

Residential Belonging: Examining the Impacts of Residential Learning
Communities on Student Outcomes

Brendan G. Clary

Kansas State University

December 2018

Introduction:

The purpose of this study is to determine if Residential Learning Communities at Kansas State University have a higher sense of belonging than their general education counterparts. Learning communities are used across the country and Kansas State University's Residential CAT Communities, henceforth called RCAT, will be used as a typical example of a residential learning community.

As many colleges have turned to residential learning communities to increase retention, performance, and happiness several studies have taken place delving into the outcomes these support structures create. The term learning community has been hotly debated, as "different observers have different views of what other specific primary components make a true, positive, healthy community that enables optimum learning to occur" but for the purposes of this project, residential learning community shall be defined as a group of students that live and learn together (Lenning & Ebbers 1999). We hope to answer what difference do residential learning communities make on the social belonging of college students? We also plan to study the academic results of learning communities asking: What outcome does belonging to a residential learning community have on the academic performance of college students.

Limitations of Study:

This study is limited by breadth of respondents. The population studied was limited to freshman students in RCATs and freshman students who shared lecture style classes with the RCAT students at Kansas State University. In addition to a relatively low population size, the study also had a relatively low response rate. The first survey saw a response rate of 9.6%, the

second saw a rate of 10.4% and the third saw a rate of 9.3%. Out of the 1052 students that received the surveys; 102, 110, and 98 completed the surveys. These numbers could question the validity of this study, but the results were relatively uniform across respondents, so it would indicate that the sample would be representative of the population. Also, since the study did not collect identifying information from the respondents there could be a higher response rate for one sector of the population than any others, resulting in skewed data.

Methodology:

This study was conducted over the Fall 2018 semester at Kansas State University. It utilized quantitative data collected from periodic surveys. The study used three surveys: one at the start of the semester, one at midterm, and one at the conclusion. These surveys included Likert Scale questions to evaluate the emotional belonging of students in large lecture classrooms that are either in RCATs or not currently enrolled in an RCAT, these included questions such as “I feel that I have adequate support systems regarding this course” and “I feel like I belong in this classroom.”¹

The surveys were sent by email to 1052 freshman students in large lecture classrooms. These were classes that were offered through a RCAT community and to the general population of students. The surveys were completely voluntary and anonymous, no identifying information was collected. In this way the identities of the respondents were protected, so those collecting the information had no possibility of determining who the respondents were from their data.

¹ A full list of survey questions used can be found in Fig 1.

Background:

There are many instances of learning communities across our country, and many of their positive effects have been studied: for example, at the University of Southern Maine, participants in their residential learning community the Russell Scholars Program were more satisfied with interaction with faculty and overall experience than the control group of students. These students also spent more time with other students either in school activities or more informally (Johnson & Romanoff 1999). Another effect studied at the University of Wisconsin-Madison dealt with the likelihood of student binge drinking which found, “not only were LC students less likely to drink, but they were also significantly less likely to binge drink: 37.7% of LC students reported bingeing once or more in the past two weeks, while 57.1% of the non-LC students had binged once or more in the previous two weeks” (Brower, Golde, & Allen 2003). Similarly, a collaborative group of researchers from the University of Michigan and San Diego University found that women that were not part of residential learning communities were more likely to binge drink than their counterparts in these learning communities (Boyd et al 2008).

While research has been done into the positive effects of residential learning communities, an area somewhat lacking is whether these objects foster a sense of belonging and community that is not found in the general population of students. Additionally, research in this area does not seem to be being conducted in the present day. The previously stated surveys were from ten to twenty years ago, and therefore their validity must be called into question.

Findings:

The findings from the first survey seemed to indicate that there is small difference between students in RCATs and general population students. RCAT students on average had a 80.5% positive response rate while general population students had a 69.0% positive response rate. This survey was shortly after the RCAT students would have had their first meeting, so it is possible that these students had feelings of optimism going into the class. The findings also indicate that students in RCATs tended to respond with strong positive responses more than their general population counterparts (See Fig.2). This is a relatively small difference and the numbers are statistically similar, this could be due to the students not connecting with their learning communities at the beginning of the semester.

The second survey seems to indicate that there is a larger positive difference between the two populations. At this midterm point of the semester students belonging to RCATs responded with a 89.7% positive response rate on average. In contrast general population students only responded 61.5% positive response on average. This larger difference could be attributed to students in residential learning communities growing with each other. The data would suggest they are a support system for each other resulting in a higher comfort level.

