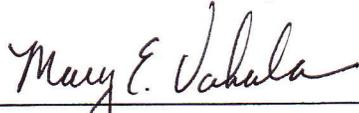


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IN RESIDENCE HALLS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN – LA CROSSE

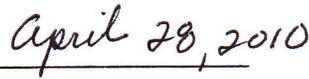
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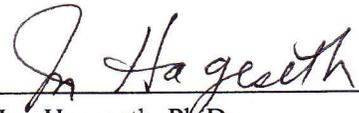
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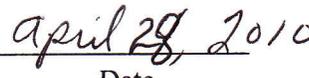
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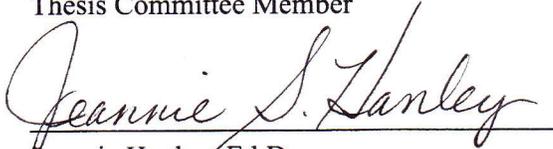
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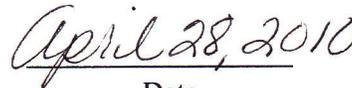
Jon Hageseth, Ph.D.  
Thesis Committee Member



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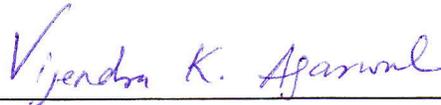


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Thesis accepted



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Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs



Date

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-LA CROSSE

Graduate Studies

FIRST-YEAR STUDENT PERCEPTIONS ON ACADEMICS IN THE COMMUNITY  
IN RESIDENCE HALLS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN – LA CROSSE

A Chapter Style Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Science in Education

David J. Lemon

College of Liberal Studies  
Student Affairs Administration in Higher Education

May, 2010

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By David J. Lemon

We recommend acceptance of this thesis in partial fulfillment of the candidate's requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education – Student Affairs Administration in Higher Education.

The candidate has completed the oral defense of the thesis.

_____ Mary E. Vahala, Ed.D. Thesis Committee Chairperson	_____ Date
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Thesis accepted

_____ Vijendra K. Agarwal, Ph.D. Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs	_____ Date
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## ABSTRACT

Lemon, D. J. First-year student perceptions on academics in the community in residence halls at the University of Wisconsin – La Crosse. M.S.Ed. in Student Affairs Administration in Higher Education, 70pp. (M.E. Vahala)

This study analyzed the perceptions of first-year students living in residence halls at the University of Wisconsin – La Crosse had about academics and intellectuality within their communities. The study focused on first-year students living in Coate Hall, a first-year experience hall, and Hutchison Hall, a traditional residence hall. In December 2009, the University Residence Environment Scale (URES) was administered to participating residents from Coate and Hutchison Halls. One hundred and seventy-two residents participated in the study.

The results showed that there was a significant difference in perceptions of academic achievement and no significant difference in perceptions on intellectuality between the first-year experience residence hall and the traditional residence hall. Additional findings and recommendations for future research were also discussed.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research project would not have been possible without the hard work and constant assistance and support from many individuals. I would like to thank Dr. Mary Beth Vahala, my thesis committee chairperson, for her advice and support through the duration of my project. I would also like to extend thanks to Dr. Jon Hageseth and Dr. Jeannie Hanley, members of my thesis committee, for their constant support and willingness to give up their time to ensure the success of my project.

I would also like to extend a special thanks to the UW – La Crosse Office of Residence Life Central Staff members, especially Dr. Nick Nicklaus, for their support of my research, through providing me with my instrument and the forum to use it. I would also like to thank the student staff members in Coate and Hutchison Halls for spreading the word about my study to their residents.

A special and heartfelt thanks to all of the residents of Hutch, including my staff and advisees, who were patient with me through trying times and constantly reminded me why I care about student affairs. They were truly the inspiration that I needed to complete this process.

I could not have done this study without help from Amanda Welter, my statistics savior. Thank you for all the time and energy you put into this project.

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The dormitory made possible – so the argument went – the supervision and parental concern of the faculty for the well-being of their young charges. The dormitory brought to bear the sense of common decency and the sense of self-respect which taught responsibility (Rudolph, 1990, p.96).

For approximately the first two hundred years of higher education in America, on-campus housing in dormitories existed as an outlet for faculty members to instill a wide variety of positive morals and values into the students of their institution outside of the classroom. The dormitory setting not only promoted positive values, but also created an opportunity for the young students living there to develop their social skills through interactions with other students who they may have otherwise never met.

The ideas of dormitory and on-campus living did not necessarily remain a constant staple from the early beginnings of colonial America to the present. In the second half of the nineteenth century, as the German model of higher education continued to exert influence in America, many American college and university administrators began to embrace the idea that college students are truly adults and as such should be treated in that regard (Rudolph, 1990). This included the idea that students should take on the responsibility of finding their own housing options. As more institutions began to adopt this model, there was decreasing support for residence halls and on-campus living. Instead, energy and resources were focused on academic buildings and new/better resources for the students' academic pursuits (Winston & Anchors, 1993).

Despite the waning support for residential living on many campuses across the country, there were individuals and institutions who invested a great deal of time, energy, and resources into creating residential living opportunities for students on campus. From 1892 to 1914, campuses such as the University of Chicago, Columbia University, Princeton University, Cornell University, Harvard University, and Yale University made significant strides in providing residence halls for their students (Caple, 1998, p. 41). The housing resurgence was supported by the ever-growing acceptance of the *in loco parentis* mentality. Student housing allowed university officials to teach students about the commonly accepted values and moralities of their society within the confines of their home under administrator supervision. Student housing options made it easier for the university officials to become true extensions of the students' families (Caple, 1998, p. 42).

The 1930's and 1940's brought about what is called the student personnel point of view. This point of view placed heavy emphasis on the idea that students must be considered a whole person and educated as such (Blimling & Miltenberger, 1981). Another assumption about the development of students that the student personnel point of view made was that the "total environment of the student is educational and must be used to achieve his full development" (Blimling & Miltenberger, 1981, p. 22). Ideas such as this led to the popularization of the term "residence hall" rather than "dormitory". Dormitory implies a place where you sleep, whereas residence hall implies a place where you live (Schroeder & Mable, 1994). The transition of terminology is a symbol in the rising importance that residence halls play in the education of students on college campuses.

Today residence halls are a mainstay on any four-year college or university campus. In fact many technical schools and two-year campuses are beginning to build residence halls to keep their students on campus. As we have moved away from the formal *in loco parentis* model, many students and their parents still demand structured living environments that put a strong emphasis on safety and security (Winston & Anchors, 1993, p. 174). In fact, many institutions and professionals are starting to see the potential of residence halls and living-learning environments. Institutions, now more than ever, are working to create very intentional environments to “enhance the academic experience and enrich the personal lives of the student residents” (Winston & Anchors, 1993, p. 174).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Though Coate and Laux Halls have been designated by ORL as First-Year Experience Halls, there has not been a formal assessment of the program to date. The goal of FYE programming is to help first-year students transition into college life and be as successful as possible; however, there is no current research to support the fact that the FYE Program in Coate and Laux Halls has an impact on the perceptions of the first-year students living there.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was two-fold. First, was the intention to examine the perceptions of academic and intellectual community in the residence halls. Second, was the intent of this study to investigate significant differences in perception between students in first-year experience halls and students in traditional residence halls.

## **Hypotheses**

The research hypotheses focused on two specific sub-scales of an instrument used to measure the perceptions of the community. The hypotheses focused on the effect of the first-year residence hall programming as a treatment that could affect perceptions.

1. H<sub>01</sub>: There are no significant differences in the perceptions of academic achievement (AA) between first-year students living in a first-year experience hall and those living in a traditional residence hall.
3. H<sub>02</sub>: There are no significant differences in the perceptions of intellectuality (INT) between first-year students living in a first-year experience hall and those living in a traditional residence hall.

## **Importance of the Study**

As a profession, Student Affairs is just beginning to understand the magnitude of the effects that living in a residence hall can have on students. According to Rudolph Moos, “The social-ecological setting in which students function can affect their attitudes and moods, their behavior and performance, and their self-concept and general sense of well-being” (1979, p.3). The idea that the setting in which students live is linked to the students’ personalities and well-being is important to the University staff tasked with the creation and implementation of residence hall administration and programming. During the nine months of the year when the residence hall is serving as a home for a multitude of students, the residence hall acts as a medium where residents are confronted with new social, intellectual, and personal challenges. In this setting, students have no choice but to deal with the change and find some way to cope. Residence halls act as “social-

ecological” settings that have the potential to challenge and change the students residing there. This is important for student affairs practitioners, especially those working in residence life/housing offices, to understand the great opportunity presented to them in terms of being able to affect the students they serve.

