

## **Further Enriching the Learning Community Experience**

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## INTRODUCTION

Residential Learning Programs (RLPs) are a common feature of many US post-secondary educational institutions. Generally, they revolve around living arrangements in which a group of students with similar academic interests, backgrounds, or goals live together in a designated housing unit or floor of a resident hall. RLPs are designed to create an intentional living and learning environment that supports academic success, personal growth, and community building among students.

In RLPs, students participate in programming, for example academic and social activities, integrated into their living environment. These may include guest lectures, group projects, community service, mentoring programs, and other opportunities to connect with peers and faculty members who share similar interests. RLPs are often led by faculty or staff members who provide guidance and support to students.

Research has shown that students who live in RLPs typically tend to have higher Grade Point Averages (GPAs), greater retention rates, and a stronger sense of community than students who do not live in RLPs. RLPs are also seen as a means of supporting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) on campus by bringing together students with different backgrounds and perspectives.

Vincent Tinto is a scholar in the field of higher education who has conducted extensive research on student success and retention in college. According to Tinto (1993), there are several factors that contribute to a student's success in college, including:

1. Academic preparedness: Students who come to college with strong academic backgrounds and skills are more likely to succeed.
2. Social integration: Students who feel connected to their peers, faculty, and the campus community are more likely to stay in college and graduate.
3. Institutional commitment: Institutions that provide strong academic and social support systems are more likely to retain students.
4. Personal motivation: Students who have clear goals and are highly motivated to succeed in college are more likely to do so.
5. Financial support: Students who have access to financial resources and assistance are more likely to stay in college and complete their degrees.

RLPs offer the promise of addressing many of these factors and thus, are an attractive proposition for any university looking to maximize student success.

The history of RLPs in American universities began in 1909 at Harvard University. The "House Plan" was designed to provide students with a more cohesive and supportive environment by grouping them together in small residential communities. In the 1920s and

1930s, the residential college model spread amongst other universities and valued small, self-contained communities that typically had their own dining halls, common rooms, and other shared spaces while students were encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities and social events together.

The modern RLP evolved in the late 1990s (Henscheid, 1996) when the quality of residential life became a major selling point for universities competing for higher-paying out-of-state or international students. Offering alternatives to the traditional fraternity/sorority model, also known as “Greek life”, RLPs emphasized that social and intellectual life didn’t have to be separate: students could have both at the same time. Positive outcomes include a greater capacity for critical thinking (Inkelas, et al, 2006), improved academic performance (Inkelas & Soldner, 2011), and openness to new perspectives and differences (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003). Studies have shown students engaged in an RLP interacted more with faculty through academic and career advising and had more social opportunities (Garret & Zabriskie, 2003; Inkelas & Soldner, 2011). RLP students also more frequently visited faculty during office hours, asked for course-related help, and discussed personal, career, and academic concerns with faculty.

Given the benefits identified, a well-run RLP infrastructure can be integral to the success of student graduation. Conversely, RLPs can depreciate quickly if not properly managed and invested in by the founding University and may fail to realize their full potential. A failed or stagnant RLP could be reputationally damaging to the University and invite criticism.

Consequences could include:






- Students who sign up for a residential learning program or living learning community with high expectations may become disillusioned if the program fails to deliver on its promises.
- The university and the students who participate in the program could waste time, money, and energy that could have been invested in other educational opportunities.
- Students may be discouraged from enrolling in the program in the future, or perhaps from considering the university entirely.

An RLP that fails to achieve its mission can mean missed networking opportunities, hands-on learning experiences, or exposure to new perspectives and ideas for students. Overall, a failed RLP or an RLP “in name only” can have significant negative consequences for both the university and the students who participate in the program. It is important for universities to carefully plan and implement these programs to ensure that they are effective and provide value to students. Faculty participation in RLPs through formal and informal activities could significantly enhance the learning experience. However, tenured and tenure-track faculty with high research and publication activity will likely only make time for an RLP if

their participation is incentivized through a stipend, course release, or other form of compensation. In addition to directing resources to attract faculty, universities should budget to attract and retain talented, enthusiastic staff members with student affairs experience. Residential staff trained to provide social and emotional support can enhance the student experience by serving as academic advisors within the program. The investment required to get these initiatives started will pay off many times by improving the students' experience, raising the profile and reputation of the RLP, and reflecting well on the university's reputation for a holistic, quality liberal arts college experience within a world-class research university.

