Living Learning Communities Final Report

Charge: "Develop a set of recommendations for how living-learning communities can support first year student success at UMaine."

Recommendations

1. Implement a new model for learning communities and other special interest housing. Distinguish between different types of housing options as follows: General Housing, Special Interest or Theme Housing, Learning Communities (with minor academic component), and FY Interest Groups (smaller clusters of FYs taking one semester with substantial course loads and living in proximity to one another).

2. Create a standing committee, appointed jointly by Provost and VP of Student Life, to oversee development, approval, and implementation of learning communities, FIG, and special interest/theme housing. Group should be empowered to review existing policies and procedures that impact the success of communities under its oversight (see below). Recommend or mandate living learning community model program components.

3. Conduct critical review of all housing and residence life policies, protocols, and practices to ensure that operational lenses do not unnecessarily impede success of communities with academic components. Develop new policies and protocols to account for complexities associated with new programs, i.e. prioritize learning community needs. Ensure learning outcome-oriented priorities drive business practices, not vice versa.

   Examples include but are note limited to
   - clarify relationship between course enrollment and learning community housing assignment when one or the other changes
   - evaluate new assignment practices against best practices; determine which models best influence desired student outcomes
   - review assignment timelines, communications with students, etc. to increase period during which students can pursue learning communities
   - whether academic units can mandate living learing community participation (and therefore housing assignment)
   - impact on students with other needs/interests including student athletes, differently abled students, continuous housing, gender-related concerns, etc.
   - LLC (and housing options, in general) marketing strategies

4. Coordinate extensively with Institutional Research, New Student Programs, and academic advising units to identify target populations for which residential learning communities and FIGs should be developed. Market extensively to those populations and/or mandate participation if sponsoring academic unit supports such a policy.

Background/Rationale

The University of Maine's current 'learning communities' are mostly either limit participation to a specific class of students (Honors) or theme housing. Only the leadership community initiated in FY19 maintained an academic requirement and its struggles (tied largely to current housing business practices) have led to it being placed on hiatus for FY20. So, heading into FY20. no living learning program at UMaine will have an academic component. While such a model tends to be attractive to students and parents when applying for housing, there is little evidence at the university, or elsewhere, that such a model impacts student success or retention.

By and large, the LLC working group perceives its recommendations as coordination of already-existing resources at UMaine. There is tremendous potential impact in aligning student academic requirements with residence hall arrangements, along with good planning between the affiliated academic and residence life personnel. The scholarship suggests that expansive investment can yield even greater gains for our students, but the working group is not recommending those models for implementation at UMaine at this time.

LLC Models

The LLC working group wishes to align UMaine's living-learning programs with national best practices and pursue well-established models that can bend and flex to the culture and resource base of the university. The group's primary concern is to pursue actual residential learning communities with academic components. Two models seem appropriate within reach of the university. The first are communities with a modest (3-6 credit hours) academic requirement, often an already existing FY seminars and sometimes designed specifically for the community. The other is the more robust FIG model, in which a smaller cluster of students (8-20) are enrolled in the same 9-12 credit hour academic cluster, while living in close proximity to one another.

The group believes there remains a place for special interest or thematic housing at UMaine, but recommends that it be recognized as separate from residential programs that are tied to the

curriculum. This recommendation does suggest that difficult decisions may need to be made about communities like Support for Science Students, among others, that 'sound' like they have academic components but do not. We defer such decisions to those implementing these recommendations, if accepted.

A note on Honors housing at UMaine: the Department of Residence Life's stance on Honors housing has been that it is special interest housing and would not qualify as a learning community as described above. Without specific programmatic or academic components specific to the students in that housing arrangement, it is simply special interest housing. If the Honors College wishes to integrate some components to the residential experience that they would not offer to all of their students, then Residence Life's perspective on the community would change. Whether or not such distinctions are relevant moving forward might be revisited.

Oversight

The current model of oversight and approval exists almost exclusively within Residence Life, and until January 2019 under the First Year and Transfer Center that fell under Residence Life's oversight. Such an administrative home may be appropriate for special interest housing, a different framework will be needed for residential programs that maintain academic components. The working group recommends a standing committee, appointed by the Provost and the Vice President for Student Life, to oversee all components of the university's residential learning communities.

Specifically, such a group would need to oversee development of and assessment of new learning communities and FIGs. Over the long term, they would evaluate and recommend and/or approve changes to existing programs. They would also need to explore, clarify, and develop policies and structures as relate to learning communities, ensure that communication and marketing of the programs is a priority, and coordinate with academic advisors, housing, and enrollment management to determine best methods to drive appropriate students to the appropriate programs.

Policy Review

An important task that might be delegated to the standing committee is a critical review of housing and residence life practices, timelines, and procedures. Decisions that simply impact a student's housing assignment can create unrealized problems for student enrolled in classes tied to that housing assignment. There are numerous examples of students being placed, without their

approval, into current special interest housing arrangements. Housing freezes, early notification of housing assignment, students being moved without consultation of all interested parties, etc. are problematic in our current arrangements and would be substantially more concerning when academic requirements are tied to housing assignments, and vice versa.

Regarding Blended Housing

Throughout the working group's efforts, multiple parties expressed concern about the impact of segregated First Year housing. At both convenings, the group received similar feedback. The concerns expressed were tied to the inability to take advantage of resonsible upper class students influence in the first year halls. The burden on live-in undergraduate staff in FY halls is substantial and additional influence from responsible upperclass students would be beneficial. In particular, the working group saw substantial potential in the positive influence of returning students (non staff) to learning communities and special interest housing.

Additionally, housing staff noted challenged created by the policy, limiting options to place students in appropriate assignments and to address overflow concerns if they arise.

The Right Students Supported by the Right Personnel

One of the greatest challenges in assessing learning communities, or any value-added program, is controlling for self-selection of participants. Multiple studies have illustrated that students who self-select into learning communities tend to have college-educated parents, come from means, and typically do not reflect the full diversity of the institutions' student body. If the program models outlined here are to have any impact on FY success and retention, they must at least reach some of the students who typically do not persist to the third semester.

Appropriate use of data from enrollment management and institutional research can help us identify who would be best suited to benefit from these kinds of programs. Holding some spaces in these communities for such students makes sense (given that we do not anticipate or endorse developing living-learning programs exclusively for at-risk students). Support from New Student Programs and Housing to market the programs is a priority. Academic program coordinators and/or advisors who place students in classes will be essential to the success of the students. Strong coordination between the sponsoring academic unit and residence life staff to ensure that the curriculum and co-curriculum are aligned and mutually supportive is a best practice.

Resource Information

The working group perceives that the investment of time from existing university personnel will be the main driver of these proposals. Time has value, and the building of the policy and procedural structure to support these suggestions will be significant. After that, oversight and coordination should be routinized and may be delegated to administrative units as deemed appropriate. Some direct line to the Provost should remain to ensure the integrity of the academic component of the communities is well supported.