Student Experiences in Residential Programs at Community Colleges:

A Multiple Case Study

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This dissertation titled
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ABSTRACT

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Student Experiences in Residential Programs at Community Colleges: A Multiple Case Study (141 pp.)

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This qualitative study explores a growing phenomenon in higher education: residential programs at community colleges. Residence halls are known to contribute positively to the student experience at four year institutions, but little formal research exists about residential programs at community colleges.

A case study methodology was used to examine the experiences of students at two community colleges: Northampton Community College in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and Cochise College in Douglas, Arizona. Professional level staff and student staff were interviewed and focus groups were held with students. The data were organized into individual case studies and then a cross case analysis was conducted and discussed.

Some common themes that emerged included the lack of readiness for college level work, the “disconnect” between efforts of the staff members and perceptions of students, and impact of the geographic location on student experiences.

Recommendations for practice and recommendations for future research are also included.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

Peter C. Mather

Assistant Professor of Counseling and Higher Education
To Pedro,

Thank you for reminding me when it was time to write and when I needed to take a deep breath. You’ll always be first in my heart, if not in my mind.
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CHAPTER ONE
Background of the Study

Although residence halls have been in existence nearly as long as higher education in this country, not all early administrators believed that residence halls could contribute to the education of students (Brubacher & Rudy, 2003). In fact, Reverend Manasseh Cutler, one of the founders of Ohio University, believed that “chambers in colleges are too often made the nurseries of every vice and cages of unclean birds” (Super, 1924, p. 16). In spite of these notions, students moved into what was known then as “dormitories” and were supervised by faculty members. Later, as the German model of higher education, which emphasized research, began to influence American higher education, professors began to push for residential alternatives to dormitories and freedom from student disciplinary responsibilities. Rapidly, the dormitories became unused as students began living in private boarding houses off campus (Brubacher & Rudy, 2003). As faculty became less interested in attending to students beyond their academic lives, the student services profession emerged (Fenske, 1980).

With the development of the student personnel field, a gap was created between academic affairs and student affairs. Caple (1996) stated, “From the beginning, ‘student affairs’ was charged with the growing responsibility for life on the campus, up to but not including the classroom, which was the domain of the faculty and ‘academic affairs’” (p. 195). One of the first attempts to reduce this gap was the publication of The Student Personnel Point of View in 1937 (American Council on Education, 1937). The authors of this report reminded higher education professionals of the importance of developing the
student as a whole, not just in terms of the research and scholarship needed to advance knowledge in specific fields. In 1949, a second version of *The Student Personnel Point of View* was published. This time, the call for cooperation was even more direct: “The effectiveness of a student personnel program is determined not solely by either its technical quality or its administrative and financial structure, but even more by its institutional setting” (p. 34). The American College Personnel Association (ACPA) joined this movement calling for a reduction in the gap between academic and student affairs by encouraging collaboration between the units in their statement titled *The Student Learning Imperative: Implications for Student Affairs* (ACPA, 1994). Boyer (1987), supporting an ending to this separation, stated:

> The college of quality remains a place where the curricular and cocurricular are viewed as having a relationship to each other. At a time when social bonds are tenuous, students, during their collegiate years, should discover the reality of their dependency on each other. They must understand what it means to share and sustain traditions. Community must be built. (p. 195)

Many institutions started sponsoring “learning communities,” which took many forms, but had the common goal of integrating academics into out-of-class experiences, including within the residence halls. With the development of learning communities on many campuses, faculty members found themselves being asked to come back into a world from which they had voluntarily separated themselves over 100 years earlier.
Benefits of Living on Campus

Living on campus has long been thought to positively influence four-year college students with Pascarella, Terenzini, and Blimling (1994) stating, “The evidence is clear that college and university residence halls, through the intellectual and interpersonal climate they foster, play a substantial role in the growth and development of students who live in them” (p. 43). Living on campus is positively correlated with receiving a bachelor’s degree, satisfaction with faculty, and willingness to re-enroll at the same institution (Astin, 1993).

Community Colleges

Despite the fact that the residential experience is a noted part of the traditional college experience, it is not a given for America’s community college students. Community colleges developed later in higher education’s history. Cohen and Brawer (2003) indicated that proximity was the most important single factor to accessing community colleges, removing a need for residential facilities. Most sources (Bogart, 1994; Brubacher & Rudy, 2003; Cohen and Brawer, 2003) credit the President’s (Truman) Commission on Higher Education in 1947 for succinctly defining the community college’s role:

Whatever form the community college takes, its purpose is educational service to the entire community, and this purpose requires of it a variety of functions and programs. It will provide college education for the youth of the community certainly, so as to remove geographic and economic barriers to educational opportunity and discover and develop individual talents at low cost and easy
access. But in addition, the community college will serve as an active center of adult education. It will attempt to meet the total post-high school needs of its community. (Levine, 1979; as cited in Bogart, 1994)

However clear the mission is, a common definition is more difficult to locate. Cohen and Brawer (2003) state that two names are typically applied to two-year colleges: community colleges and junior colleges. Sometimes more specific names are used to refer to the supporters of the institutions such as city college, county college, and/or branch campus. Despite these differences, Cohen and Brawer (2003) define a community college as “any institution regionally accredited to award the associate in arts or the associate in science as its highest degree” (p. 5).

Given the historical mission of community colleges, it is not surprising that residence hall systems were slow to come into being as housing was simply not a factor for the target audience at this type of institution. However, this trend is changing. Moeck (2007) cites reasons such as increasing student diversity, providing a traditional college experience, and competition as reasons some rural community colleges have started offering residential living as an option. Summers and Budig (1988) used data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) from 1983-84 to describe characteristics of residence halls in the 317 two-year colleges that reported residence hall fees.

Sometime later, Murrell and Denzine (1998) reported that nearly 23% of community colleges offer the option of on campus residence halls. The American Association of Community Colleges reports that 24% of the nation’s public community colleges have residence halls.
As of January 2007, 46% of all undergraduates in the United States attend a community college. Of those students, 43% are under the age of 21, which makes them not substantially different from the students attending the many four year institutions in this country. However, some demographics that differentiate them from their four year counterparts include that 39% are first generation college students and 17% are single parents. Sixty percent are enrolled part time.

London (1992) stated that there are a disproportionately large number of first generation college students enrolled at community colleges. Cohen and Brawer (2003) stated that 28% of students entering community colleges were in the bottom socioeconomic quartile, while 19% were in the top socioeconomic quartile. Comparable numbers for students entering four year institutions were 23% and 27%.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the limited research on a growing phenomenon in higher education: residential programs at community colleges, particularly focusing on the student experience. At this time, there are approximately 240 public community colleges that provide on-campus housing. There is little research available about residential living on community college campuses. Cohen and Brawer (2003) state, “during most of history,
the community college has been unnoticed, ignored by writers about higher education” (p. 35). One reason for this may be:

University faculty and graduate students have strong incentives to conduct formal, scholarly research and to seek every opportunity for publication of their work in order to advance their educational and professional status. Practitioners in the community college do applied research to solve practical problems that relate to the operations of their colleges, but they have few incentives to produce formal research reports or to submit them for publication. (Bers & Calhoun, 2002, p. 12)

Two-year colleges are also not known for providing residential experiences; therefore, professionals and graduate students may overlook the potential for research in this area. However, Pascarella (1999) discouraged this disregard calling it “dangerous” because policymakers “will rely on unsubstantiated beliefs, stereotypes, and even publicly accepted myths in making judgments about the educational effectiveness and funding priority of community colleges” (p. 10).

Given the current climate in higher education where the word “accountability” is used with increasing frequency, it is becoming necessary for all areas within an institution to demonstrate that services advertised are provided, and that those services are of value to the students of that institution. The report of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education (2006) concluded, “Our colleges and universities must become more transparent, faster to respond to rapidly changing circumstances and increasingly productive in order to deal effectively with the powerful forces of change they now face,” (p. 29). Further, the report stated, “This lack of useful data and
accountability hinders policymakers and the public from making informed decisions and prevents higher education from demonstrating its contribution to the public good,” (p. 4).

In the state of Ohio, the Planning Committee for Higher Learning Accountability and Productivity has published a website encouraging all institutions to publish Student Success Plans online ([http://regents.ohio.gov/StudentSuccess/accountability.html](http://regents.ohio.gov/StudentSuccess/accountability.html)). Not only are general education and major specific information included in the Success Plans, but also “special features” which includes first year experience programs, residential learning communities and other initiatives. Studies such as this one are imperative for providing necessary information to professionals and policy makers within higher education.

To address this topic, I used qualitative methodology, employing observation, focus group interviews, and personal interviews with professional level staff members, student staff members, and students living in the residence halls. As such, the following research questions were explored:

1. How does the institutional environment contribute to residential student experiences?
2. How do students living in residence halls at community colleges describe their residential experiences?
3. What events have helped shape these students’ residential experiences?
4. How do residence life staff members’ perspectives and practices relate to the living and learning environment of residential students?
5. How do the experiences of students vary based on membership in subpopulations within the student body (race, gender, athletes, non-athletes, etc.)

Significance

There is significant literature that discusses salient issues for residential programs at four year institutions available for professionals working in that area. Similar information for professionals at community colleges is nearly non-existent; therefore having information for administrators or policy makers to use when making decisions or for instructors to use in classes preparing future student affairs professionals is necessary. Understanding the student experience is an important component of understanding why students may choose to stay or leave an institution and for assessing institutional achievements and/or deficiencies. This study will document the experiences of residential students at selected community colleges.

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study are as follows:

1. The results of this study will be based on two relatively short periods of fieldwork at each institution, giving a limited perspective of the experiences of students.

2. For a qualitative study, it is important to identify potential influences of the researcher. Recognizing that my experience in a residential program at a community college may have some effect on my interpretations is an
important step in controlling outward expressions of these experiences when on site and acknowledging their involvement in my evaluation of data.

The delimitations of the study are as follows:

1. Because of the in-depth nature of qualitative research, only two institutions were studied. Generalization is not the goal of this study, but rather a detailed description of examples of the experiences of residential students at community colleges.

