or second semester of nursing. Students will be recruited through personal contacts, word of mouth, and solicitations at the two various universities. I have received permission from two deans at the universities of choice.

Participants' confidentiality will be ensured by using a secured research data in locked files. After three years the data will be shredded and disposed of. Consent for Participation will be provided to each participant for consideration prior to commencing the study interview. Interviews will be face-to-face or if necessary via phone, at the chosen location of the respondent, require one hour, and be audiotaped.

Phone: , Email: renee.bauer@indstate.edu

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Renee Bauer

APPENDIX B: RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SUBQUESTIONS

RQ1. What influence has the living–learning community had on students' perceptions of their development and achievement?

a. Describe what you appreciate about the living–learning community. What have you found helpful?

b. Is there any aspect of the living–learning community that you did not find helpful? If so, please describe that aspect. What might need to be changed or modified to make the community more helpful?

c. How has the living–learning community assisted you with or failed to assist you with your academic growth?

RQ2. What influence has mentoring within the living–learning community had on students' perceptions of their development and achievement?

a. What is your understanding of mentoring?

b. Please describe a time when you were mentored in the living–learning community. What did you find helpful?

c. How did this help you do a better as a student? How did this help you develop as an individual and/or professional?

d. Was there any aspect to the mentoring that you did not find helpful? If so, please describe that aspect. What might need to be changed or modified to make the mentoring more helpful?

e. If you have not been mentored, would you ask to be mentored if you felt it would

benefit you?

RQ3. What influence has the living–learning community and mentoring had on students'

willingness to remain in or leave a program?

a. If you have found the living–learning community helpful, how has it assisted you to

remain in the nursing program?

b. If you have not found the living–learning community helpful, how did it influence

you to leave the nursing program?

c. If you were mentored, what role has mentoring played in your desire to remain in the

program?

d. If you were mentored but did not find it helpful, how did that influence your

willingness to leave the program?

e. What other thoughts or perspectives would you like to share about the living–learning

community or mentoring?