The use of living-learning communities to provide additional education, resources, and support to students can help to make the residential experience a positive and meaningful one. “Recent empirical work has noted that living-learning students: (a) are more involved with their college environments, (b) partake in greater numbers and richer types of interactions with peers and faculty, (c) have stronger academic outcomes, and (d) overall experience a better adjustment to college (Longerbeam, Inkelas, & Brower, 2007, p. 21). Also, research has shown that even those students who are not taking part in or engaging themselves in the living-learning community are reporting secondhand benefits of the living-learning environment such as a perception of social supportiveness in their community and an increase in “positive diversity interactions (Longerbeam et al., 2007, p. 26). The findings of studies such as this indicated that living-learning environments can have profound impact on students. Studying the effects that these environments can have on students will allow practitioners to better understand what they can do to create environments conducive to student growth and success.

### **Assumptions**

A key assumption of the study is that the only noticeable difference between the two halls chosen for this study is the fact that Coate is a First-Year Experience hall and Hutchison is a traditional residence hall. Because of its first-year focus, Coate houses only first-year students. Hutchison is home to first-year and returning students. There was

also an underlying assumption that the students in each hall knew about and took advantage of opportunities within the hall. This includes opportunities such as programming, networking events, and in Coate Hall utilization of the Academic Resources in the hall (the Academic Resource Mentors and Academic Advising Satellite Office). The assumption was that any significant difference in perceptions about the community would be in relation to the resources and programmatic opportunities offered.

### **Limitations**

The basic design of this research project is a Static-Group Comparison. This design involves multiple groups, with one group that is exposed to the intervention (LaFountain & Bartos, 2002). In this case Coate is receiving the intervention of the first-year experience program. The selection of the participants was limited to the residents of each hall. Since Hutchison has a smaller population of first-year students from which to draw, this was a hindrance. Because the study was conducted on a voluntary basis, there is the chance that students, from both comparison groups, who chose to participate in the study, are the type of students who would choose to take advantage of hall programming. This tendency could create a shift in the findings of the study as many of the questions in the instrument focused involvement within the hall.

### **Significance of the Study**

According to Winston and Anchors (1993), “the renewed emphasis on residential education during the past twenty years has resulted in housing professionals becoming living-learning specialists in addition to being housing and food service administrators” (p. 175). The concept of residential living has existed and has constantly been evolving

since the humble beginnings of higher education in America. As we continue to learn from and build on what has happened in the past, we constantly see opportunities for learning and growth within our residence halls. Today's student affairs practitioners are constantly looking for ways to extend learning opportunities outside the classroom.

“There is now a renewed emphasis on the integration of residential living as an integral part of the educational experience of students” (Winston & Anchors, 1993, p.172). As student affairs professionals continue to look for opportunities to blend academics as well as outside-the-classroom education into students' residential lives, it is important to understand that living-learning communities provide an interesting opportunity to expose students to new experiences that could aid in their growth and development. This becomes especially important in the first year. Students need to be brought into the fold of campus life to feel included. Helping first-year students to successfully transition into college life is paramount to retaining these students.

Understanding how these first-year students perceive their communities can help administrators to design and implement environments that are conducive to first-year student success. Though this study only focuses on two residence halls at UW-L, the implications reach far beyond the UW-L campus. Currently the research being done on first-year student residence halls yields an assortment of mixed results. Studies have examined grade point averages of first-year students living in “all-freshman halls” versus first year students who have been integrated with students of all grade levels and have produced results claiming that first-year students in all first-year environments score better in both environments than their counterparts in mixed environments (Schroeder & Mable, 1994).

Rather than focusing on academics in terms of grades, this study's aim is to understand how students perceive academics and intellectuality within their community. The study is meant to examine how much or little they feel their community values academics and intellectuality. By taking this focus, rather than focusing on grades, the study will hopefully help to create an understanding of the power of the living communities within residence halls. In addition, the study could help to understand how the grouping of students by age, whether it be all first-year students or different grade levels living together, perceive the values of the community. This research has the potential to provide new and valuable insight on a very divided topic within the field of Student Affairs as a whole.

### **Definitions**

Academic Achievement (AA): A prominence of academic accomplishments and concerns (Moos, 1988).

Academic Advising Satellite Office: A branch of the UW-L Academic Advising Office located in Coate and Laux Halls that is staffed by a full-time academic advisor.

Academic Resource Mentors (ARMs): Peer mentors who work to provide academic resources and support as well as the benefits of a mentoring relationship within where they live and work.

Community: A group of individuals living in a common space where certain beliefs and values are shared.

First-Year Experience Programming: Opportunities provided specifically for first-year students that are designed to help ease the transition into college on academic, social, and personal levels.

Intellectuality (INT): An emphasis on cultural, artistic, and other intellectual activities as distinguished from strictly academic achievements.

Living-Learning Communities: Communities that have specific focus areas that extend learning out of the classroom and into the residence.

Resident Assistant: A student staff member hired by the Office of Residence Life who is tasked with the enforcement of hall policies and providing educational and social opportunities for the residents in their community.

Residence Hall: A university or college housing option where a variety of students reside together on-campus.

University Residence Environment Scale (URES): A scale developed by Moos (1988) to measure residents' perceptions of the environment in which they live.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **REVIEW OF THE SELECTED LITERATURE**

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the relationship between first-year student perceptions of the academic and intellectual communities and the first-year experience residence hall program. The study will investigate perceptions on communal value of academics and intellectualism in first-year experience and non-first-year-experience halls. In this chapter are sections on the description of first-year experience halls, as well as academic and intellectual communities; personal development and environment theory; and a review of the literature on first-year students and resident hall environments.

#### **The Residence Hall Experience**

“A substantial body of research supports the contentions that residence halls and on-campus living have a positive, although often indirect, effect on student growth and development” (LaNasa, Olson, & Alleman, 2007, p. 943). This chapter will examine some of this research.

Both Bowen (1977) and Astin (1985) believe and ground a majority of their work in the idea that higher education should be concerned with the “development of the full

potentialities of human beings and of society” (Bowen, 1977, p. 54). Residence halls provide a safe forum for student affairs practitioners to meet students at their level of development, design effective programming and provide other educational opportunities to help these students grow. It has long been thought that residence halls offered a vehicle for learning outside of the classroom where students would have to learn more about themselves, the world and people around them. For many students, the residence halls offer a safe haven, where for the first time they can exercise a great deal of independence and maintain a very self-directed lifestyle. Brandon, Hirt, and Cameron (2008), studied the interactions between residents within traditional and suite-style residence halls at a large, public institution and affirmed that residence halls foster a great deal of social interaction among residents; however, there was a great disparity between social and academic interactions. Many students were either studying alone or outside of the residence hall. This finding asks the question: Is academic achievement a value that is shared among the communities in residence halls today? Most institutions of higher education have academics at the core of their mission and charge their faculty with carrying out these initiatives in the classroom; however, learning is in no way confined to the walls of their classroom. The college campus in general is a forum for students to be educated about themselves as a whole person. The new responsibilities and involvements that are present can help students to understand their personal values, beliefs, and motives in ways that they previously could not (Luna & Gahagan, 2008).

Residence halls can play a major role in this self-discovery. Residence halls provide a shared home for a variety of students, who in any other situation would potentially never interact. Residence halls offer students a safe place to meet others and

to be exposed to new beliefs, values, and practices through interaction with the other students in their building. In a 1997 study at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, findings were gathered that showed that students in academically focused living-learning groups had stronger academic outcomes (i.e. higher grade point averages) (Brower and Dittinger, 1998 & Brower, 1997). These results lend themselves toward suppositions that the development, implementation and execution of Living-Learning Communities in residence halls can have an impact on students understanding of their community in and out of the hall as well as many of their behaviors, including studying and classroom academic performance.

Johnson and Romanoff (1999) found very similar results as they studied a residential learning community at the University of Southern Maine. The program, called The Russell Scholars, was designed to cultivate collaboration between students and faculty members to promote learning in and out of the classroom. The goal of the study was to assess how participation in the program affected participants' achievement and satisfaction with their collegiate experience. The study found that students within the program were significantly more satisfied with their faculty and significantly more comfortable speaking out in class and participating in classroom discussions. Students within the program also showed higher grade point averages while earning more credits with higher rates of satisfaction for their institution, though these findings were not found to be significant.

## **Student Development Theory in the Residence Halls**

There have been a variety of theorists who have taken the time to form developmental theories that apply to the college student population. Only a few of these theories were written for or directly applied to the growth and development that takes place in college residence environments.