2. Focus groups involve a group of individuals expressing their thoughts and opinions about different topics. Feelings and beliefs about sensitive issues may or may not be adequately expressed in a group setting.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following terms have been defined:

1. Community college - any institution accredited to award the associate’s degree as its highest degree.

2. Residential program – the system under which the residence halls are managed and operated including programs and services for students.

3. Student staff member – a student staff member hired to provide supervision, develop programs and activities, and otherwise tend to the daily needs of students living within a residential program, typically referred to as a Resident Assistant (RA).
4. Professional live-in staff member – the staff member that supervises the paraprofessional staff members within a residential program. This individual typically has a bachelor’s or master’s level degree.

5. Director of Residence Life – The individual responsible for overseeing the operations and functioning of a residential program. This person may have other titles or additional responsibilities.

6. Residential Learning Communities (RLCs) – Learning communities with a residential component.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. References and appendices are also included. Chapter One includes the introduction and background for the study. The statement of the problem, the significance of the problem, the research questions, the limitations and delimitations of the study, and definitions of terms relevant to the study can also be found in Chapter One.

Chapter Two contains review of literature relevant to this study including the history of residence halls on college campuses, benefits of living on campus, components recommended for residential programs, residential learning communities, community colleges, and residence halls at community colleges. Chapter Three presents the research design including a brief profile of the institutions studied, data collection procedures, and a discussion of data analysis. Chapter Four includes a case synopsis, the data sources and summaries, case analyses, and a summary of the findings. Finally, in Chapter Five, the
researcher provides a cross-case analysis by research question, discusses the findings, and provides recommendations for practice and recommendations for further research.
CHAPTER TWO
Review of the Literature

A Brief History of Residence Halls

Student housing dates back to the twelfth century when higher education officials wanted to keep an eye on their students (Lucas, 1994). Some students lived in hostels, while others lived in actual hospitals that had extra beds available, such as the Hospital of the Blessed Mary of Paris in 1180, which continued as student housing until 1789 when several institutions combined their student housing. Students living in hospital settings were held to the same standards as normal patients within the hospital. To the officials at this time, it seemed apparent that housing the students together would be beneficial for all parties involved. Students were able to share rooms, have meals together, and save money, while officials were able to supervise and ensure that their students did not cause trouble in town. Strict rules were applied when students were put into collegia housing.

In the mid 1200s, Walter de Merton in England realized that student housing was a necessity because students could not find lodging otherwise. Over time, older students became responsible for supervising the younger students on campus. While residential campuses were phasing out of existence on the European continent, residence halls were a standard feature of English institutions (Lucas, 1994). Principals were elected from the student body to help supervise students.

American colonial colleges formed using the English residential colleges as a model where residence halls, or dormitories as they were referred to then, were created in
the hopes of bringing faculty and students together in a “common life which was both intellectual and moral” (Brubacher & Rudy, 2003, p. 41). However, unlike their English counterparts, American faculty members were responsible for all duties, including both teaching and monitoring student behavior (Blimling, 1995). In the English system, “Dons,” were selected not just by academic tests, but also based on character (Annan, 1999), and were required to live with the students, be unmarried, and monitor behavior, leaving faculty members free to mingle and befriend the students. Schroeder and Mable (1994) reported that the goals of the earliest residential facilities were to bring faculty and students together so that in-class and out-of-class experiences were seamless. Fredericksen (1993) said that the residence halls “provided the atmosphere in which a social organization could be built around the students and faculty” and so residence halls were considered “essential” (p. 168) to early American college campuses. Students were younger at that time and traveled great distances to go to school, so parents felt comforted by the fact that those who taught their sons would also be responsible for monitoring conduct and behavior, giving rise to the in loco parentis philosophy.

In the late 1800s there was a growing negativity toward dormitories and housing students together. Some leaders within higher education believed that financial resources could be better utilized in other areas (Brubacher & Rudy, 2003; Schroeder & Mable, 1994), while others considered residence halls a place where “tempers tightened until they snapped, where in quiet desperation plots were hatched, and where what may have begun in innocence often ended in tragedy and misfortune” (Rudolph, 1962, p. 97). Some of the most renowned educators of the time were speaking out publicly against
residential campuses, including Wayland from Brown University, Tappan from University of Michigan, and Eliot from Harvard. Tappen went so far as to refer to residence halls as “a mere remnant of the monkish cloisters of the middle ages” (Fredericksen, 1993, p. 169). These educators believed that college students were adult and should be treated as such (Fredericksen, 1993). Cowley and Williams (1991) identify the German model of education as a major influence encouraging faculty to stay out of students’ lives outside of the classroom. Dormitory facilities were neglected during this time period as well (Brubacher & Rudy, 2003) causing students to seek housing elsewhere, typically in private boarding houses. Blimling (1995) noted that these “attacks” on residence halls were more common in the eastern United States whereas institutions in the Midwest were not as affected.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the negative impacts of ignoring student housing issues were felt on college campuses. Boardinghouses were unable to provide enough housing for all of the students coming to school, so students began moving into private homes. Costs of quality housing increased beyond the ability of students to pay. When fraternities appeared on the scene, chapter houses contributed to the inequality in housing arrangements. Also during this time period, women’s colleges, founded on a residential philosophy (Fredericksen, 1993), were opening, increasing enrollment at all types of institutions. Female students at this time could not be treated with the same indifference as male students had been up until this time (Blimling, 1995), so quality residences were necessary. As students became more interested in
extracurricular activities (which were also inspired by fraternities) and living on campus, residence halls became a more important part of the college experience.

By the turn of the century, according to Blimling (1995), detailed accounts of negative experiences in residence halls had turned into fond recollections of “the good old days,” which helped contribute to the resurgence of residential programs. Both the federal and state governments passed laws helping institutions building new facilities in which students could be housed during the 1920s and 1930s. During this time, a new type of professional within higher education also emerged: the student affairs professional.

With the enrollment of women in higher education, positions such as Deans of Women in addition to the Deans of Men were formed to help supervise residential students. Faculty interests had changed to focus on the intellectual development of the students, while the student affairs professionals were to tend to the social and personal development (Blimling, 1995). The American Council on Education published *The Student Personnel Point of View* in 1937 clearly delineating the responsibilities of student personnel professionals. In 1949, S. Earl Thompson, the Director of Housing at the University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana, proposed an association of housing officers, which met for the first time that summer. This small group led to the later formation of the Association of College and University Housing Officers International (ACUHO-I), one of the groups providing standards for residential programs on college and university campuses, as well as opportunities for professional development.

The latter part of the twentieth century saw increases in enrollment of minorities and the creation of living-learning communities. Students fought for (and won) greater
freedom, delivering the final blows to the *in loco parentis* philosophy (Schroeder & Mable, 1994). Housemothers have been replaced by housing professionals with advanced degrees and student Resident Assistants have been hired to guide, mentor, and supervise students (Blimling, 1995). There was also a renewed interest in incorporating academic and personal development into the residential environment.

Whereas students desired more freedom in previous decades, students of the 1990s and their parents came to college expecting slightly more structured environments (Fredericksen, 1993). Concerns relating to safety and security have created more restrictive policies regarding visitation and alcohol and drug use and abuse. The old philosophy of *in loco parentis* has been set aside and the notion of *duty to care* has been embraced (Woodward, Love, & Komives, 2000). Duty to care entails understanding that student affairs staff members are not replacing the students’ parents, but they do acknowledge some responsibility for providing a structured experience to aid in development.

Blimling (1993) identified eight “future” challenges for residence life and housing: (a) multiculturalism; (b) student mental and physical health; (c) campus violence; (d) changing student attitudes; (e) accountability; (f) residence hall facilities; (g) institutional finances; and (h) staffing issues. When reviewing the characteristics and expectations of the millennial students, meaning those born between 1982 and 2002 (Coomes & DeBard, 2004), these challenges have manifested as predicted. Millennial students have been described as “special,” “sheltered,” “team-oriented,” among other descriptors (DeBard, 2004; Lowery, 2004) creating the need to redesign services offered
by residence hall programs. Parents are more involved, frequently calling upon the
president’s office to intervene when a student has a roommate conflict (Lowery, 2004).
When millennial students encounter people they have difficulty working with, they
expect an authority to intervene and protect them (DeBard, 2004). The reliance on
technology creates situations where students will Instant Message (IM) someone rather
than go down the hall to their room (Lowery, 2004), but they like to cooperate and
congregate, contributing to the popularity of living-learning centers. Redesigning services
must even extend to preparing for millennial students to become professionals within
student affairs as the earliest millennial students graduated from college in 2003 and are
stated that, “The need for competent practice to meet millennial students’ aspirations and
millennial parents’ expectations should keep the student affairs professional well
occupied for years to come” (p. 43).

Benefits of Residence Hall Living

The positive impacts of living in residence halls while pursuing an undergraduate
degree are well documented. For example, Chickering (1974, as cited in Schuh, 1996)
found that when students who lived on campus were compared with those who
commuted, “the residential experience accelerates the differences between these two
groups” (p. 285). Astin (1985) proposed that “simply by eating, sleeping, and spending
their waking hours on the college campus, residential students have a better chance than
do commuter students of developing a strong identification attachment to undergraduate
life” (p. 523). Upcraft (1989) observed, “the scope of students’ influence on one another is enormous, ranging from their academic lives to their personal lives (p. 144).

Christie and Dinham (1991) conducted a qualitative study at a large public research university investigating factors contributing to the social integration of first year students based on Tinto’s Model of College Student Departure. One of the themes that emerged from the interviews was that living on campus provided more opportunities for students to get involved by allowing them to meet other students more easily, encouraging the development of friendships, affording more opportunities to receive information about campus events, and helping them make transition from high school friends to college friends. Off campus students commented that they had difficulty meeting people in class and finding out about social events on campus. Further, “students living on campus were presented with more social opportunities merely because of the amount of time they spent on campus in comparison to their off-campus peers” (p. 420).