### RESIDENTIAL LEARNING PROGRAMS AT UNC

UNC's Residential Learning Programs (RLPs) advertise providing students with a unique, inclusive learning experience that connects classroom learning with residential living. Program experiences intend to provide collaboration with student, faculty, and staff partnerships assigned to the RLP. The RLP goal is to lay a foundation for students to become better prepared to succeed during and after college because it broadens their perspectives and understanding of the world. However, the range of RLPs offered at UNC Chapel Hill suggests the program's primary purpose is to ensure a sense of inclusion and belonging rather than academic success. Students are housed together in one dorm (usually on one floor) in groups of 30-40 students.

| RLP Offerings at UNC  |   |
|---|---|
|  | <p>BLUE focuses on fostering an entrepreneurial mindset and teaching innovation and collaboration skills. Collaborators: BeAM (Be A Maker), Carolina Housing, and the Entrepreneurship Center for the Kenan-Flagler School of Business.</p>               |
|  | <p>First Gen helps first-generation students build relationships through various activities, learning spaces, and opportunities.</p>  |
|  | <p>Outdoor Pursuits focuses on the health and well-being of students in an outdoor setting. It's a collaboration between Campus Rec/Carolina Adventures and Carolina Housing.</p>   |
|  | <p>Pride Place supports the personal wellness and academic success of LGBTQ+ students. Its mission is to ensure that all residents feel safe, included, and empowered, regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.</p> |
|  | <p>Transfer United aims to help transfer students transition into UNC and the campus community.</p>   |

The requirements for participating in each RLP can vary for each program; the current budget allocation for RLP's programming is \$800 per program from Carolina Housing. Outdoor Pursuits has additional funding from campus recreation and BLUE is supported by BeAM.

Notably, the programs offered at UNC are not currently tied to an academic program track. The Assistant Director of Student Learning Initiatives at Carolina Housing, Patrick Preudhomme, explained, "the program remains limited in scope in large part due to the lack of faculty involvement. Without investment from faculty and an academic centric focus, RLPs at UNC are more akin to affinity groups aiming to connect people with a common interest or purpose." Further, affinity groups disguised as an RLP can create undue burden for those seeking community. For example, Pride Place serves an important purpose for UNC LGBTQ+ students, but it does not make sense to require LGBTQ+ students to write papers or submit capstone projects just to inhabit a floor of a resident hall where they feel safe from persecution.

### **COMPARISON TO OTHER INSTITUTIONS**

UNC's Residential Learning Programs (RLPs) have limitations compared to other academic institutions that invest in diversity, equity, and inclusion.

To create a sense of purpose and identity for the community, RLP members should have shared visions and goals, and the LLC should have strong leadership, academic support, and active student participation.

The University of Virginia - Charlottesville has three residential colleges with Principals in residence, Faculty Fellows, strong student governance, and a unique identity. Brown College is socially engaging, and Hereford College focuses on promoting students' well-being.

The University of South Carolina - Columbia offers 13 Live and Learn Communities for students to connect with like-minded peers and explore shared interests, ranging from Capstone Scholars to ROTC.

The University of Tennessee-Knoxville has two types of living and learning communities: Academic Programs for first-year students pursuing a degree in a specific school or college and Special Programs for students interested in politics and public service, including ROTC and Honors and Scholars.

The Living & Learning Community at the Haslam Business College assists first-year students by creating a supportive network, encouraging active learning, and offering involvement and leadership development opportunities. They also engage with the local community through service-learning activities.

Duke University's Cardea Fellows Program supports underrepresented students interested in health careers. It is a four-year program that enhances competitiveness and builds a solid foundation in natural sciences. They offer targeted programming, SAGE learning communities, prehealth advising, and a supportive living-learning community. They aim to foster success and a sense of belonging for fellows pursuing medicine and other health-related fields.

As a student, they will have access to diverse opportunities to enhance their experience, gain interdisciplinary knowledge, and build their skill set for future success in their career or graduate school. They will also develop cross-cultural understanding relevant to their field of study worldwide.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Given the known benefits of the RLP model, we recommend UNC reassess its existing RLPs to ensure they are achieving their goals academically. At the Institutional level, a renewed commitment from senior leadership, engagement of faculty, and creation of an RLP Oversight Committee is necessary to create accountability, funding, program standards, and legitimacy to the RLPs. UNC should also consider tethering its RLPs to an academic track to align with its mission of academic excellence, as well as redesigning RLPs to support members during all four years of their college experience. These changes would complement the infrastructure already in place through Carolina Housing.