### **Chickering's Theory and Applications to Residence Halls**

Residence halls are designed to bring students from a wide variety of backgrounds. Chickering and Reisser (1993) hypothesized “When students are encouraged to form friendships and to participate in communities that become meaningful subcultures, and when diversity of backgrounds and attitudes as well as significant interchanges and shared interests exist, development along all seven vectors is fostered” (p. 273). Within the residence halls students are forced to share space and rooms with new people which facilitates the diversity of backgrounds and attitudes to which Chickering refers. That being said activities and programs sponsored by the residence halls should incorporate some developmental aspects that reflect the growth and development described by the seven vectors. Not every program will necessarily promote all seven vectors, but overall all seven should be addressed to facilitate maximum growth.

In terms of the FYE program in the residence halls at UWL, all seven vectors must be addressed if the program wants to achieve maximum growth and development potential. Individually, all aspects of the program do not represent or demonstrate the

potential for growth under each of the seven vectors, but the program as a whole creates a situation that addresses the seven vectors' areas of growth.

The first vector is developing confidence. There are three levels of confidence; intellectual competence, physical and manual skills, and interpersonal confidence (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 45). As a result of working with the FYE program, students will develop confidence in a variety of ways. Students will gain confidence in their academic abilities as they learn and practice effective study habits. Students should also gain confidence in themselves to seek out and explore campus resources as they learn about them from their in-hall mentors. The mentoring component of the ARMs will also help to develop interpersonal skills as mentees will learn to more effectively communicate with their mentors.

Managing emotions, the second vector, refers to the process of acknowledging, understanding, and expressing positive and negative emotions in a constructive manner (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 46-47). During the transition to college many students are flooded with a variety of emotions ranging from fear and anxiety to excitement and elation. In order to truly develop in terms of managing emotions, students need to acknowledge and understand that their feelings exist. Chickering makes it clear that emotions should not be ignored or repressed, rather taken as a notification to the individual that there are issues at hand to be addressed (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The FYE program will help students prepare for and understand the rigors of collegiate level coursework. As students interact more and more with their Academic Resource Mentor, the ARM should be helping the students learn to identify and deal with stressors that can arise from dealing with academics. The ARMs will teach students to recognize their

stress at an early stage, so that they can cope with it in a healthy manner instead of shutting down completely or exuding their stress in a negative/deconstructive manner.

Chickering's third vector is moving through autonomy toward interdependence. "A key developmental step for students is learning to function with relative self-sufficiency, to take responsibility for pursuing self-chosen goals, and to be less bound by others' opinions" (1993, p. 47). One of the purposes of the FYE program is to help students feel more comfortable with their academic lives at UWL. Part of this is helping students to find a major and/or career path. The academic advisor in the Academic Advising Satellite office in each of the FYE halls meets with students, not to choose a major/career path for the student, rather to help the student understand what is available and what the student actually wants to do. The advisor is in the position to help the student make sense of their emotions, their wants, and their needs, so that in the end the student can make the decision that is best for them. The students who utilize this service can then use this decision making and self-exploration skill in other areas of their life.

The fourth vector is developing mature interpersonal relationships. "Developing mature relationships involves (1) tolerance and appreciation of differences and (2) capacity for intimacy" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 48). The relationships that students participating in the FYE program will encounter are the relationship that they form with the in-house academic advisor and their ARM. Each of these relationship encourage the student to look at themselves in a new light, exploring different ways of understanding and coping with different academic problems, choices, and teaching styles. The students will learn tolerance and hopefully acceptance of different instructors and the ways they choose to teach their classes. In addition, students will learn about forming

safe and professional intimate relationships as they will need to learn to place trust in their in-hall academic advisor and ARM. They will need to trust these individuals with information about themselves including current knowledge, skills, and abilities, as well as any personal information that could affect their academics or the way in which they learn.

Establishing identity, Chickering's fifth vector, in many ways is dependent on the vectors previously mentioned. The summation of these vectors and the way that we make sense of them as a whole is the lead-in to our established sense of identity. Chickering describes the process of establishing identity as "the process of discovering with what levels of intensity and frequency, we resonate in satisfying, in safe, or in self-destructive fashion" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 49). Establishing identity is typically thought of as a higher level of development and may not be a forefront concern of many individuals, especially those of traditional college age and development. The FYE program can help individuals to establish their identity in some sense. The academic advisor and academic resource mentor are both available to the student to help them figure out where their passions lie. The advisor and mentor can also help to steer the student in the direction of classes, programs, and organizations that will help students to explore their personal identity if they so choose. The FYE program does not force an identity on any given student. Instead, the FYE program gives students the tools that they need to explore their identity and take steps toward getting to know themselves.

The sixth vector, which could also be considered at a higher level of development, is called developing purpose. "Developing purpose entails an increasing ability to be intentional, to assess interests and options, to clarify goals, to make plans, and to persist despite obstacles" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 50). As previously stated, the FYE

program provides an academic advisor and academic resource mentors in-house to assist students in the discovery of different classes, programs, and organizations that are available to the students to assist in the further development of each student's individual identity. Whereas, these advisors and mentors cannot force the students they work with to do anything they can illuminate the paths that lay before each student. This can help the students to understand the choices that they have and to potentially make the best decision possible for themselves. Students must start taking actions on their own. They must make internal commitments and follow through externally with their actions. When making these internal commitments, students are forced to think about what is best for them and their ability to commit to action. Students have the support of their advisor and mentor, but ultimately it is up to them to commit to their own decisions and fight through any obstacles that arise to succeed.

The seventh and final vector, known as developing integrity, can be thought of as a higher level of development which the majority of people do not consciously consider. Developing integrity should be thought of more as a process than anything else. "Developing integrity involves three sequential but overlapping stages: (1) humanizing values... (2) personalizing values... and (3) developing congruence" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 51). The FYE program is not necessarily designed to help students develop integrity; however, students may begin or continue developing integrity through the exploration and integration of the new classes, programs, and organizations that they experience. As students begin to learn more about themselves and what they value, they can display their values through their affiliations and demonstrate congruence of those values through their actions.

## **Person-Environment Theory**

Using a different theoretical background it is possible to understand residence hall through a completely different framework. In his earliest work, Lewin (1936) introduced the idea that behavior was a function of the interaction between a person and their environment. As we strive to understand the effects that residence halls can have on their student inhabitants it is important to understand the basics of person-environment theory.

There are many student development theories, such as Chickering's work, which attempt to describe the "person" aspect of Lewin's person-environment function (Evans, Forney, & Guido-Brito, 1998). One of the first developmental theorists to tie student development into the person-environment interaction function, Sanford, explored the idea of the developmental conditions that must be met to allow student growth (cited in Evans et al., 1998). Sanford is best known for his work to understand the ideas of challenge and support as facilitators for student growth. Sanford (1966) outlined three developmental conditions: readiness, challenge, and support. Readiness highlights the idea that individuals cannot demonstrate some behaviors until they are ready to do so. Sanford believed that students needed to engage in "an optimal level of dissonance" in order to grow and develop. The idea is that the right amount of challenge provides motivation, but does not act as a deterrent. The amount of challenge that a person can handle is based on how much support they have available from external agents (Sanford, 1966). In terms of the role that residence halls play in the growth and development of students, it is crucial to remember that the residential experience must challenge students to step outside their comfort zones while maintaining proper measures to ensure that students feel safe and supported throughout the process. If students perceive the challenges before them as

impossible or that they do not have the support necessary to achieve the desired results, they may abandon or avoid the challenges at hand, denying themselves a potential growth and development opportunity.

### **Barker's Behavior Settings Theory**

There are also a variety of theories, which try to explain the “environment portion” of the function as well. Barker's (1968) theory on behavior settings explains the role that environments play in the selection and modification of their inhabitants' behaviors. Barker suggested that behavior settings were made up of two interacting components. The two components would be the behaviors that are actually occurring as well as the environmental objects and/or factors where the behavior is carried out (Barker, 1968). In the case of this study, the environments in question would be residence halls. The static rules and regulations of the residence halls have an effect on what actions are perceived as permissible and ultimately can affect resident behaviors. Also, the proportion of people within a given population and the make up of that population can have interaction effects on those interacting with the environment (Barker, 1968). Understanding a particular environment and the role that it plays in determining behaviors can help to shape communities that are conducive to promoting learning behaviors. For residence life professionals it is important to remember that having control over the environment of the residence halls means that they have some control over the behaviors of those who reside there according to the person-environment theory.

## **Assessment Tools**

### **The University Residence Environment Scale (URES)**

The University Residence Environment Scale (URES) is an assessment tool developed by Moos in 1974. Moos (1979) acknowledged the importance of the ideas put forth by person-environment interaction theory noting, “the social environment has important effects on satisfaction, learning, and personal growth” (p. 2). The URES is a tool developed to assess the climate of student living groups in a variety of settings and contexts including single-sex halls, co-educational halls, fraternities, and sororities (Moos, 1979).