Berger (1997) extended ideas from community psychology to student departure theories to examine whether students with a strong sense of community in campus environments such as residence halls, were more likely to be more closely linked with the rest of the campus community. Data were collected from 718 students (46.4% of the entering class) at the beginning of fall semester, halfway through fall semester, and again in March of the following year. The first data collection consisted of biographical information from students’ Student Information Forms (SIFs). The second data collection was responses to the Early Collegiate Experiences Survey (ECES) and the last was the Freshman Year Survey (FYS). Berger’s (1997) findings demonstrated that a positive
relationship did exist between residential sense of community and social integration on campus.

Skahill (2002) focused on the influence of social networks on student persistence at an urban technical arts college during a 12 week period of time. He found that commuting students were less likely to persist than students living in the college provided housing. Students living on campus also stated that they had stronger feelings of academic and social success while attending college. These findings support Astin’s (1977) earlier finding that living in a residence hall contributes about 12 percent to a student’s chances of persistence to graduation.

In their 1991 synthesis of research related to the benefits of living on campus, Pascarella and Terenzini asserted that place of residence (living on campus versus living at home versus commuting) had a significant impact on students. In their updated review, similar findings were reported. One revelation in the later review was the indirect benefits of living on campus including increased involvement on campus, increased interactions with peers and faculty members, more positive perceptions of the campus environment, greater satisfaction with their college experiences, and greater personal growth and development (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005).

Recommended Components and Practices

The organization and administration of a residential program is complex. Upcraft (1993) identified items to take into consideration when considering this topic. Institutional demographics play a role in administrative decisions as well as the mission of the institution. Needs of the students and student demographics such as age or
racial/ethnic background should also be taken into account. Finally, the organizational structure and administration could be impacted by policies requiring students to live on campus. Sometimes housing is included under the umbrella of residence life and other times it is part of the business functions or another administrative area of the institution.

Upcraft’s (1993) discussion of organization within a residence life department begins at the level of the paraprofessional staff members or student employees that are typically called Resident Assistants. Resident Assistants (RAs) are usually responsible for supervising students, providing personal and academic assistance, facilitating programs that are social, developmental or educational in nature, sharing information from the college administration with residents, and maintaining an environment that is safe and conducive to success. Blimling (1995) identified four roles filled by the RA including role model, teacher, counselor, and student.

The influence of the peer group (and therefore the RAs) should not be underestimated. Blimling stated, “Not all college students participate in a special clique; however, all are influenced to a greater or lesser degree by the general peer environment” (p. 132). He further asserted that the need for approval by one’s peers was strongest in the first two years of college. Winston and Fitch (1993) wrote, “The preeminent power of the RA is directly correlated with his or her ability to persuade or influence residents by the force of example and the quality of personal relationships,” (p. 321).

The next level of staffing, according to Upcraft (1993) varies depending on the institution, but typically involves another level of live-in staff. Where possible, these individuals are graduate students enrolled in a student affairs degree program or, in some
A variety of professional standards exist for residence life programs. The Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) published standards for Housing and Residential Life Programs with the following components: (a) Mission; (b) Program; (c) Leadership and Management; (d) Organization and Administration; (e) Human Resources; (f) Funding; (g) Facilities; (h) Legal Responsibilities; (i) Equal Opportunity, Access, and Affirmative Action; (j) Campus and Community Relations; (k) Multi-Cultural Programs and Services; and (l) Ethics (Schroeder & Mable, 1994). Similarly, the Association for College and University Housing Officers International (ACUHO-I) has its own standards for College and University Student Housing which include: (a) Mission; (b) Functional areas (Business/Management, Physical Plant, Education/Programming, Food Service, and Ethics); and (c) Qualifications (http://www.acuho.ohio-state.edu/pdf/standards.pdf). These lists contain many similar elements such as focusing on the mission statements, as well as the various parts to operating a residential program, such as food service, programming, and the business operations. They also both comment as to the various types of staff needed to operate a residential program. These standards are most applicable to four year institutions, as the language within entails. Phrases such as “upperclass students” and others reveal that two year institutions most likely were not considered during the development of the standards.
Creating programs and services in the residence halls that contribute to learning is also necessary (Schroeder & Mable, 1994). They suggested that residence halls committed to student learning would concentrate on the holistic growth and development of students as well as emphasizing the development of life skills such as critical thinking, interpersonal skills, teamwork abilities, technical skills, and caring attitudes. In addition, the residence hall program should encourage students to learn “responsibility, altruism, aspiration, persistence, empathy, ethics, and leadership” (p. 14). Kuh (1994) identified nine conditions that should be part of the residential program:

1. Clear, coherent, and complementary educational purposes, policies, and practices;
2. An institutional philosophy that emphasizes a holistic view of talent development;
3. High expectations for student performance;
4. Ample opportunities for student involvement;
5. Human-scale settings, characterized by ethics of membership and care;
6. Use of effective instructional approaches;
7. Programs and services congruent with student characteristics and needs;
8. Freedom to disagree;
9. An ethos of learning that pervades all aspects of the institution (p. 110-115).

Along the same lines, Schroeder and Mable (1994) stated that there were five practices that should be adopted if intentional efforts for residential education were to succeed:
1. Residence hall staff must develop a philosophy of student learning consistent with the academic mission of their institution;
2. Residential life programs and policies should be informed by a growing body of knowledge about how students learn and by systematic assessment initiatives;
3. Staff should develop a clear and coherent statement of their educational purpose;
4. Learning communities should be created through collaborative partnerships with students, academic administrators, faculty and others.
5. The educational role of residence halls should be consistently communicated to important institutional constituencies – students, parents, faculty, staff, alumni, legislators, and so on (p. 310-313).

Through these recommendations, two themes that emerge include: (a) the notion that student learning should be a concern of the entire institution, and (b) that residence hall staff members need to very clear about what contributions are being made by the residential programs to student learning. These are some of the concepts underlying the development of learning communities.

Learning Communities & Living-Learning Communities (LLCs)

Johnson and Cavins (1996) summarized different types of learning communities, as well as the research about effects of living-learning communities on students up until that time. In reviewing available literature, they found that there was a positive relationship between campus residence and persistence toward graduation, while the
impact of living arrangements on academic achievement was still somewhat uncertain. The effects of assigning students to housing based on academic achievement were found to be positive for high-achievement students. The studies reviewed also presented mixed results on the relationship between freshman residence halls and academic achievement. Detailed descriptions of faculty involvement programs, themed housing programs, residential college programs, and LLCs were included in this study with the overwhelming conclusion being that “intentional academic focus aids in retention and supports academic achievement on the part of residents who take advantage of special lifestyle options” (p. 79).

Pike (1997) reviewed available literature on learning communities for impacts on students as well, but his research focused more broadly on the effects of participation in a learning community on learning and intellectual development. He found that students involved in residential learning communities had significantly higher levels of involvement, interaction, integration, and learning and intellectual development than students in regular residence halls. Further, involvement in residential learning communities contributed positively to students’ daily college experiences as well as their abilities to integrate information and learn, meaning students involved in residential learning communities were more able to integrate course information into their daily lives. Participants in learning communities also reported higher levels of involvement on campus (Pike, 1997).

Schroeder, Minor, and Tarkow (1999) described their experience with a particular type of learning community called a Freshman Interest Group or FIG at the University of
Missouri-Columbia. The FIGs consisted of 15-20 students taking three general educational courses together and assigned to the same residential community. They also take a freshman orientation course together. Each FIG had a peer mentor who lived in the residence hall with the students, as well as a faculty or staff member who facilitated the freshman orientation course along with the peer advisor. The faculty or staff member also served as an additional resource for the students in the FIG. When studying the academic records of the students involved in the FIG, it was discovered that students participating in the FIG had a 96% retention from fall to winter term (compared to a 91% for non-FIG students). Year to year retention rates were also better with FIG students having a 87% retention rate compared to an 81% non-FIG student retention rate. FIG students also had significantly higher grade point averages even when entering ability was taken into account.

Inkelas and Weisman (2003) reported similar findings in a study that examined three different types of residential learning communities: transition programs (those focusing on first year students), academic honors programs, and curriculum based programs (focusing on certain areas of study). A survey was used to gather information from participants in the learning communities. The results indicated that students participating in the learning communities were more involved than students who were not learning community participants. Further, participants scored higher on dependent measures such as using critical thinking skills, meeting with faculty members outside of class, and enjoying academic pursuits.
Although much of the earlier literature focused on the structure of various types of learning communities, Stassen (2003) found that “even simple structures that facilitate student interaction around academic work (even without coordinated faculty involvement) can have a positive effect for students of all preparation levels” (p. 609). Stassen (2003) examined student records to ascertain entering characteristics of students, academic preparation, and to track students’ academic performance and enrollment patterns. A survey was also conducted at the end of the first semester to determine academic and social experiences. In addition to the finding that learning communities do not have to be complex to benefit students, it was also found that academic performance and persistence were positively impacted by learning communities.

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) wrote, “the evidence indicates that learning communities have significant and positive net effects on students persistence” (p. 423) as well as having a number of other benefits for students, such as more involvement in learning and social events. Further, learning communities encourage the development of peer groups that are supportive, promote involvement in the classroom, and further integrate students’ social and academic lives. Although these authors included both two year and four year institutions in much of their research, none of the research pertaining to residence halls included studies at two year institutions.

Community Colleges

American community colleges developed relatively later in the history of American higher education, with the earliest conceptions of such institutions beginning in the early twentieth century (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). The Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890
spurred the founding of public institutions in nearly every state and demand for access for more of the nation’s population was high. In addition, those attending college were looking for broader subject and occupational areas. There was a disparity of opinions between many of the country’s brightest minds in education, with educators such as President Tappan of Michigan, President Mitchell of the University of Georgia, and President Folwell of the University of Minnesota encouraging the formation of junior colleges (an early term for community colleges) to educate freshman and sophomore classes, leaving the universities to focus on research and professional development, while President Harper from the University of Chicago, President James of the University of Illinois, and President Jordan from Stanford were recommending that American higher education follow in the footsteps of the European universities and secondary schools. So, the universities provide and teach “higher-order scholarship.” while the lower schools would provide general and vocational education to students through age nineteen or twenty. President Harper even recommended that some of the “weaker four-year colleges might better become junior colleges rather than wasting money by doing superficial work” (Cohen & Brawer, 2003, p. 7).