The conclusion survey does has its problems. This survey had the lowest response rate, and as far as general population students there were only twenty students that completed this survey. This calls into question the validity of the data found therein. This survey indicated that RCAT students had an average positive response rate of 90.5% while general population

students had an average positive response rate of 66.2%. This difference could be attributed to the sense of belonging students derive from being in a RCAT community.

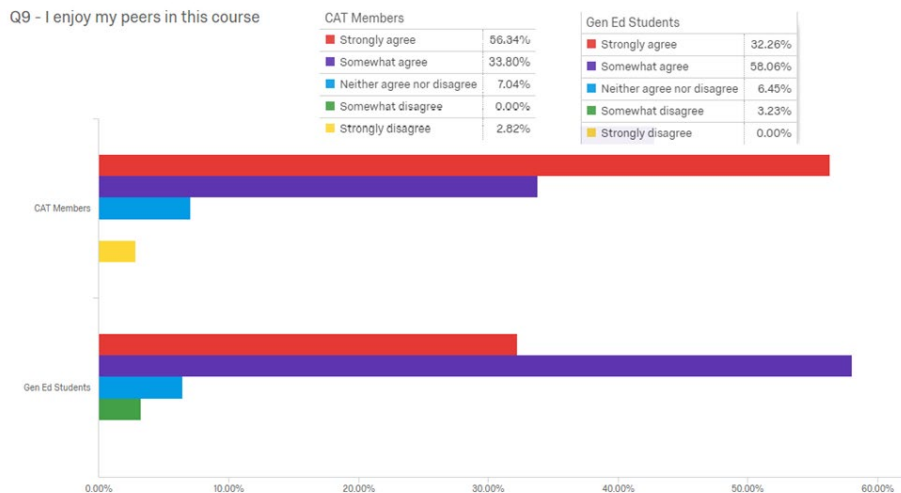
As the data has shown in this article, we would conclude that residential learning communities do have a positive impact on student emotional outcomes. Students in residential learning communities at Kansas State University are showing more positive responses toward questions regarding their emotional belonging in large lecture classrooms, and they seem to exhibit higher positive responses than their general population counterparts.

Appendix:

Fig 1:

Survey 1	Survey 2	Survey 3
Are you currently enrolled in a residential CAT community?	Are you currently enrolled in a residential CAT community?	Are you currently enrolled in a residential CAT community?
Were you aware that there was a CAT community option with this class?	Were you aware that there was a CAT community option with this class?	Were you aware that there was a CAT community option with this class?
I feel that I have adequate support systems regarding this course	I feel that I have adequate support systems regarding this course	I feel that I have adequate support systems regarding this course
I have friends taking this course with me	I have friends taking this course with me	I have friends taking this course with me
I know who I could go to with questions or to study with	I know who I could go to with questions or to study with	I know who I could go to with questions or to study with
I feel like I belong in this classroom	I feel like I belong in this classroom	I feel like I belong in this classroom
This classroom feels safe	This classroom feels safe	This classroom feels safe
I enjoy my peers in this course	I enjoy my peers in this course	I enjoy my peers in this course
I am excited about taking this course	I am enjoying this course	This class has been an enjoyable experience overall

Fig 2:



References:

Lenning, Oscar T., & Ebbers, Larry H. (1999). *The Powerful Potential of Learning Communities: Improving Education for the Future*. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report, Vol. 26, No. 6. ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, One Dupont Circle, N.W., Suite 630, Washington, DC 20036-1183; Tel: 800-773-3742; (Toll Free) Fax: 202-452-1844; Web site: <http://www.eriche.org/reports>

Johnson, Judith L., & Romanoff, Stephen J. (1999). HIGHER EDUCATION RESIDENTIAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES: WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS? *College Student Journal*, 33(3), 385.

Brower, A., Golde, C., & Allen, C. (2003). Residential Learning Communities Positively Affect College Binge Drinking. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 40(3), 132-152.

Boyd, McCabe, Cranford, Morales, Lange, Reed, . . . Scott. (2008). Heavy episodic drinking and its consequences: The protective effects of same-sex, residential living-learning communities for undergraduate women. *Addictive Behaviors*, 33(8), 987-993.