Research has shown that using the URES can shed a great deal of light on the impacts of thematic programs implemented within residence halls. In 1979, college students participating in ten different college programs were administered the first edition of the URES before, during, and after their participation in the programs as research for a doctoral dissertation (McHugo, 1979). The results of that research showed that “students in more innovative and experimental housing programs expected and appraised their living units as higher on cohesion, academic achievement, and intellectuality and lower on traditional social orientation” (McHugo, 1979; Moos, 1988). The URES was also used to examine the perceptions of community in co-education living environments at a state-supported university in a small community. The study showed that there were significant differences in the perceptions on community across all dimensions and in several subscales (Moos, 1988).

Another popular use for the URES is to examine the perceptions of students living in fraternity or sorority housing in comparison to their counterparts who have not joined a Greek-letter organization living in residence halls. One particular study looked at 16 fraternities to see if they had differing perceptions from their male counterparts in the campus residence halls. The members of the fraternity all lived in an organization-owned house. The results showed very significant differences, including higher scores on involvement, emotional support, traditional social orientation, and competition within members of the fraternity living together in one residence as opposed to their counterparts who did not live together (Moos, 1988). These results offer evidence that housing programs, in a variety of fashions, can affect student perceptions of their community. Understanding that different housing situations can significantly affect perceptions on community, student affairs professionals can begin to craft meaningful and purposeful communities that achieve desired outcomes.

### **The Student Developmental Task and Lifestyle Assessment (SDTLA)**

The Student Developmental Task and Lifestyle Assessment (SDTLA) is another instrument, which is used to quantify student development.

The purpose of the Student Developmental Task and Lifestyle Assessment (SDTLA) is to provide an assessment tool and procedure that educational practitioners can use with young adult college students to facilitate development of life purpose, mature interpersonal relationships, and academic autonomy as well as the establishment of healthy lifestyles. (Winston, Miller, & Cooper, 1999, p. 3)

The SDTLA is an assessment designed to help practitioners understand what level of development a student is at in comparison to what would be considered normal. Using the results of the STDLA, practitioners can work with students to create development

plans or evaluate the environment the student(s) are living in to create educational and developmental opportunities.

The SDTLA measures different tasks, subtasks, and scales related to the development of college students. The tasks are developmental checkpoints, which build on themselves to provide experiences to the accomplishing individual. The subtasks are specific parts of the larger tasks. “Subtasks are independent constructs that also share commonality with other subtasks within a larger developmental area” (Winston et al., 1999, p. 10). The SDTLA is comprised of three tasks; establishing and clarifying purpose, developing autonomy, and mature interpersonal relationships.

The establishing and clarifying purpose task is made up of four subtasks: educational involvement, career planning, lifestyle planning, and cultural participation. The establishing and clarifying purpose task and its related subtasks are concerned with the creation and exploration of educational goals, career goal, personal values and ideals, and cultural interests (Winston et al., 1999). The establishing and clarifying purpose task is very focused on how self-directed an individual is and whether or not he or she is thinking critically about his or her future plans.

The developing autonomy task is also comprised of four subtasks: emotional autonomy, interdependence, academic autonomy, and instrumental autonomy. The task of developing autonomy includes ideas such as self-fulfillment and self-motivation, being proactive, time management and self-direction, and citizenship and community values (Winston et al., 1999). The developing autonomy task has strong roots in being able to be

an independent person who understands and engages themselves in the community in which they live.

The mature interpersonal relationships task is comprised of two subtasks: peer relationships and tolerance. The mature interpersonal relationship places a strong emphasis on open and honest relationships as well as being accepting of people from all backgrounds (Winston et al., 1999).

There are also two scales that are a part of the SDTLA: the salubrious lifestyle scale and the response bias scale. The salubrious scale is designed to measure how consistent a student's lifestyle is with physical health, while the response bias scale is more concerned with the accuracy of a student's portrayal of him or herself.

The SDTLA is designed to help practitioners understand what students think about themselves and to gauge where those students and the community in which they live are developmentally. The URES is designed to help practitioners understand what students perceive about their residential environment and what the community values within that environment. Because the URES was designed to be more focused on residential living, it was selected as the instrument for this study.

### **Themed Residence Halls**

First-year experience halls are a type of themed residence hall designed specifically for first-year students. Themed residence halls are living structures that are structurally similar to traditional residence halls, but have a specific learning focus that engages residents in outside the classroom learning (Herszenhorn, 1999). First-year themes can be created in a variety of ways; however, the end result is usually an

environment that exposes first-year students to different aspects of collegiate life in a safe and comfortable environment so that they are not overwhelmed or taken aback by the information. One university described their first-year living-learning residence as “designed to create a residence hall environment well integrated with the academic life of the university” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980, p. 346). These first-year themed residence halls provide additional academic and personal support to the residents of the building.

### **Residence Halls and UW-La Crosse**

For the 2009-2010 academic year, the Office of Residence Life (ORL) at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse (UW-L) provided residence hall housing options for 2944 students utilizing nine different residence halls. One of these halls housed only students in their second year at school or higher. Six of the halls housed a mix of first-year and returning students. The remaining two halls housed primarily first-year students. Each hall had a live-in, masters-level hall director to supervise the hall as well as to provide leadership and guidance. Three of the larger halls (two were mixed first-year and returning and one was primarily first-year) also had a live-in, graduate-level assistant hall director who assisted the hall director in the supervision of the hall. In addition to the hall director and possibly an assistant hall director, each hall had a number of resident assistants (RAs). The RAs were student-staff members who were tasked with building community and enforcing UW-L and ORL policy within each hall. Each hall had established a hall council, which was comprised of executive and general members who were residents of the building. These hall council members provided leadership to the hall as well as represented the hall on the campus-wide Residence Hall Association Council (RHAC). A recognized governing body, RHAC gave students a voice in multiple

aspects of residence hall governance. These aspects included policy formation, facility upgrades and changes, and programming.

In the Fall of 2009, the ORL employed a number of students as Academic Resource Mentors (ARMs). The ARM position was created to provide academic resources and support to the residents living in each building. Seven of the residence halls employed two or three ARMs, while the remaining halls employed more. The two halls that hired additional ARMs were the designated first-year experience halls. These halls attempted to use the ARMs to enhance the academic transition of the new first-year students that lived there during the year. Coate Hall hired 11 ARMs. There was one ARM for all but one community in the building.

After students are accepted into UW-La Crosse, they have the opportunity to apply to live on campus. This application process usually takes place between the September and June preceding the academic year of enrollment. Students provide ORL with their gender as well as smoking and hall preferences. ORL staff then assign new students to rooms and notify those students in the summer prior to the fall term. Students were made aware of the fact that Coate and Laux Halls would be first-year experience halls and could state their preference on whether or not they would like to live in such a residence hall.

Coate Hall and Laux Hall house primarily first-year students, with the exception being student staff members. Coate Hall housed approximately 415 students for the 2009-2010 academic year, including 12 student staff members and 12 Academic Resource Mentors who were not first-year students. Laux housed approximately 250 students for

the 2009-2010 academic year, including 9 student staff members and 6 Academic Resource Mentors who were not first-year students.

As a part of the FYE program, both Coate and Laux had satellite academic advising offices located in their basements starting in the 2009-2010 academic year. The in-hall academic advising office provided students with the opportunity to connect with an academic advisor within the comfort of their home. The satellite office also allowed a specific academic advisor as well as the Academic Advising office to do programming and supply other general resources to the FYE hall that would otherwise not have been available.

The other defining feature of the FYE program for Coate and Laux was that each of these halls had additional Academic Resource Mentors. Traditional residence halls have either two or three Academic Resource Mentors (ARMs). These two or three ARMs typically provide passive and active programming throughout the hall to promote awareness of the academic resources that they, as well as other offices on campus, have to offer. As stated previously, Coate had 12 ARMs and Laux had 6. The increased number of ARMs in these halls allowed the ARMs to form closer, more mentor-like relationships with the students in the hall that they served. These relationships have the potential to create connections between the students in the buildings and the ARMs and potentially to pull more and more students into their programming. These strong connections would also, in theory, encourage more students to develop trusting relationships with their ARM which could mean that those students would be more likely to go to their ARM for advice/resources.

Coate in particular had a special set up for the ARM facet of the FYE program. Each of the floors in Coate is divided into three cubes, which are communities that fall under the watch of a resident assistant (RA). In addition to the leadership and guidance of an RA, each cube had an ARM to build mentoring relationships and promote academic achievement. Before the 2009-2010 academic year this type of mentoring relationship focused solely on academic achievement.