President Truman’s Commission on Higher Education provided further reasons for the development of community colleges in 1947 when the commission recommended the formation of community colleges to help provide access to more students, regardless of their preparation or financial background (Brubacher & Rudy, 2003). The creation of Pell grants further encouraged access to higher education for all students. Early in their development, community colleges benefited from accepting students from any
preparatory levels and freeing its faculty from the research demands of the university, but these freedoms also “doomed community colleges to the status of alternative institutions” (Cohen & Brawer, 2003, p. 8).

The mission of the community college has changed over time. In 1922, the American Association of Junior Colleges said the mission of the junior college was to “provide two years of instruction of strictly collegiate grade” (Thornton, 1972). Kasper (2003) focused on how the mission has changed to add vocational certification to this list of services provided by community colleges. He further distinguished between short-term certificates, some of which required less than a year to complete, in fields such as information technology, mechanics, and construction trades and long term certifications such as health professions and engineering related fields. Some of the traditional functions served by community colleges include academic transfer, vocational-technical training, continuing education, developmental education, community service, as well as combinations of the functions above (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Lorenzo (1994) encouraged community colleges to allow their missions to evolve as the global society has new expectations for higher education, including customization, advancement, and adaptation.

Enrollment has steadily increased with nearly half of the undergraduates in the United States being enrolled at community colleges (Education Commission of the States, 2004). With increasing numbers, the diversity of the student population at community colleges has also increased. About half of the students attending community colleges are 18-24 years old, approximately 57% of them are women, and 66% are white
The median age of community college students has dropped from 26.5 years old in 1991 to 23.5 years old in 1999 (Adelman, 2003). In 2000, enrollments of foreign students at community colleges had grown by 46% since 1993 (Woodard, 2000).

**Residence Halls at Community Colleges**

Information regarding two-year colleges with residence halls is scarce. The American Association of Community Colleges reports that 24% of public community colleges have residence halls ([www.aacc.nche.edu/Content/NavigationMenu/AboutCommunityColleges/Fast_Facts1/Fast_Facts.htm](http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Content/NavigationMenu/AboutCommunityColleges/Fast_Facts1/Fast_Facts.htm)). Saffian (2002) stated, “Residential facilities have not been typical of the two-year campus the way they have at four-year campuses, but are becoming so in increasing numbers (p. 44).

Summers and Budig (1988) reported that 317 community and junior colleges reported “days per week for board” in an NCES publication from 1983-1984 (p. 2). Questionnaires were sent to the Chief Executive Officers of 244 institutions seeking to identify some of the characteristics of two-year colleges with residence halls. Of those, 114 responses from 77 public and 27 private institutions were used in the study. The characteristics reported in the study included scope and size, specialized housing availability, programming, organization and management issues, challenges for these kinds of housing systems, the needs and concerns of two-year college residence halls, and a summary of policies that institutions were willing to share.
In terms of geographic location, most of the public institutions in the study were located in Alabama, Mississippi, and Texas (classified as the South by Summers and Budig, 1998), as well as in states with “wide open spaces” (p. 3) such as Nebraska, Arizona, Colorado, Kansas, North Dakota, Oklahoma, and Wyoming. Institutions reporting residence halls in the Northeast were primarily private. These types of housing programs tended to be small, also, with 80% of respondents reporting having 500 beds or fewer. The three largest residential programs were located in Indiana, Idaho, and Georgia. Occupancy varied from campus to campus with some institutions reporting unused halls, while others were planning additional buildings. Only 25 of the institutions reported occupancy levels below 80%. Nearly two-thirds outsourced their food services, while most had their own maintenance and housekeeping staffs.

In terms of specialized housing and programs, a wide variety of options were reported by Summers and Budig, including special housing for athletes, married students, international students, and handicapped accessible options. Co-educational housing, quiet floors, summer conference housing and even sororities and fraternities were reported as available at community colleges. Educational programs or features found by Summers and Budig (1988) in residence halls at communities colleges included alcohol/drug abuse prevention programs, computer terminals, counseling services, programs about eating disorders, credit bearing classes, libraries, study lounges, tutoring, and other wellness programs.

Challenges identified included drug and alcohol abuse, finances, renovation, declining enrollment and occupancy rates, retention, programming (especially for diverse
populations), damage/vandalism, security, and handicapped access (Summers & Budig, 1988). Major concerns included the lack of upperclass students to serve as good role models, a more diverse population attending college, having a short time to make a positive impact on a student, and a weaker pool of applicants for professional and support staff. Over three-quarters of the institutions surveyed reported having policies for room assignments, billing and payments, alcohol and drug abuse, judicial systems, fire and safety, damage, and security. Half of the respondents had a residence hall handbook, a housing contract, open visitation, and policies governing room searches. The authors also noted that there was “a great deal of activity” (p. 6) regarding assessment of student satisfaction, energy conservation, grade point averages of residents, and charging back to the auxiliary fund for general services.

More recently, Murrell and Denzine (1998) examined the potential benefits of community colleges offering residence halls as an option for students. Again, the lack of information available about two-year colleges with residence halls is mentioned as is the assertion that 23% of community colleges in the United States offer the option of on campus residence halls. Murrell and Denzine examined the potential benefits of residence hall availability on two-year college campuses. In an extension of work done by Denzine (1998; as cited in Murrell & Denzine, 1998), the Assessment for Living and Learning (ALL) was distributed to 14 community colleges with residence halls. Students from a variety of geographic areas in the United States took the ALL. The ALL is a 21 item forced choice survey in which items are rated on a four-point Likert scale. Fourteen of the questions assess perceptions regarding peer involvement in creating an academic
environment, while the remaining seven items inquire about residence hall staff commitment to academics (p. 664). There were also three open ended questions asking students how living on campus affects their academic life, what their perception of the academic climate is, and how the residence life department can better meet the student’s needs.

The results of this study demonstrated that the community college students involved in this study did not view their residence hall as an academic environment, although staff and peers received slightly above average scores (Murrell & Denzine, 1998). The authors used these results to discuss implications from three general areas. First, there is a need to focus on creating residentially based learning communities. Second, assessment should be included in the plans for creating these communities. Finally, the authors draw on the results from a variety of studies at four-year institutions regarding the possible benefits of living on campus to assert that more research is needed in this area. They conclude, “using current physical space, staff, and curriculum, residence halls can be restructured to better provide true living and learning communities to support their population of 248,000 students” (p. 670).

In his qualitative dissertation, Catt (1998) examined some of the issues that first year students faced while attending a non-residential two-year college not in commuting distance from their homes. He interviewed 10 students and 6 employees from an institution and looked at newspaper clippings, police reports, and landlord complaints to the Dean of Student’s office. Originally, he had planned to interview parents as well, but
when parents were resistant to these interviews, he eliminated this information from his study.

The information from the interviews was arranged around general topic areas, including observations, housing search, adjusting to college, roommates, basic needs, money and budgets, emotional needs, community relations, college services, state system obstacles, residence hall, and police reports. As can be seen from previous research, residence hall programs can assist with some of these concerns. The housing search upsets parents the most (Catt, 1998). Employees at the college state that many parents expect the college to help them find housing and be responsible for the agreement between the landlord and the student, while they cannot. One secretary in the admissions department shared that the college only provided the minimal services necessary in this area. An administrator also commented on the need for a full time person to help coordinate the search for housing. Students complained about the difficulty in obtaining a place to live because they were students and many landlords were unwilling to rent to them. Loneliness was also a factor shared by students. Many of them came to school not knowing anyone and then got apartments off campus without roommates or with people they did not know well, and so problems arose. Basic needs were not being met for some students whose landlords did not respond quickly to broken appliances and utilities. An employee at the college observed that things like this would not happen in a residence hall environment when a college bears responsibility for such things. When specifically asked about a residence hall, most employees commented favorably stating that this would help students, parents, and the administrators looking out for the students.
In his conclusion, Catt (1998) notes not only that community colleges cannot ignore the out-of-class experience, but also that having an environment that is conducive to learning and safe is a responsibility of the community college. Additionally, community colleges need to realize that this responsibility may include tending to areas outside the traditional boundaries of community colleges, including housing. Further, he asserted that “community colleges cannot ignore influences outside the classroom and beyond on their students” (p. 99). Although many suggestions for future research were made, none of them included residence halls at two-year institutions.

Baker (2006) completed a survey of residential students to find out if outside influences have an impact on the socialization of community college students and influence persistence in the residence halls. Although the findings revealed mixed perceptions about the influence of outside resources on community college students, she makes a number of recommendations for practice at a community college with residence halls including

1. The community college should adopt a clear written mission statement for the residence halls that describes the philosophy and purpose of the residence hall living and learning environment.

2. Faculty and staff outside of the residence halls should be expected to participate each semester in a residence hall or college cocurricular activity.

3. Goals should be identified and implemented by residence hall administration and staff to address the philosophical aspects of the learning and living environment.
4. A student housing board should be established to address the concerns of the residents and to discuss alternative options to reduce stress and encourage community integration.

5. Resident students should be encouraged and rewarded for participating in regular (biweekly) town (hall) meetings to address student concerns and questions.

6. A residence suite point reward system could be established to encourage residence hall activity participation.

7. Personal growth and development workshops should be offered each semester to address the life transitions that students are faced with when living on their own and separating from family.

8. Money management workshops should be offered each semester to help students learn to balance work commitments and manage their finances.

9. Academic discipline concentrated study groups should be offered on a regular basis to establish routine support systems for students.