UNC must engage the faculty support necessary to enrich the RLP academically. UNC Senior Leadership must decide how to recruit faculty, keep them engaged, and set expectations for their involvement in RLPs. Expectations for faculty engagement in RLPs should be outlined clearly in job descriptions and/or performance plans and tied to performance appraisals to create accountability. Faculty may include professors, advisors, tutors, and other professionals who are experts in their respective fields and will be asked to:

- Mentor students via meeting one-on-one, providing advice and guidance on academic and career goals, and helping them navigate the university's resources and services.
- Create programming and events that support the goals of the RLP such as organizing academic and social events, inviting guest speakers to campus, and facilitating workshops and discussions.
- Develop a tailored curriculum that integrates academic coursework with practical application and learning opportunities such as internships and volunteer work.
- Establish partnerships and collaborations with local businesses, hospitals, and other organizations in the community to provide students with hands-on learning experiences and networking opportunities.









- Serve on the corresponding RLP oversight committee responsible for developing policies and procedures, evaluating the effectiveness of the RLP, and making recommendations for improvement.

Individual RLPs and students within them will benefit from a newly created RLP Oversight Committee ensuring each RLP has academic support and access to counseling services, career development resources, etc. Faculty members serving the RLP would collaborate with this Oversight committee to establish program goals and measure success of each program. Representatives from the various professional schools should also contribute to the vision and direction of their corresponding RLP. This will create partnership and recognition of the RLP as a valuable experience for those applying students to have on their CV. The RLP Oversight Committee will be responsible for training the staff and faculty involved in the RLP to ensure that they can support and mentor students effectively. This may involve professional development workshops and training sessions. Finally, an assessment system should be put in place to evaluate the effectiveness of the RLP in achieving its objectives, including surveys, focus groups, and academic performance data.

At the individual RLP level, a primary academic track, whether it is medicine, computer science, business, or another profession should be at the center of the RLP. Once the academic track is established, the key stakeholders involved in planning and implementation must be identified, and a comprehensive plan outlining the RLP's goals, objectives, and strategies for implementation created. The chosen academic track could be broad enough to support students with multiple declared majors that align with a given RLP's vision, as well as supporting students through all four years of their academic journey as coursework escalates in complexity and graduation nears. We recommend piloting one new RLP with the proposed changes, at first.



## CHANGES/PROPOSED RLPS at UNC (examples)

| New RLP Offerings at UNC  |   |
|---|---|
|    | <p><b>BLUE</b> focuses on fostering an entrepreneurial mindset and teaching innovation and collaboration skills. Collaborators: BeAM (Be A Maker), Carolina Housing, and the Entrepreneurship Center for the Kenan-Flagler School of Business.</p>        |
|    | <p><b>CURE</b> creates the opportunity for pre-med majors to live and learn together. Students navigate prerequisite course work, participate in special events, and network with UNC School of Medicine administration.</p>                              |
|    | <p><b>CARE</b> creates the opportunity for nursing majors to live and learn together. Students navigate prerequisite course work, participate in special events, and network with UNC School of Nursing administration.</p>                               |
|    | <p><b>TECH</b> focuses on the success of computer science majors learning cutting edge technology and partnering with SAS and other technology companies in the research triangle.</p>  |
| Rebranding existing RLPs as Affinity Groups at UNC                                  |   |
|  | <p>First Gen helps first-generation students build relationships through various activities, learning spaces, and opportunities.</p>  |
|  | <p>Outdoor Pursuits focuses on the health and well-being of students in an outdoor setting. It's a collaboration between Campus Rec/Carolina Adventures and Carolina Housing.</p>   |
|  | <p>Pride Place supports the personal wellness and academic success of LGBTQ+ students. Its mission is to ensure that all residents feel safe, included, and empowered, regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.</p> |
|  | <p>Transfer United aims to help transfer students transition into UNC and the campus community.</p>   |

## PROPOSED TIMELINE

The introduction of the proposed pilot program will need to coincide with the recruitment, admissions and housing assignments cycles to give it adequate exposure and to facilitate recruitment; as a consequence, a significant lead-in time will be needed to set up the initiative for success. The proposal is to engage in:

- Planning/preparation - May 2023 - May 2024
- Move into a phase of promotion, recruitment during the period - May 2024 – September 2024
- And then align RLP sign-up with Housing requests starting - October 2024 onwards for an August 2025 launch.