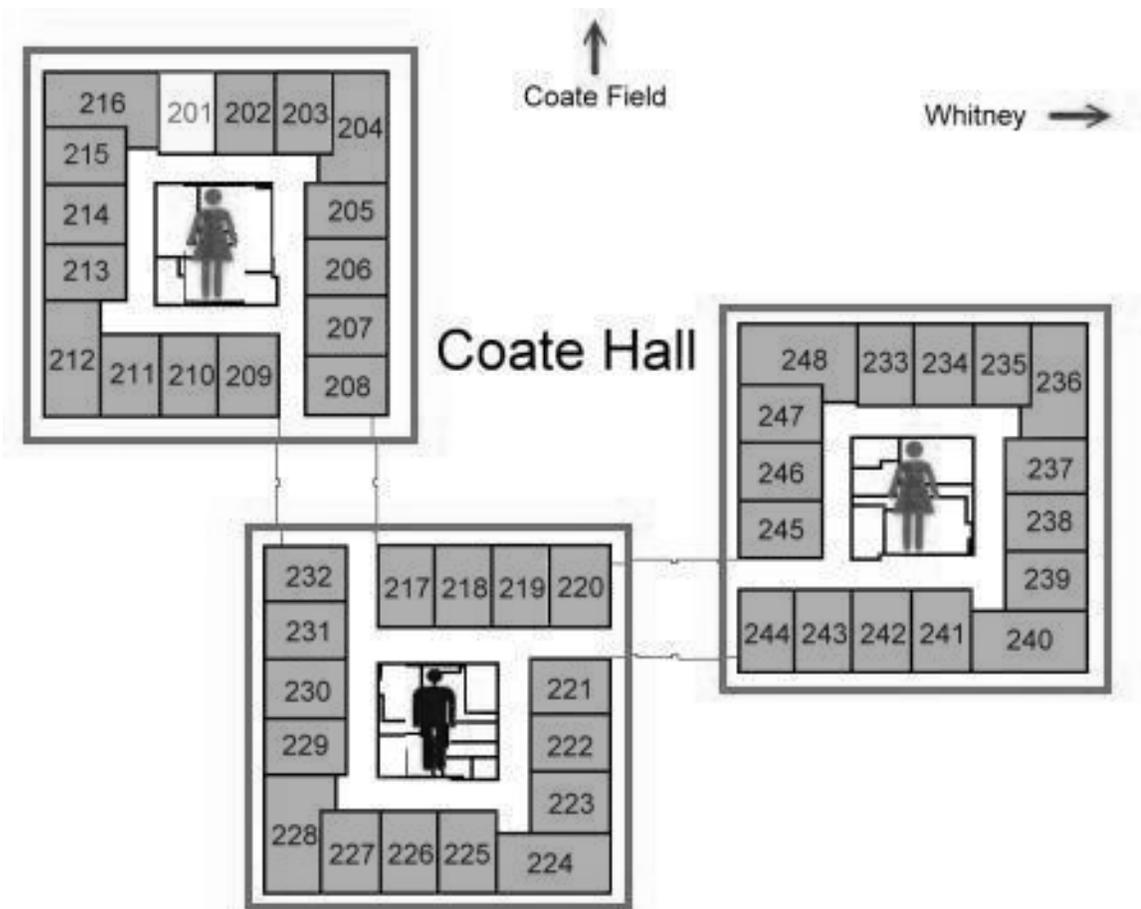


Figure 1. Coate Hall Floor Layout

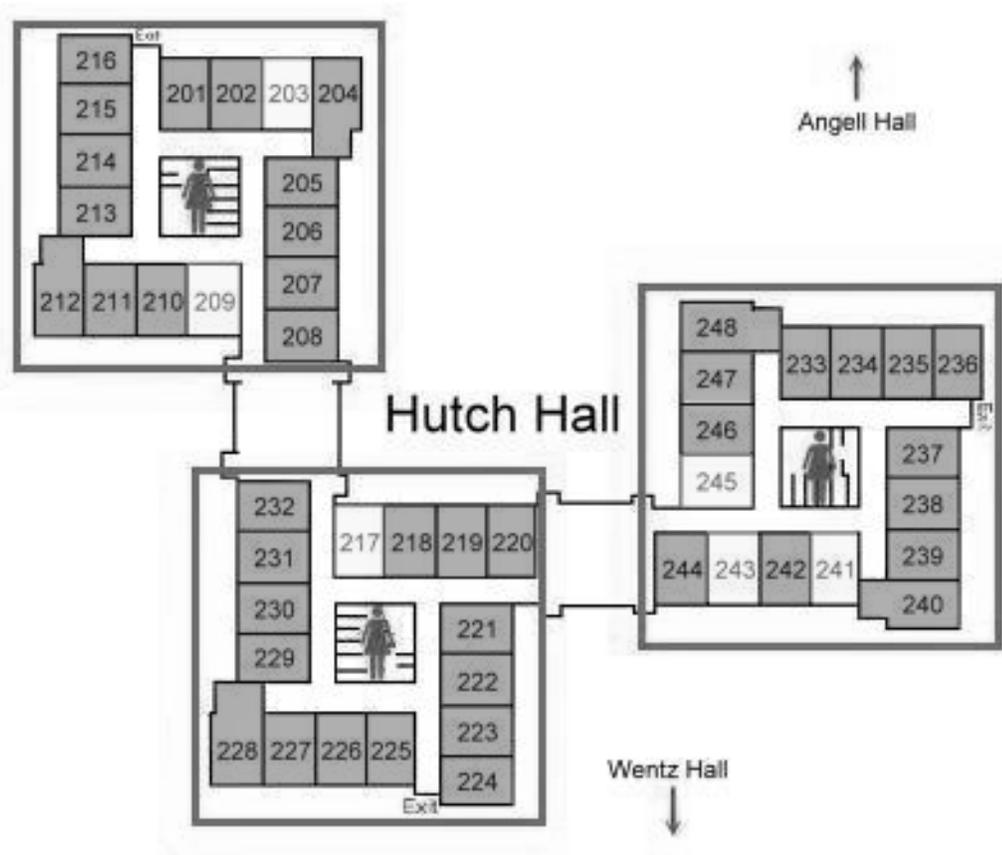


Figure 2. Hutchison Hall Floor Layout

### Summary

Research has demonstrated that there are a variety of different first-year experience or first-year themed residence halls across the country. Each of these institutions used the first-year experience program a bit differently, pulling in a variety of different resources to make their programs successful. All of the programs share one commonality: the desire to create a positive and enriching experience for all students participating in the program.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study was a Static-Group comparison that was conducted to assess any differences in the perceptions of academic achievement and intellectuality in the residence halls. The study focused on the First-Year Experience program as an intervention given to the first year students residing in Coate Hall and the absence of that intervention in Hutchison Hall. The participants all resided in Coate and Hutchison Halls. Coate Hall, a First Year Experience hall, housed primarily first year students. Hutchison Hall housed a combination of first year and continuing students, with the majority of residents being continuing students. The University Residence Environment Scale (URES), a social climate assessment tool, was administered to all participants (Moos, 1988). It was hypothesized that students living in Coate Hall who had been exposed the First-Year Experience program would report higher perceptions of academics and intellectuality in their community than their first-year counterparts in Hutchison Hall.

#### **Population and Sample**

Of the nine residence halls on the UW-L campus during the Fall of 2009, Coate Hall was the largest designated First Year Experience Hall. For the purpose of this study it was necessary to find another hall that had similar occupancy numbers as well as a similar building structure. Hutchison Hall was selected because its physical layout is very similar to Coate Hall and there were similar resident occupancies. In both buildings there

are three resident assistants on each floor with a professional Hall Director and Assistant Hall Director living on the first floor. No professional staff, student staff, or ARMs were a part of this study. Population details as well as information about amenities in both halls are available in Table 1.

Table 1.

Population Comparison and Building Amenities

	<b>Coate Hall</b>	<b>Hutchison Hall</b>
First Year Males	109	26
First Year Females	267	90
Male RA's	4	3
Female RA's	8	9
Male ARM's	3	2
Female ARM's	8	1
Study Spaces on Each Floor	2*	2*
Satelellite Academic Advising Office	X	
Front Desk Operation	X	X
Game Room	X	X

\* The first floor of both Coate and Hutchison Halls only have one study due to the layout of the lobby.

## **Instrumentation**

The URES is divided into three dimensions; relationship, personal growth or goal orientation, and system maintenance and change. Across the three dimensions the scale is broken up into ten subscales.

The subscales that fall into the relationship dimension are involvement (INV) and emotional support (ES). Involvement is defined as “the degree of commitment to the house and residents; amount of interaction and feeling of friendship in the house” (Moos, 1979, p. 29). Emotional support is described as “the extent of manifest concerns for others in the house; efforts to aid one another with academic and personal problems; emphasis on open and honest communication” (Moos, 1979, p. 29).