10. Discipline specific learning communities that address social integration and student development strategies could be established for residence hall students to support the experiential learning and living opportunities. These small cluster learning communities can be made up of one to two courses that can encourage students to illustrate the benefits of the residential experience and involvement in college/residence hall activities. (Baker, 2006, pp. 83-84).
Summary of the Literature

Residence halls have a rich history on American four year college and university campuses. Community colleges ignored residential developments as residence halls were not pertinent to their missions. However, as time has passed and enrollments have increased, community colleges are now seeking ways of retaining more students. The few studies that have focused on residence halls at community college indicate positive trends, but more research is needed before the benefits can be confirmed. Studies such as this one will contribute to a growing body of literature. Chapter Three will outline the methodology used in this study.
CHAPTER THREE

Rationale for Design

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the limited research on a growing phenomenon in higher education: residential programs at community colleges, particularly focusing on the student experience. A case study approach will be used as a framework for analyzing and describing the findings. Stake (2005) defined a “case” as “a specific, unique, bounded system” (p. 445). Case studies typically serve one or more of five purposes – to explain, to describe, to illustrate, to explore, or as a meta-evaluation (Yin, 2003). Further, the case study methodology is particularly appropriate when the researcher wishes to keep the context of a situation intact, as in this study which focuses on describing residential programs at community colleges, where residential facilities are not as common as they are at four year institutions. The deficit of literature available on this topic also indicates that this topic should be explored in greater detail so that current practitioners have another resource available to them.

Case studies are also particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic (Merriam, 1998). They are particularistic in that they center on “a particular situation, event, program, or phenomenon” (p. 29). A case study is descriptive because the result of a case study is a very detailed and thorough description of the item under study. Rather than reporting numbers, a story is told, one that the intended audience can visualize based on the words and phrases used in the description. Being heuristic indicates that the audience will also come away from the study having a new understanding of the situation or phenomenon. This study focuses on the phenomenon of residential programs at community colleges.
(particularistic) and describes two residential programs from the perspective of faculty, staff, administrators, and residential students (descriptive) which will lead to a clearer understanding of residential programs at community colleges.

Stake (1994) distinguished between two interests in studying cases. The first is an intrinsic case study, where the researcher examines cases in an effort to better understand a particular case. The second is an instrumental case study where a particular case is highlighted as an example of a phenomenon. Although many case studies focus on just one example in great detail, there are also collective case studies (or multiple case studies) where several cases are examined for their similarities or dissimilarities. This study represents an intrinsic collective case study where a particular set of cases will be described in an effort to understand and help others understand how residential programs at community colleges function. Similarities and differences will be identified through a cross case analysis.

MacPherson, Booker, and Ainsworth (2000) discussed the importance of considering the ideas of purpose, place, process, and product as a framework for case studies. Case studies must have a purpose prior to the start of the research and these authors consider it unacceptable to create secondary purposes after research has begun. Place is particularly relevant to case studies because “case study research provides for diversity and uniqueness of social sites on one hand and the potential for commonality and universality across similar sites on the other” (p. 54). Process refers to the consideration of the multiple roles the researcher plays as an observer, investigator, and active participant, as well as the views that participants take in terms of the research, as
well as the outcomes of the research. Each of the previous notions creates the end product of the research, the case study itself, which must successfully convey the outcomes and results accurately and meaningfully to the appropriate audiences.

Glesne (1999) stated that random sampling is not appropriate for qualitative studies because the purpose of qualitative research is not to draw generalizations. Instead, cases should be “purposefully” selected (Patton, 2002) such that the most “information-rich” cases are chosen; thus the researcher must pick the “cases they could learn the most from” (Patton, 2002, p. 233). This study employed an operational construct sampling method where real-world examples of the phenomenon are used (Patton). This study will also be a multiple case design so that the results will be “more compelling” and “more robust” (Yin, 2003; p. 46). However, Yin (2003) also cautioned that multiple-case studies are very time consuming and require significant resources. Creswell and Maietta (2002) also indicated that the in-depth nature of case studies requires fewer cases because, “for each additional case examined, the researcher has less time to devote to exploring the depths of any one case” (p. 163). For these reasons, two institutions have been selected for this study.

Patton (2002) reported that most qualitative researchers focus on trustworthiness and authenticity rather than traditional notions of reliability and validity. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested some techniques for establishing trustworthiness. One is ensuring credibility by spending adequate time in the field, making careful observations, and utilizing triangulation. Creswell (1998) defined triangulation as using different and varied sources of data collection using diverse methods. Flick (2004) discussed different types
of triangulation including data triangulation, investigator triangulation (using multiple observers or interviewers to balance out biases), triangulation of theories (looking at the data from different perspectives), and methodological triangulation (using different methods within a method, such as distributing a questionnaire during a focus group). Stake (2005) stated, “Triangulation has been generally considered a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation” (p. 454). Professional level staff members, student staff members, and students were able to provide multiple perspectives on the topics discussed. Because I was able to interview all of the professional level staff members at both institutions, I was able to confirm whether the perceptions expressed were one particular staff member’s perspectives or if those opinions resonated through the professional level staff. I interviewed three student staff members and facilitated three focus groups for the same purpose. At the end of each interview and focus group, I went back and reviewed the topics that seemed to be the most important to participant(s) to ensure an accurate understanding of the discussion.

Malterud (2001) suggested that the background and experiences of the researcher can affect the topic selected, how the issue is examined, and the methods used in a study, as well as how the results and conclusions are shared. Therefore, she recommended that the impact of the researcher be considered at every step of the project. One such way of doing so is using reflexivity, which begins with the researcher identifying any preconceptions brought into the study whether through professional or personal experiences. Reflexivity can be sustained throughout the study by “looking at the data, or
its interpretations for competing conclusions” (p. 484). She also noted that perceptions are the same thing as a bias, if not mentioned at the beginning of the research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that member checks are “the most critical technique for establishing creditability” (p. 314). However, they also noted that if there are doubts about an informant’s honesty in reviewing data, member checks should not be used. Member checks are when the researcher asks his/her sources of information to clarify anything reported from the observations, interviews, or focus groups conducted (Creswell, 1998). Steinke (2004) recommends using member checks to further establish authenticity meaning that the reported experiences are in fact as the participant would report them.

The Researcher

Patton (2002) stated, “Qualitative inquiry, because the human being is the instrument of data collection, requires that the investigator carefully reflect on, deal with, and report potential sources of bias and error” (p. 51). He recommends that the researcher should report any information, personal or professional, that could impact the findings of the study. I have been involved in residence life since the fall of 1993 when I became a Resident Assistant at Ohio University. In the fall of 1997, I entered the College Student Personnel program at Ohio University and became an Assistant Resident Director. After one year, an opportunity became available at Hocking College and, although leaving Ohio University was difficult, I could not pass up the chance to work with a different type of student in a different type of environment. As time went on, more doors were opened and, upon completion of my degree in 2000, I accepted the Director of Residence
Life position, which is my current position, although at various times my duties have included Campus Judiciaries and responsibility for all housing functions such as room assignments, billing, and payment collection. Hocking College is planning to expand its residential program through two new residence halls slated to open in summer of 2008.

Clearly, I would not be in my position if I were not already favorably disposed toward residence halls in two-year institutions, but I believe that my professional experiences enabled me to be a better observer, interviewer, and focus group facilitator for this topic as there are many differences in the cultures at four-year and two-year institutions. One of the potential obstacles in qualitative research identified by Poggenpoel (2005) was lack of preparation to enter the field. The author further stated, “It is a prerequisite that the researcher familiarizes him/herself with the specific context in which the research will be conducted” (p. 310). My work in Hocking College’s residential program has provided an opportunity for such fieldwork preparations. To counteract influences of my experiences at Hocking, member checks were used to establish trustworthiness of my data. Further, I have attempted to demonstrate reflexivity by identifying preconceptions I have from my personal and professional experiences. I maintained this reflexivity by spending adequate time in the residence halls observing and talking to staff and students to help me check my interpretations of observations and discussions. I utilized data triangulation and triangulation of sources to help me remain open to alternative interpretations of the data.
The Cases

Locating residential programs at community colleges was challenging, largely due to the deficit of research about residential community colleges in the literature (Pascarella, 1999; Bers & Calhoun, 2002; Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Furthermore, my experience with the Association of College and University Housing Officers, as well as the Great Lakes Association of College and University Housing Officers has been that many two-year colleges are unaware of many of the resources available to them by joining these organizations.

Although I was aware of several community colleges with residence halls, I wanted to ensure that I selected institutions that were quality programs and geographically diverse. The American Association of Community Colleges provided a list of community colleges with residence halls to help with my initial investigation. Using that list, I began looking at each institution’s website. I selected Northampton Community College after ascertaining that their residence life and housing department included the encouragement of academic success and personal development as part of their role. A referral from Hocking College’s Dean of Enrollment Services (who has past experience in Residence Life) led me to contact Dr. Michel Ouellette from Cochise College in Arizona. A review of their website as well as a Resident Assistant position description indicated that their program had some educational components. Dr. Ouellette readily agreed to participate in the study.
Institutional Profiles

Northampton Community College

Northampton Community College provides several campuses with a variety of educational purposes ranging from community education classes, adult basic training, English as a Second Language, as well as an Industrial Park offering training in welding, machining, and electrical engineering. Over 32,000 students attend classes in all of these areas. The residence halls are located on the main campus in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Over 200 beds are available in a traditional residence hall, as well as 12 apartments housing four or more students per apartment.

Cochise College

Cochise provides educational opportunities at several locations, including Douglas, Arizona, where the residence halls are located. There are 1444 students on this campus, comprised of mostly female students (60%). On campus housing has a total capacity of 240 students. The campus is located very close to the Mexico-United States border so it is not surprising that Hispanic students are largely represented on this campus (59%). Enrollment is equally split between full and part time. Most of the students living on campus are athletes and are aged 18-20 years old (M. Ouellette, personal communication, April 2, 2007).

The institutional contexts are described in more detail in Chapter Four.