## PROPOSED BUDGET

Funding could be solicited from a variety of sources, including an additional housing fee for RLP participation, grants, endowments, philanthropic donations, a one-off seed grant or employer/commercial endorsements. Estimated costs associated with relaunching UNC RLPs would include administrative support, faculty incentives, teaching assistant stipend, marketing, and RLP specific support. The off-set benefit from this will be revenue generated or saved in the form of intern contributions to ongoing UNC projects within academic programs; for example, CARE members could intern in UNC laboratories and on research projects and make meaningful yet free contributions to these important areas.

| <b>(Pilot) CARE Budget Summary</b> |                  |
|------------------------------------|------------------|
| <b>Administration</b>              |                  |
| Oversight Committee                | \$ 17,500        |
| Marketing                          | \$ 5,000         |
| <b>Housing</b>                     |                  |
| Space                              | \$ -             |
| Community Director                 | \$ -             |
| <b>Academic Support</b>            |                  |
| Faculty (94K)                      | \$ 25,000        |
| Teaching Asst.                     | \$ 8,000         |
| <b>RLP specific</b>                |                  |
| Programming                        | \$ 15,000        |
| <b>Total</b>                       | <b>\$ 70,500</b> |

## MEASURING SUCCESS

It will be important to measure the success of any residential learning program initiative to ensure that they are meeting their goals and to further refine the model offered. There are a variety of metrics that can be used to evaluate RLPs, including:

- Student retention and graduation rates: RLPs should have higher retention and graduation rates than the general student body.
- Academic performance: RLP students should have higher GPAs and course completion rates than the general student body.
- Career outcomes: RLP students should have higher job placement rates and salaries than the general student body.

- Student satisfaction: RLP students should be satisfied with their experience in the program.
- Diversity and inclusion: RLPs should be welcoming and inclusive of students from all backgrounds.

It is important to note that no single metric can definitively measure the success of an RLP. The best approach is to use a variety of metrics to get a holistic view of the program's effectiveness. In addition to the metrics listed above, RLPs may also want to consider comparing data points from other institutions, from IPEDS (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System) for example which collects data on various aspects of postsecondary education, including enrollment, graduation rates, and student financial aid.

Furthermore, there are several other national surveys that could be used to measure the effectiveness of Residential Learning Programs; some of these surveys allow institutions to insert their own questions. These may be useful for gathering specific data related to an RLP experience, for example:

- National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE): Measures student engagement and the quality of undergraduate education. It includes questions related to academic challenges, learning with peers, student-faculty interaction, and campus environment. Institutions can add their own questions to the survey.
- Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey: Administered to first-year students and covers topics such as academic and career goals, student attitudes and values, and student experiences. Institutions can add questions to the survey.
- Your First College Year (YFCY): Assesses the academic and personal experiences of first-year college students. It includes questions related to academic engagement, student-faculty interaction, and campus involvement. Institutions can add questions to the survey.
- Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) Faculty Survey: Administered to faculty members and covers topics such as teaching practices, faculty attitudes and values, and institutional policies. Institutions can add questions to the survey to gather data related to their RLPs.
- National College Health Assessment (NCHA): Assesses the health behaviors and concerns of college students. It includes questions related to physical health, mental health, and wellness. Institutions can add questions to survey the social and emotional well-being of students in RLPs.

By collecting data on these and other metrics, RLPs can track their progress over time and make improvements as needed.

## CONCLUSION

UNC has an opportunity to strengthen its reputation as a premier institution of higher education by marrying the features known to underpin the success of Residential Learning Programs (RLP) with UNC's unique academic strengths. Creating RLPs tethered to an academic track will serve UNC as an institution and its student community in attaining their goals of high GPA, retaining students, optimizing career outcomes, and creating a sense of community and belonging.

Establishing new RLPs requires a thoughtful and strategic approach at the Institutional level and individual RLP levels.

### Institutional Level (UNC Senior Leadership)

1. Renewed commitment in RLPs
2. Creation of an RLP Oversight Committee
3. Set formal expectations for faculty involvement

### Individual Level (RLP):

1. Identify primary academic track(s)
2. Identify the key stakeholders and outline goals, objectives, and curriculum
3. Secure funding sources
4. Select suitable location of residence
5. Establish the metrics by which success of the RLP will be continuously evaluated

In summary, creating an RLP requires collaboration, planning, and commitment that involves defining objectives, identifying key stakeholders, developing a comprehensive plan, securing funding, selecting a suitable location, developing a curriculum, recruiting and selecting students, training staff and faculty, and evaluating and assessing the program's effectiveness. This approach can lead to a successful RLP that enhances student learning outcomes, improves student retention rates, and creates a sense of community among students.

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