The subscales that fall into the personal growth or goal orientation dimension are independence (IND), traditional social orientation (TSO), competition (C), academic achievement (AA), and intellectuality (INT). Independence is defined by Moos as the “degree of emphasis on freedom and self-reliance versus socially proper and conformist behavior” (1979, p. 29). Traditional social orientation involves looking at what emphasis exists on things such as “dating, going to parties, and other traditional heterosexual interactions” (Moos, 1979, p. 29). Competition is the “degree to which a wide variety of activities, such as dating and grades, are cast into a competitive framework” (Moos, 1979, p. 29) Academic achievement is the “prominence of strictly classroom and academic accomplishments and concerns” (Moos, 1979, p. 29). Intellectuality is defined by Moos as having “emphasis on cultural, artistic, and other intellectual activities, as distinguished from strictly classroom achievements” (1979, p. 29).

The subscales that fall into the system maintenance and change dimension are order and organization (OO), student influence (SI), and innovation (INN). Order and organization is defined as the “amount of formal structure, neatness, and organization (rules, schedules, established procedures)” (Moos, 1979, p. 29). Student influence refers to the “extent to which student residents formulate and enforce rules and control use of the money, selection of staff, roommates, and the like” (Moos, 1979, p. 29). Innovation is defined by Moos as the “organizational and individual spontaneity of the behaviors and ideas; number and variety of new activities” (Moos, 1979, p. 29).

When Moos and Gerst first developed the URES in 1974, there were 238 questions listed on the survey that participants were to take. These 238 items were paired down to 140 items. This new form was administered to students in over 70 residents halls. (Moos, 1988). The results that were found were such that the form underwent further revisions and was able to be reorganized into what is now recognized as Form R, with 10 subscales and 100 items.

The URES currently contains four distinct forms. These forms are the Real Form (R), Ideal Form (I), Expectations Form (E), and the Short Form (S). Form R measures students’ views and perceptions on their current living group. Form I measures students’ conceptions on what an ideal community would be. Form E measures students’ expectations about a living group that they are about to enter. Lastly, Form S, a shortened version of Form R, allows for a quick assessment of a living community (Moos, 1988).

Form S from the second edition of the URES was chosen for this particular study. The second edition of the URES contained an expanded overview of multiple research

applications. The normative samples for Form R and Form S were taken from 16 institutions and included 168 living group units. These living group units included co-educational housing, fraternities, women's houses and men's houses (separated by freshmen or upper-class student status), and units occupied by both undergraduate and graduate students.

Form S contained a page with instructions, a page for collecting demographic information, and the 40 true-false statements that comprised the survey. The demographic sheet had spaces for each participant to identify their name, age, gender, residence hall, floor, room, and class standing. The demographics section also asked students to indicate whether their current living assignment was their first, second, third, or fourth choice for housing or if they did not have a choice in the assignment process. Participants were provided a space to identify how long they had resided in their current living assignment during the current and/or previous year and if they would prefer to live in the same living group/hall for the next year.

This study focused on the academic achievement (AA) and intellectuality (INT) subscales; however, the entire form was given to all participants, and collected data for all ten subscales. Academic achievement and intellectuality were chosen to address the academic nature of the first-year experience program. The first-year experience program includes a variety of academic-based resources, which are discussed in further detail later in this chapter. The decision to include all of the subscales in the study was made to insure that the integrity of the instrument would remain intact. Separating out the items directly related to the AA and INT subscales had the possibility of drawing the attention of the participants to the purpose of the study, which could influence their responses.

## **Instrument Validity and Reliability**

Assuring that the instrument chosen would provide reliable and valid results was of the utmost importance. In the development of the URES, Moos and Gerst found that the internal consistencies ranged from .88 to .77. Moos and Gerst also found the test-retest reliability for the URES by administering the URES to a group of 83 students living in men's and women's dormitories at a public university on three separate occasions (Moos, 1988). The test-retest correlations that were found ranged from .66 to .77 after one week and after four weeks they ranged from .59 to .74. According to Moos, these results demonstrated "adequate stability" (Moos, 1988).

Moos (1988) established content validity into the URES by creating definitions of specific constructs, by preparing items to fit the specific constructs, and by eventually selecting items which were conceptually related to a dimension of the URES as agreed on by an independent rater. Empirical criteria, including item inter-correlations, item-subscale correlations, and internal consistency analyses were also used utilized in the selection of items to ensure validity. To ensure clarity each item was only used within one dimension.

## **Data Collection**

An email was sent to all of the first-year students living in Coate and Hutchison Halls soliciting them to participate in the study. Of the 492 residents that were solicited, 172 residents completed the survey yielding a total response rate of 34.96 percent. Of the 492 residents solicited, 376 were residents of Coate and 116 were residents of Hutchison. There were 103 surveys completed from Coate Hall for a response rate of 27.39 percent.

Of the completed surveys 35 were male and 68 were female. In Hutchison Hall there was a response rate of 59.48 percent. Males completed 25 surveys while females completed 44 for a grand total of 69 surveys completed.

Form S of the URES was administered to freshmen students living in Coate and Hutchison Halls in early December of 2009. December was chosen specifically because it allowed ample time for the students to acclimate to their hall and develop bonds to their communities. By placing the study after the Thanksgiving Break, residents were afforded the chance to be away from the stresses of college life for a few days. This break allowed the residents to differentiate from the stresses of their coursework with the stresses of their living community so that when they took the survey they could clearly focus on their thoughts about their living group. The survey was administered during a three-hour block of time in the lobby of each hall. Residents willing to participate came down to the designated survey area during the designated time. Participants received the survey packet and a verbal overview of the packet. Each participant received an introductory letter, an informed consent form, and Form S of the URES (See Appendices A, B, and C)

After participants received the packet, they were asked to read the introductory letter and sign the informed consent form. Participants were informed that their participation was completely voluntary. Participants were told that they did not have to include their name on the survey and that if they did include their name, anonymity would be assured. After each student completed the survey they immediately turned the packet into the researcher.

Prior to the beginning of this survey the UW-La Crosse Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects granted approval for this study, which allowed this study to take place using students in the residence halls (See Appendix D). The Hall Directors for both Coate and Hutchison Halls granted permission for this study to take place within their residence halls.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **RESULTS**

This chapter focuses on the results of the research. The hypotheses will be addressed using data from the URES. This chapter will also include information about why the tests for significance were chosen.

#### **Data Analysis**

After the surveys were collected, an Excel spreadsheet was used to determine the scores for each subscale. The frequencies for the scores for each subscale were plotted on line graphs for each living group. This was necessary to determine whether or not each set of data was normal. This step was crucial as the t-test used to determine significant interactions, assumes normalcy. If the frequencies are not normal, the t-test's results are not as accurate and powerful as they could be. A visual inspection of the frequency polygons suggested that the distribution of the data might not be normal. Figures 3 and 4 show the curves that were created by plotting the score of each subscale against the number of participants from each hall who responded in that way. To test the assumption of normality, it was decided to use the Shapiro-Wilk Test. The results from the Shapiro-Wilk test, as shown in Table 2, show that the data is not normally distributed and that a two-sample t-test is not appropriate as the two-sample t-test assumes that the data falls under a normal distribution. Consequently, the Wilcoxon signed-ranks test was chosen in the place of the standard t-test. The Wilcoxon signed-ranks test is a nonparametric test

that “is applicable where the samples are related”, but does not make the same assumptions about data normality as the t-test (Bruning & Kintz, 1997, p. 292).

## **Hypothesis Findings**

### **Null Hypothesis One**

First-year students living in a first-year experience hall will report no significantly differing perceptions on academic achievement (AA) in their community than first-year students living in a traditional residence hall.

The first null hypothesis was rejected ( $W=7978.5, p=.001$ ). Therefore, the alternative hypothesis that first-year students in first-year experience halls will report significantly differing perceptions on academic achievement in their community than first-year students living in a traditional residence hall was accepted. On the AA subscale of the URES, there were significant differences between the responses from residents in Coate and Hutchison. Figure 2 illustrates the mean and standard deviation for each subscale. The p-value listed on Table 2 for the AA subscale indicates a significant difference between the Coate and Hutchison mean scores.

### **Null Hypothesis Two**

First-year students living in a first-year experience hall will report no significantly differing perceptions on intellectuality (INT) in their community than first-year students living in a traditional residence hall.

The second null hypothesis was not rejected ( $W=8518.5, p=.103$ ). Therefore, the alternative hypothesis was not accepted. Hutchison did report higher scores on the INT

subscale than Coate; however, this difference was not significant. This is illustrated in Table 2.