Procedures

Campus visits, document analysis, observations, interviews, and focus groups were the primary means of gathering data for this study.
Campus Visits

I made two separate visits to each campus studied. The initial visits took place in November and consisted primarily of observing in the residence halls and on campus, becoming familiar with campus, interviewing the professional level staff members, and building rapport with the student staff and students. Between visits I maintained contact with some of the professional staff to ask follow up questions. During my second visits (in February), I conducted the interviews with student staff, focus groups with students, and continued spending time in the residence halls to observe student interactions. I spent approximately one week total on each campus. At Northampton, I stayed a hotel near campus and at Cochise, I stayed in a guest suite. During November, I stayed in Chiricachua Hall and in February, I stayed in Huachuca Hall. All interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded. Within hours of each event, I listened to the recordings and made notes of my observations and thoughts during the event. It was especially important to this immediately following the focus groups as I was facilitating the focus groups and generally did not take notes during the focus groups.

Document Analysis

Wolff (2004) referred to documents as “institutional traces” and stated, “They may legitimately be used to draw conclusions about the activities, intentions and ideas of their creators or the organizations they represented” (p. 284). In this study, documents such as institutional and departmental websites and handbooks were reviewed to gain a better understanding of the educational and/or developmental goals advertised to students as part of the residential living experience. Resident Assistant position descriptions were
reviewed, as well as other professional level position descriptions as available. Merriam (1998) called documentary data a good resource because it can help set the stage or develop the context of a situation. Patton (2002) recommended having access to documents at the beginning of fieldwork to help guide research goals, as well as guide interviews, focus groups, and conversations.

Merriam (1998) also discussed the use of on-line documents such as websites, e-mails, and chat rooms, and listservs. Stability is one concern she mentioned. Websites are not necessarily static. Relying solely on electronic forms of communication can affect the authenticity and trustworthiness of the data. Institutions of higher education rely on their websites for advertising, as well as sharing information with their constituencies; thus, they provided rich sources of information to inform this study.

Observation

I began my research by spending time in the common areas of the residence halls observing interactions, conversations, and learning more about the daily happenings in the hall. I also observed a variety of informal interactions between both the student staff and the professional staff with students. Patton (2002) emphasized some of the advantages to direct observations. First, the researcher is better able to understand and describe the context in which the study takes place. The firsthand experience also allows the researcher to experience the setting, rather than relying on descriptions provided by others. Being an outside observer, I had the opportunity to see things that have become so common to those within the setting that they go unnoticed or seem unimportant, when in fact, they may be very important. In observing daily life, there is also an opportunity to
learn things about an environment that participants may be hesitant to discuss in an interview or focus group. First hand observations also reduce the impact of the perceptions of others on the researcher. Finally, it allows an opportunity to get closer to the participants in their own context. Having a better understanding enabled me to develop better follow up questions for interviews and focus groups. Merriam (1998) recommended noting items such as the physical setting, the participants, activities and interactions, conversations, less obvious things like nonverbal behaviors, spontaneous activities, and things that you might expect, but are not happening. The impact of the researcher’s behavior is also important to note, as well as the thoughts as the observation continues. I engaged in and documented spontaneous conversations I had with students, as well, almost as if they were mini-interviews. Notes from these interactions were typed the same day. I also kept the original notes.

*Interviewing*

Interviewing was another method used to help me “learn to see the world from the eyes of the person being interviewed” (Ely, 1991, p. 58). I interviewed the following individuals at each institution:

1. The Director of Residence Life;
2. A live-in professional level staff member;
3. Student staff members (typically referred to as Resident Assistants).

At Northampton Community College, two additional professional level staff members were interviewed: a part time Hall Director who also works in the Financial Aid Office and a part time Residential Counselor.
Lincoln and Guba (1985) discussed the continuum of structured to unstructured interviews. Structured interviews are more focused and involve having set questions prior to the interview and not deviating from those questions. Unstructured interviews involve having a loose set of guidelines upon which questions are based. My interviews were a combination of these types, or what Patton (2002) refers to as the general interview guide approach, which involved having a list of questions to cover, but also allowed me the freedom to ask follow up questions and let the interviewee lead me to other thoughts and experiences, as long as we remained within the scope of the research. The general interview guide method of interviewing is advantageous because the researcher can determine how best to use the time set aside for the interview, but is a more methodical method of conducting the interview, making comparison of responses easier. Again, notes from these interviews were typed the same day as the interview and the original notes were kept for later reference.

Focus Groups

Three focus groups were held to collect the thoughts and experiences of students. Each focus group consisted of 6 - 14 students living in the residence halls and was scheduled to last approximately an hour per Patton’s (2002) recommendations. However, students were much quieter after the recorder was turned on and looked to me to guide the conversation. As a result, each focus group took approximately 20-30 minutes. A fourth focus group was scheduled at each campus, but proved to be unnecessary as three focus groups provided an appropriate level of data saturation. Bohnsack (2004) suggested several helpful practices for conducting focus groups. First, he advised ensuring that
opening questions are addressed to the entire group and that topics are deliberately vague and only put forward as suggested topics rather prescribing the flow of the conversation. Further, he instructed the researcher to only ask follow up questions when a lapse (as compared to a gap or pause) in conversation occurs. These follow up questions should be detailed and avoid initiating new topics, unless the previous topic has been exhausted. Although there are many advantages to focus groups, such as being able to collect a large amount of data in a relatively short period of time and use the interactions among participants as a checks and balances, Patton (2002) also highlighted some of the limitations and cautions such as avoiding controversial subject matter, asking a fewer number of questions, and not letting one or two people control the entire conversation, making it difficult for less popular opinions to come forth.

Data Analysis

Unlike quantitative research where there is a clear distinction between the research phase and the analysis phase, Patton (2002) suggested the line is less clear in qualitative research. “In the course of fieldwork, ideas about directions for analysis will occur. Patterns take shape. Possible themes spring to mind. Hypotheses emerge that inform subsequent fieldwork” (p. 436). The descriptions from the fieldwork comprise the foundation of the analysis. While in the field, as I organized my field notes, my initial thoughts about patterns and any insights were noted separately.

Patton (2002) recommended three steps to constructing case studies: (a) assemble the raw case data; (b) construct a case record; and (c) write a final case study narrative. Therefore, an initial case record was developed in the form of detailed descriptions, as
well as initial thoughts and insights at that time. Although much of this information was compiled while onsite, the verbatim transcriptions of each recorded interaction were received later and were compared to my initial perceptions and ideas.

Each interview and focus group was digitally recorded and then transcribed. In addition to reading the transcriptions, I listened to the recordings several times making notes of changes in tone of voice, pauses, or other observations made during the sessions that may not have been reflected in the transcriptions. Transcriptions were uploaded into OmniOutlier 3.5 (v134.2) to organize the data. Because of the large amounts of data, I separated the transcriptions into the three data sources (professional level staff, student staff, and focus groups). I chose to break it down by data sources to ensure a trustworthy representation of the data and to be able to compare and contrast perceptions among the three groups. Then, the data were organized into broad topics based on the research questions, which is how the interview questions were organized. After organizing by research question, I began looking for themes or commonly repeated thoughts and sentiments. Once those themes were identified for each group of sources (professional staff, student staff, and focus groups), I returned to the transcriptions to triangulate the perceptions, thoughts, and opinions expressed. Based on Cho and Trent’s (2006) recommendation to note the discrepancies reported by participants and make a determination as to how to best utilize that information, when participants expressed differences of opinions, follow up questions were asked to ascertain how many participants identified with that sentiment. I also reviewed notes from individual, casual conversations with students for similar comments. All opinions expressed are reported,
with any differences noted. Finally, all of this information was combined to develop individual case records, which were then used to answer the research questions.

**Summary of Methodology**

Patton (2002) recommended that qualitative research methods, such as case studies, be used when a researcher wants to study an issue in depth and in detail. Furthermore, when using qualitative methods, the researcher focuses on “things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them” (Denzine & Lincoln, 1994, p. 2). One of the best ways to capture the experiences of residential students at community colleges is by observing and interacting with those constituencies. Through observations, interviews, and focus groups, I developed case studies comparing and contrasting the experiences of students in residence halls at the individual community colleges as well discussing the common experiences of these students.

Chapter Four includes a summary of the interviews and focus groups at each institution as well as findings by research question. In Chapter Five, a cross case analysis by research question is presented, as well as a discussion of common themes. Finally, Chapter Five includes a list of recommendations for practice and a list of recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER FOUR

Chapter Four begins with a brief introduction to each institution followed by a thematic summary for each data source (administrators, paraprofessional staff interviews, and resident focus groups). Finally, an analysis of the findings organized by research questions is presented.

Case Synopses

*Northampton Community College*

Located in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, Northampton Community College is situated an hour and a half west of New York City and an hour and a half to the northwest of Philadelphia, PA. Approximately 32,000 students attend classes at the main campus in Bethlehem, a branch campus in Tannersville, PA, an educational center south of Bethlehem, and more than 50 satellite sites in four counties in northeast Pennsylvania ([http://www.northampton.edu/Office/Pubinfo/factsheet.htm](http://www.northampton.edu/Office/Pubinfo/factsheet.htm)). Some of the most common majors include General Studies, Early Childhood Education, Education, Business Administration, and Criminal Justice.

Despite the campus’ proximity to such large urban centers and the busy freeways winding through the Pocono Mountains, there is no shortage of green, open spaces on campus. The center cluster of academic buildings is surrounded by a circle of grassy lawns with sidewalks running like spokes between the parking lots on the outer most circle and the buildings. At the core of the cluster is College Center, the building that houses the cafeteria, the library, the gymnasium, the fitness center, the bookstore, and the health center, as well as the student affairs offices.
Northampton Community College opened its doors to 846 students in October of 1967 with 21 professional staff members teaching in eight career programs, five transfer options, and a program to allow for individualized development. In 1970, the college received accreditation from the Commission on Higher Education in the Middle States Association of College and Schools. In the 1970’s five additional buildings were constructed for various technologies, including a Funeral Services/Radiological building. In the 1980’s, the campus experienced a building boom when many classrooms were renovated, new classrooms were built, a new Admissions Office was constructed, and the Automotive Technology wing was added to an existing building. Student apartments and the residence hall were also built during this time. During the 1990’s, additional partnerships with local business and industry were established and more buildings were added to main campus, including the Hampton Winds restaurant for the culinary program. A state of the art teleconferencing facility was completed in 1996, just one year before the campus celebrated the 30th anniversary of the day classes began at Northampton. Over 200,000 students have been educated here since the college opened (http://www.northampton.edu/Office/Pubinfo/factsheet.htm).

The residence hall and student apartments are located across the street from the cluster of academic buildings, a brief walk from “main campus.” After crossing the traffic heavy Green Pond Road, a path worn in the grass reveals the quickest way to get to the residence halls. Even with the traffic, it is easy to forget that campus is located in a relatively urban setting. Trees sprinkle the median in the parking lot, as well as the residence hall yard. Cars parked in the lot surrounding the residence halls have license
plates mostly from Pennsylvania, but there are those from New York, New Jersey, Maryland, and other eastern states.

The residence hall consists of two separate “L” shaped wings connected by a diamond shaped central hub where, on the first floor, the Hall Director and Residential Counselor Office is as well as the Resident Assistant desk, lobby, and game room. This lobby area is also home to the Spartan’s Den, a snack bar operated by the college’s food service. Students refer to the snack bar simply as “The Den.” On the second floor in the central hub, there is the multipurpose room, referred to by staff and students as the “MPR” where students can watch TV, hang out, and attend programs facilitated by the residence life staff. Near the MPR are larger suites available for guests and/or staff members. Currently, there is a staff member from the Americorp program residing on campus. Both the game room and the Spartan’s Den also have televisions allowing multiple viewing opportunities for students.

Just over 200 students live in the residence halls at Northampton. An additional 48 students are housed in the student apartments located next door to the residence hall. Eight Community Assistants (CAs) and Mentors supervise their own wings of the residence halls with approximately 20-30 residents per wing. One CA supervises the apartment complex. In Fall 2007, there were 110 male students and 112 female students living on campus. In terms of racial diversity within the halls, 59% of the students are white/Non-Hispanic, 22% are African American, 10% are international students, 6% are Hispanic, and 2% are unknown. These percentages remain fairly consistent from year to year. (J. Howey, personal communication, September 17, 2007).
CAs and Mentors have the same responsibilities within their assigned residence hall wings, but have different “desk duty” requirements. Mentors work an average of five duty hours per week (instead of an entire night on duty) and they work four weekends per semester during which they will average ten hours total. Mentors share a double occupancy room with a non-student staff member. CAs are on duty one weekday per week and four weekends per semester. CAs receive a free single room and their stipend is approximately $200 more than that of a Mentor. Being on duty entails remaining in the residential complex from 6:00 p.m. until 8:00 a.m. the following morning, completing rounds of the complex at scheduled times, signing visitors in and out, and monitoring the distribution/return of equipment, such as billiards equipment used in the game room.

All student staff members are expected to handle policy violations, assist students with personal and/or academic concerns, as well as maintain a presence in the building. In addition, they provide both active and passive programming in the residence halls. Each individual staff member provides a total of ten programs per semester. Four of these programs are part of the “4 in 4” where staff members pair up to provide one activity each week during the first four weeks of the semester to help students learn about their new homes. The remaining programs must fall into predetermined educational topics such as Life Skills Development, Cultural Identity Awareness, Creating a Mattering Community, and Service to Others (either fundraisers or active service). Passive programming entails renewing decorations within their wing including an educational theme. All staff members help decorate the lobby area.
The CAs and Mentors are supervised by a Hall Director and a part-time Hall Director. In addition, Northampton employs a Residential Counselor, a part time counselor assigned to the residence halls. The Residential Counselor works from 4:00 p.m. until 9:00 p.m. on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays. This individual also attends additional training and meetings as needed. All three of these individuals are supervised by a Director of Residence Life. In addition to supervising the student staff, the Hall Directors are responsible for being available for a set number of office hours each week, as well as generally being present in the building to handle any situations for which the CAs and Mentors need help. Both the Hall Director and the part-time Hall Director live in the residence halls.

**Cochise College**

Nearly 2300 miles away from the Northampton campus, the Douglas campus of Cochise College sits just north of the border between the United States and Mexico in southeast Arizona, about 15 miles outside of Douglas, Arizona. An isolated stretch of Highway 80 connects the town of Douglas to Interstate 10, leading to more populated destinations. In addition to the main campus at Douglas, Cochise operates a branch campus just under an hour away in Sierra Vista, as well as centers in Benson, Wilcox, Fort Huachuca, and Nogales. There are 1444 students on the Douglas campus, leaving the remaining 2500 students (approximately) at the branch campus and centers. Although a total of 240 students can live on campus, only 125 are currently living on campus, many of whom are athletes (M. Ouelette, personal communication, November 13, 2007).
Although most of the students living on campus are from Arizona, other common home states for students are New Mexico, Texas, and Colorado.

The Douglas campus is a collection of small, one story buildings in a circle just off Highway 80. The gymnasium, baseball fields, soccer/football field, and Rodeo ring are to the east of the looping road around campus. At the end of campus furthest from the highway is the Art, Welding, and Agriculture building, as well as the Aviation building, which leads to the Cochise College Airport. Turning back toward the highway on the west side of campus are the residence halls and a large parking lot for all students and staff members. Looking in any direction, mountains can be seen in the distance, with flat, brown, grassy fields between the campus and peaks. Small cactus plants decorate the flower beds on campus. Despite its desert location, there are trees dotting the lawn around the campus. The total silence of campus is occasionally disturbed by the animated chatter of students walking to and from class or sports practices, or by the sound of a small plane taking off or landing.

The Douglas campus of Cochise College was once the only campus available to students. In 1961, residents of Cochise County voted to establish a junior college within the county to provide educational opportunities for students unable financially to move to Phoenix, Tucson, or Flagstaff for college. There was some controversy over the exact location of the campus with many of the towns suggesting that they were better than others to be the home of a junior college. However, plans continued for the original site, desert grassland, donated by the Bergmann family. County voters approved the 1.6 million dollars worth of college bonds to fund the campus. Even though the first
president was killed in a plane crash before the college even opened, nothing deterred the forward momentum, and the doors opened for classes on September 21, 1964. Since then, interest in the educational opportunities afforded by Cochise College has demanded the development of the branch campus about 60 miles away in Sierra Vista and various centers around southeast Arizona.

The residence halls are located a short distance from the academic buildings on campus, near the Cochise College runway. The two buildings, called Huachuca Hall and Chiricahua Hall, have similar layouts: a large lobby with two “blocks” of student rooms accessible only to residents with keys. Each block consists of a square shaped, uncovered, patio with two floors of residential rooms on all four sides, somewhat resembling an older hotel. Each double room has its own bathroom. Chiricahua Hall is named after Apache tribe that once lived in this region. They were among the last to quit fighting United States control over the southwest. There is mountain range to the north of Douglas, which includes Chiricahua National Monument. Huachuca Hall is named after a mountain range to the west of Douglas, near Sierra Vista. Huachuca means “place of thunder” in a local Native American dialect

The Resident Assistants (RAs) are expected to be student leaders, set a good example for other students, or handle any violations of policy that occur in the residence halls. They are on duty as assigned on the weekdays, but are paid extra for working weekend duty. When on duty, RAs complete rounds of the buildings three times (four times on the weekend nights) and monitor student behavior. They also make sure there is
sufficient paper for the printers in the computer labs, as well as ensuring there is enough toilet paper for residents. RAs are also required to take the Leadership and Service Course offered by the college and they must earn at least a C in the class. The tuition for the class is paid for by the Housing Department.

In addition to these administrative duties, RAs attend training, both pre-service and ongoing, as required by the college. They attend weekly staff meetings and must attend events hosted by the Residence Hall Association. In terms of programming, the campus works together to provide activities for students. The Student Government Association (SGA) and the RAs take turns hosting events so that there is one event each week and then the RAs also plan an intramural event every two weeks. The RAs are encouraged to provide events that are education or student development focused, but the lack of attendance to such events has been frustrating in the past (C. Bermingham, personal communication, November, 2007).

The RAs are directly supervised by a Hall Director and the Director of Residence Life. The Hall Director lives in Huachuca Hall and also serves as the Head Soccer Coach. There are other coaches who also live in the residence halls and share in the supervisory duties. Each evening there is an “Administrator on Duty” (AOD). The AOD carries a cell phone, conducts rounds, and is expected to be available to assist the RAs in handling disciplinary students or other matters that arise. The AODs are also expected to attend any events happening in the residence halls during their shifts.
Data Sources and Themes

Northampton Community College

Professional Level Staff

I interviewed four professional level staff members at Northampton Community College: (a) the Director of Residence Life; (b) the Residential Counselor; (c) the full time Hall Director; and (d) the part time Hall Director. All interviews took place during my first site visit in November, 2007. Interviews took place privately, in the staff members’ offices, although there were occasionally interruptions (see Appendix B for the Professional Staff Interview Guide). The data revealed the themes discussed below.

Connections. Affiliation and comfort with the college atmosphere were mentioned repeatedly throughout the interviews. One staff member said, “They [residential students] get more of a connection to the campus and to the college. [For] the commuting student, it is a place to go get, to do something and then they get back to their life. For the students here, they have an opportunity to make college their life.” Another staff member asserted that the residential experiences of students at Northampton were probably not very different than her own at a four year institution. In fact, she believed they probably had more interaction with the residence life staff than she did during her undergraduate years. The small size of the campus and the residential area contributes to the high interaction levels. “Even though they may not all be best friends, they really all kind of know each other,” she said.

Student Success. Helping students succeed academically was also a recurring topic of discussion with professional staff members. “We are perpetually trying to find
ways to promote the academic mission of the college in everything that we do,” said one staff member. The role of the Residential Counselor is critical to promoting that mission. The intervention efforts provided through his mentoring students seem to have had an impact on at least a few students. His services are offered voluntarily to students who test into two or more developmental courses; however, only a few students choose to take advantage of it. He works with faculty members, typically via e-mail to coordinate efforts for the students and to gain a realistic appraisal as to where the student in his or her coursework.