### **Additional Findings**

Visually, the data suggested that there may be unexpected differences between Coate and Hutchison using other scores from the URES. To test this assumption, a two-tailed Wilcoxon signed-ranks test was performed again. The results of the two-tailed test are detailed in Table 3. The two-tailed test indicated not only that there was a significant difference in AA scores between Coate and Hutchison, but also that Hutchison had significantly higher scores than Coate. The significance of these scores will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Of the ten subscales that were examined, five subscales were found to have significant differences in mean scores. Table 3 shows that three of these five subscales had  $p$ -values of  $p. \leq .001$ . The subscales that showed significant differences were C, AA, OO, SI, and INN. The scores for C and INN were significantly higher in Coate than in Hutchison. The scores for AA, OO, and SI were significantly higher in Hutchison than in Coate. While not significant there were also differences in the means of the other subscales. Coate had higher mean scores for INV, IND, and TSO than Hutchison, while Hutchison had higher mean scores for S and INT.

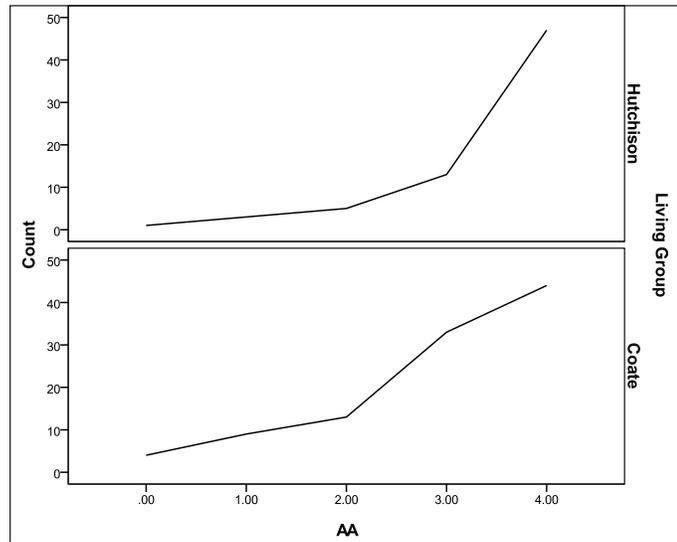


Figure 3. Frequencies of Academic Achievement (AA) Scores for Coate and Hutchison

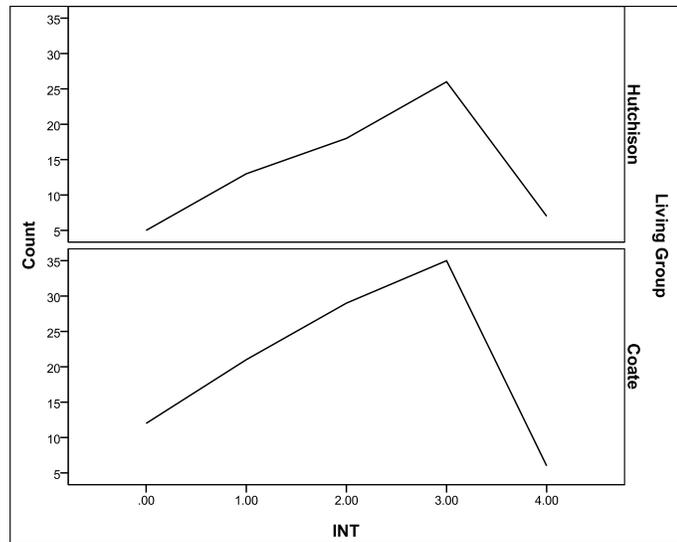


Figure 4. Frequencies of Intellectuality (INT) Scores for Coate and Hutchison

Table 2.

One-Tailed Comparison of Living Groups on the Two Selected Subscales

Subscale	Hutchison Hall		Coate Hall		Wilcoxon <i>W</i>	p-value	
	Mean (N=69)	SD	Mean (N=103)	SD			
AA	3.48	0.92	3.01	1.12	7978.5	0.001	***
INT	2.25	1.1	2.02	1.12	8518.5	0.103	

\*\*\*  $p. \leq .001$

Table 3.

## Two-Tailed Comparison of Living Groups on the Ten Subscales

Subscale	Hutchison Hall		Coate Hall		Wilcoxon <i>W</i>	p-value
	Mean (N=69)	SD	Mean (N=103)	SD		
INV	3.39	1.06	3.47	0.93	5933.50	0.893
S	3.39	0.93	3.26	1.10	8773.50	0.627
IND	1.54	0.98	1.62	1.00	5735.00	0.447
TSO	1.84	1.35	1.89	1.15	5897.50	0.820
C	1.16	0.93	1.75	0.95	4802.50	0.000 ***
AA	3.48	0.92	3.01	1.12	7978.50	0.001 ***
INT	2.25	1.10	2.02	1.12	8518.50	0.204
OO	3.54	0.70	3.25	0.86	8278.00	0.028 *
SI	2.07	0.85	1.63	0.90	7887.50	0.001 ***
INN	2.99	0.90	3.37	0.86	5042.50	0.002 **

\*  $p. \leq .05$ \*\*  $p. \leq .01$ \*\*\*  $p. \leq .001$

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This chapter will discuss the results that were reported in Chapter Four as well as conclusions regarding these findings, and provide recommendations for the First-Year Experience program and for further research.

#### **Discussion and Conclusions**

This study investigated the influence that First-Year Experience programs have on first-year students in First-Year Experience halls in comparison to their counterparts in traditional residence halls. Using the University Residence Environment Scale, residents from Coate and Hutchison Halls at UW-L were surveyed on their perceptions of the communities in which they lived.

Previous studies have shown that the concepts of a living-learning community can alter the behaviors of students to achieve more desirable outcomes. In this study, the First-Year Experience program is the treatment. Hutchison Hall is the control group while Coate Hall receives the treatment. Providing each participant with the exact same packet minimized random error. In addition, the studies were conducted at the same time of day within one 24 hour period. Participants had lived in their respective halls for the same amount of time. One of the threats to internal validity is the history of the participants. The study assumes the only differences between the control group and the treated group is the actual treatment. This assumption does not address the fact that there

could be instances from the participants' individual histories that could have an effect on results of the study outside of the treatment. Additional information about the assumptions and limitations of the study are listed in chapter one.

Two null hypotheses were investigated through this study. The first null hypothesis stated that there would be no significantly different perceptions on academic achievement between students in a First-Year Experience hall and students in a traditional hall. This first null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative hypothesis was accepted. Using the results from the two-tailed test that was conducted, it was discovered that Hutchison Hall had significantly higher perceptions on academic achievement than Coate Hall. The second null hypothesis was not rejected and therefore the second alternative hypothesis could not be accepted. Using a one-tailed test, it was found that there was no significant difference between the perceptions of intellectuality in the Hutchison and Coate communities.

The findings of the study suggest that the First-Year Experience program is not necessarily meeting its current objective to help students' transitions into the world of college academics. The significantly higher perceptions on academic achievement in Hutchison Hall could indicate that the FYE program is not affecting its intended audience in Coate Hall. The FYE program in Coate Hall provided the students living there with a variety of resources that were designed to help them succeed academically in college; however, the students in Hutchison Hall also had a resource that could have affected their perceptions on the community. In Hutchison, there is a combination of first-year and returning students living together. The returning students serve as official leaders, as Hall Council executive officers, and unofficial mentors for the first-year students. Having

already been through a year of college, these students have learned first hand the importance of academic pursuits. Being surrounded by these returning students gives the residents of Hutchison Hall a unique opportunity that is not prevalent in Coate Hall. Outside of the RAs and ARMs in Coate Hall, the first-year students do not have returning student role models.

It is not surprising that there was no significant difference in perceptions on intellectuality between Coate and Hutchison Halls. The resources that are provided by the First-Year Experience program in Coate Hall are primarily of an academic nature. It appears the intellectuality of each community is dependent on the residents who live there rather than on the resources available. This belief is mildly supported by the fact that the mean scores for perception of intellectuality were slightly higher in Hutchison Hall than in Coate Hall. The returning students in Hutchison Hall are older than the first-year students who reside in Coate Hall, thus they have had more time to develop a sense of what is important to them outside academics in a more intellectual manner. Having these returning students around the first-year students in Hutchison could affect the first-year students' perceptions on intellectuality in Hutchison Hall.

The review of literature revealed that a large portion of the research that has been conducted has concluded that living-learning communities have positive effects on the residents living within them; however, there is very little research about First-Year Experience living-learning communities from a purely residential standpoint. This study's results were somewhat contrary to the previously established ideas about living-learning communities. The disparity between this study's results and previous research could be explained by the fact that the participants' perceptions about their community

were being measured rather than GPA's or other academic indicators. It is possible that the participants in the study may have had their behaviors modified by the First-Year Experience program or lack thereof, without altering their perceptions about the community.

The study was designed to be as accurate, reliable, and valid as possible; however, the study did have its limitations. Despite these limitations, the study did protect its validity in a few ways. Because the inventory was administered only once to each living group and no post-testing is necessary, the attrition of subjects is greatly reduced. That is to say there are very few possibilities for an individual to begin the study and not finish it. Maturity of the subjects was also a non-issue in this study. Students were only tested at one point, so there was truly no opportunity for their personal growth and development to change the outcome of the study. In fact, the aim of the study was to find out how the subjects perceive their community, so their development within the hall, including their growth and acclimation to the community, was necessary.

## **Recommendations**

### **For the Institution**

Four recommendations have been made for consideration by the Office of Residence Life in regards to the First-Year Experience Program.

1. As evidenced by the significant differences in perception about academic achievement, it is recommended that the option for first-year students to live in halls with returning students be maintained.

2. To supplement the quantitative findings of this research, it would be useful to speak with the ARMs of Coate Hall as well as the Academic Advisor who staffs the Coate satellite academic advising office to assess their reactions to the First-Year Experience program and their interactions with the first-year students.
3. In an effort to learn more about the programming being presented to first-year students in both FYE and traditional halls, it would be beneficial to assess the programming that was done during the 2009-2010 year to see if there are any trends in programming that could explain the differing perceptions on the community.
4. In order to understand the effects of the FYE program on academic performance, rather than perception, it is recommended that the GPA's of the first-year students in FYE halls be compared to their counterparts in traditional halls at the beginning of the second semester to identify any significant differences.

### **For Further Research**

Due to the limitations on this study, the following recommendations were made to enhance future research.

1. It is suggested that the study be attempted again drawing a larger sample from a larger population that includes both FYE residence halls and all traditional residence halls. Studies conducted in this manner will give a better indication of patterns within first-year students.
2. It is recommended that participants in the study be pre-tested at the beginning of the academic year and post-tested at the conclusion of the fall academic semester.

The pre-test/post-test design will identify any significant changes in perception over a period of time rather than just at one point.

3. It would be advantageous to have a control group of all first-year students, no returning students, who were not receiving the benefits of the FYE program to remove the role-modeling factor previously discussed in chapter five. This would allow the researcher to have a stronger assumption that the only difference between the two environments would be the FYE program.
4. In an effort to understand why the FYE program or living with returning students change perspectives, redesigning the study to be qualitative would provide more details about how students are affected by residence hall living.

### **Conclusion**

The results of this study are indicative that further research is needed to look into the true value of First-Year Experience programming. Although living-learning communities have great potential to impact students in positive ways, this study has shown that even with the presence of the First-Year Experience program in Coate Hall, the first-year students residing there did not have higher perceptions of academic achievement or intellectualism in their community than their counterparts in the traditional residence halls.

The field of housing in general could use this research as a starting point to critique existing programs and aid in the development in new programs. One of the reasons that it may be so hard to find current research on the subject is because it requires a control group who would not have the same access to resources as would their

counterparts receiving treatment. In Student Affairs, professionals try to give students every resource possible and withholding resources does not happen often. The research needed on this subject would require professionals to create control groups that were deprived resources deemed as valuable while giving them to others. Though this deprivation has the potential to have negative impacts on some first year students, it would greatly increase the accuracy of similar studies. Creating an accurate study that allows for the understanding of the effects of First-Year Experience programming would help to create opportunities to ease the transition of first-year students into college life.

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APPENDIX A

FORM S OF THE UNIVERSITY RESIDENCE ENVIRONMENT SCALE (URES)

Form S

1. There is a feeling of unity and cohesion here ..... T/F
2. People here are concerned with helping and supporting one another ..... T/F
3. People here tend to check on whether their behavior is acceptable  
to others in the house..... T/F
4. Dating is a recurring topic of conversation around here..... T/F
5. Around here discussions frequently turn into verbal duels..... T/F
6. People around here hardly ever seem to be studying..... T/F
7. People around here talk a lot about political and social issues..... T/F
8. The house officers function in a somewhat haphazard manner..... T/F
9. The staff here decide whether and when the residents can have  
visitors of the opposite sex in their rooms ..... T/F
10. New approaches to things are often tried here ..... T/F
11. Very few things around here arouse much excitement or interest ..... T/F
12. Around here people tend to hide their feelings from one another ..... T/F
13. People here pretty much act and think freely without too much  
regard for social opinion..... T/F
14. Some people here spend a lot of time preparing for dates ..... T/F
15. People don't try to impress each other here..... T/F
16. Around here studies are secondary to most activities..... T F
17. There is a good deal of concern about intellectual awareness  
in the house ..... T/F
18. The jobs of house officers are not clearly defined..... T/F
19. The students formulate almost all the rules here ..... T/F
20. Innovation is not considered important here ..... T/F

21. In this house there is a strong feeling of belongingness ..... T/F
22. Trying to understand the feelings of others is considered important  
by most people in this house..... T/F
23. Around here people are not interested in up-holding social conventions. T/F
24. People here consider other types of social activities to be  
more important than dating ..... T/F
25. In this house people tend not to compete with each other..... T/F
26. People here work hard to get top grades ..... T/F
27. People here very rarely discuss intellectual matters ..... T/F
28. House procedures here are well established ..... T/F
29. The staff here have the last say about student discipline ..... T/F
30. In this house people often do unusual things..... T/F
31. Most people here have a strong sense of loyalty toward the house ..... T/F
32. People here try to make others feel secure ..... T/F
33. Behaving correctly in public is pretty unimportant in this house..... T/F
34. In this house dating is not important ..... T/F
35. People around here are always trying to win an argument ..... T/F
36. Most people here consider studies as very important in college..... T/F
37. There is not much appreciation here for classical music, art,  
literature, etc ..... T/F
38. House activities are pretty carefully planned here..... T/F
39. House finances are handled exclusively by students here..... T/F
40. Doing things in a different way is valued around here..... T/F

APPENDIX B  
INTRODUCTORY LETTER

December 9, 2009

Dear Student,

My name is David Lemon and I am a graduate student here at UW-La Crosse in the Student Affairs Administration program. As part of my graduation requirements, I am currently working on a master's level thesis which looks at how students in First Year Experience and non-First Year Experience halls perceive different aspects of their community. The research that I am doing will directly impact the way the Office of Residence Life looks at the First Year Experience program.

As part of my research, I am asking that you complete the attached survey and general demographic information. This survey is confidential and so you do not need to include your name. This form is entirely voluntary and it should not take you more than ten minutes to complete. If you elect to fill out the survey you will have the opportunity to be entered into a drawing for a gift card prize at a later date.

If you choose to be a part of this research, please fill out the following survey and consent form.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David J. Lemon". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "D".

David J. Lemon

APPENDIX C  
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**Informed Consent Form**

Title of Project: First-Year Student Perceptions on Academics in the Community in Residence Halls at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in the research project named above. I have been informed that participating in this project will aid the Office of Residence Life in better understanding students’ perceptions of and satisfaction with community environments in the residence halls at UW-La Crosse.

I have been informed that this research involves filling out general demographic information and completing a short survey. I have also been informed that I will remain anonymous as a participant in the study.

I have been informed that the anticipated risks and/or inconveniences from taking part in this research are minimal and that participation is entirely voluntary.

I have been informed that the Institutional Review Board has approved this study for the Protection of Human Subjects at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. I have also been informed that any questions regarding the protection of human subjects may be addressed to [irb@uwlax.edu](mailto:irb@uwlax.edu).

Signature of the Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of the Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator:  
David J. Lemon  
Office of Residence Life  
103 Whitney Center  
University of Wisconsin-La Crosse  
(608) 789 – 2548

Faculty Chair:  
Dr. Mary Beth Vahala  
Associate Director of University Centers  
212 Cartwright Center  
University of Wisconsin-La Crosse  
(608) 785 – 8883

APPENDIX D  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

UNIVERSITY of WISCONSIN  
**LA CROSSE**

To: David Lemon

From: Bart Van Voorhis, Coordinator  
Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects

Date: November 5, 2009

Re: **RESEARCH PROTOCOL SUBMITTED TO IRB**

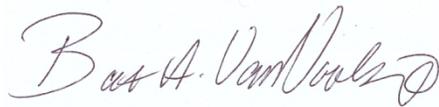
The IRB Executive Committee has reviewed your proposed research project entitled:

*“First-Year Student Perceptions on Academics in the Community in Residence Halls at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse”*

The Committee has determined that your research protocol will not place human subjects at risk. **The protocol has been approved under expedited review procedures, and declared exempt from further review in accordance with 45CFR46, 46.110(a)(b).** However, it is strongly suggested that Informed Consent always be used. Remember to provide participants a copy of the consent form and to keep a copy for your records. Consent documentation and IRB records should be retained for at least 3 years after completion of the project.

Since you are not seeking federal funding for this research, the review process is complete and you may proceed with your project.

Good luck with your project.



cc: IRB File  
Mary Beth Vahala, Faculty Advisor

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