The Residential Counselor meets with students who earn less than a 2.0 and attempts to mentor them in the right direction. Rather than trying to focus on specific content areas, he focuses on methods of being a successful student including how to understand a course syllabus, time management, and decision-making skills. These targeted efforts are a newer part of the residential program at Northampton, so more data are needed before success can be determined, according to another staff member.

According to one professional level staff member, approximately 50 students do not make the GPA requirements for the semester. “So often that takes so much one on one and [the Residential Counselor] does what he can, but know you can only spend so much [time] chasing students down,” she said. Reviewing students’ academic performance is part of all professional level staff members’ responsibilities. “We can actually from semester to semester actually pinpoint the success the students are having or are not having,” another staff member said.
Another important component to helping students be successful academically is the open communication between the faculty and the Student Services staff members, so combined efforts can be made to help students be successful academically. Students earning less than a 2.0 GPA receive a letter informing them that they are on probation and explaining the necessary steps to take to demonstrate that they are serious about their academics, but it is up to the student to take those steps. “We will work with that student in terms of keeping them here because they are showing genuine effort to be, to want to be here, to… earn that right,” said one staff member.

Faculty Involvement. Despite the very open lines of communication with faculty, faculty involvement does not appear to be a large part of the culture. “I think that our faculty really communicates with Student Service people a lot,” one staff member said. “So it’s not so much that we don’t have a close relationship. It’s just that they’re not quite down there,” she added. Professional staff members would like to see the faculty more involved whether by presenting programs or being part of study sessions. “I think that’s a large part just for students to understand that what happens in the residence halls … can relate back and that there is kind of a connection,” commented one staff member.

Student apathy. Lack of attendance at structured events was also mentioned as an issue faced by professional level staff. Professional staff members all acknowledged that attendance at the structured events was most often influenced by the availability of food rather than a desire to hear the information being presented. The Success Series is a series of programs designed to help students be more successful. Similar to the structured interventions by the Residential Counselor, the Success Series is a newer initiative. Many
of the topics students are counseled on individually are covered in what are designed to
be larger group sessions. Stress management, study skills, and other topics are typically
part of the agenda. Despite the obvious need for this type of information, attendance at
the Success Series has not been high. “I think we have not had good attendance because
people are not as academically motivated on this campus as perhaps you would find at
other schools,” commented one professional staff member. Currently, the staff is
planning to continue the Success Series despite the attendance issues because the topics
are viewed as so important for students. There is some discussion about providing food at
the sessions, but some staff members believe that students should be learning to attend
such events for their own benefit rather than being “bribed” with food to attend.

*Learning moments.* Disciplinary functions were also mentioned. Fundamental to
any disciplinary situation is the “learning moment” according to one staff member. “So,
it’s not always, ‘I’m going to slap you in the face for it.’ It’s going to be, ‘[the behavior]
won’t be tolerated, it’s not okay, but this is what we’re going to do to help you
understand why that’s not okay,’” she went on to say. Another staff member commented
on the same topic, “Hopefully, it is our opinion that students should come here to develop
and transition to become better citizens. So we do everything that we can to promote that
on, whether it is simply becoming a better student or becoming a better member of a
diverse community.”

*Passion.* Another consistent theme throughout all of the interviews was a passion
for working with students. All of the professional level staff members interviewed
commented on how much they loved what they were doing, they believed in the mission
of Northampton, and that they were really interested in helping students succeed. One staff member said, “This is a school that I absolutely believe in. I love it here. I believe in our mission. I think that…we do phenomenal work here and so as a whole…the college.” Another one echoed those thoughts, “The community college opens up so many doors for students that wouldn’t have the opportunity otherwise…I’m really passionate about this place.”

The professional level staff members also were very complimentary of the leadership within the institution and of their coworkers and even of the student employees in the department. One staff member said, “Everything we do is a team effort” (referring to his coworkers). He went on to say “They are a credit to what we do here” (referring to the student staff). “The leadership here is just amazing,” said another staff member. “It really is a great place to be,” he finished.

Also noteworthy is the fact that two of the three full time professional staff members and the part time professional level staff member come from counseling/psychology backgrounds. Having a background in a field designed to help other people likely contributes to the passionate feelings toward helping students become successful not just academically, but also in their preparations for life after college.

*Student Staff Members*

I interviewed three student staff members at Northampton Community College, all of whom are referred to by randomly selected pseudonyms. Cherie is a 19-year-old, second year Community Assistant (CA) who also served as a Mentor previously. She is from Kunkletown, Pennsylvania, approximately 30 minutes from Northampton. She is
majoring in Early Childhood Education and intends to transfer to East Stroudsburg University in Pennsylvania to pursue a teaching degree. When I first met Cherie, she was a Mentor in the residence hall. When I interviewed her during my second site visit in February, she had been promoted to a CA position and moved to the apartments located next to the residence halls. Cherie’s interview took place in the Spartan’s Den, while it was closed.

Laura is a 20-year-old, first year student who is in her first semester as a Mentor. She is from East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, approximately forty-five minutes from campus. Although in her first year at Northampton and her first year living on campus, Laura attended the Monroe campus of Northampton for one year before transferring to the main campus. Like Cherie, Laura is also studying Early Childhood Education. I met and interviewed Laura during my second site second visit in February. Her interview also took place in the Spartan’s Den, while it was closed.

Brad is a 22-year-old, second year student. Like Cherie, when I met Brad during my first site visit, he was a Mentor, but had been promoted to being a CA over the winter break and held that position when I interviewed him in February. He is studying Computer Design, but more recently expressed a desire to investigate a career path within Student Affairs. He was born in the Dominican Republic, but considers “home” to be with his aunt and uncle in East Stroudsburg, PA. Brad’s interview took place in the Hall Director/Residential Counselor office in the residence hall (see Appendix C for the Student Staff Interview Guide). The following themes emerged while analyzing the data.
Student staff learning experiences. Student staff members not only face the normal challenges of being college students, but also the additional responsibility of supervising their peers. These student staff members expressed positive views of their experiences. Laura discussed her initial apprehension about moving on campus. She moved into the residence halls with a friend who later dropped out of school. “I’m so, like I still like it … it just taught me a lot about myself and actually having a job, actually being a leader, it just, I think it gave me a lot of opportunity. So I’m glad I stuck,” she said. Brad commented about the necessity of living on campus, “I feel strongly about living here because I don’t have a lot of people behind me for support.” He was among those students helped by the Residential Counselor’s intervention program. “That actually helped me quite a bit,” he said. “What the dorm did for me was really good.”

Connections. Student staff members frequently commented on the small size of the campus and the closeness of the students. Cherie, who has worked in both the residence halls and the apartments and expressed the opinion, “I thought I would like the apartments better, but they’re kind of off to the side so nobody comes to visit anymore and it’s kind of unsocial.” She went on to explain that she still comes over to the residence halls to socialize. Others commented on how helpful the instructors are and what a good reputation the institution has in the area. “Anybody you go to, they’re more than willing to help you,” she said.

Being a role model. Student staff members also recognized the importance of their roles in the residence halls in terms of contributing to student experiences. “It would be tough for the residents [if there weren’t any staff].” Being a role model was one of the
The first things mentioned. “I hope that my people on my floor think of me, like a role model and they can come [to me],” said Cherie. The challenge of balancing their roles as students and staff members was also mentioned. “It’s so hard to say ‘no.’ I feel so bad, but like I’m trying to like help people that ask me…but it’s like I have my own to do too,” she said. Student discipline was another part of the student staff members’ jobs that commented on. “They hate us, but they like us,” commented Brad. He went on to explain that students seem to like knowing the people “in charge.” He compared it to the popular kids. “Not only are we residents, but we – we kind of own the place,” he said. “When the comes to “cracking down on noise, cracking down on alcohol, that’s when they are like ‘c’mon,’ you know,” he finished.

*Student apathy.* All of the student staff interviewed cited examples of things they do for residents such as planning activities and having someone to talk to. “We do the programming and trying to get them out and socialize so they have friends,” Cherie said. Influencing students to get out and interact can be a challenge. “You just try and like put them someplace like ‘join a club, join a group,’” she went on to say. “We make sure the students stay safe and make sure they’re not doing too many things too disorderly to wreak havoc on the building,” Laura summarized. Student staff also expressed the same disappointment as the professional staff about the lack of attendance at residence hall events. “They don’t read fliers,” said Laura, “Usually you have to go bang on doors.” Even when they try to make educational topics fun, such as a residence hall policy Bingo game, residents just really wanted the prizes and did not want to have to answer the questions. “They don’t want to go to the programming, and then they complain that
there’s nothing to do,” she went on to say. More informal events such as going to dinner together, playing games outside when the weather is nice, and watching movies are also planned by the staff, but students do not really associate those types of activities as a “program.” Not all of the student staff sees attendance at events as an issue. One student staff member commented, “Surprisingly a good amount of students come together and they have fun and meet each other and I think they like that.” Brad also expressed a desire to see more educationally focused programs, but he understands the difficulties of that for the institution. “You can’t just hire someone to come here at night time. And then you have to invest money on food because no one’s going to come down if there’s no food,” he said.

*Subpopulation Differences.* Student staff had primarily positive things to report as far as different subpopulations on campus, although two white females and one Dominican Republic male were interviewed. Interactions with international students were commented on positively. “I think once they get here…. They’re very friendly … and I think it’s a great experience,” Cherie commented. “There really isn’t any problem with racism here,” commented Brad. However, he then related a story of an African American female student who brought her Caucasian boyfriend to visit. Some students were harshly teasing them and while it did not become a physically violent issue, they did file an incident report for the situation. His story demonstrated that while he may not have been the target of any racially motivated incidents, other students’ might report different experiences.
Focus Groups

All three focus groups were held in the residence halls; the first two were held in the MPR on the second floor, while the third one was held in the Spartan’s Den snack bar, prior to opening. Students filled out general information forms to collect demographic data (see Appendix D for the Focus Group Interview Guide). The first focus group consisted of 17 participants, of which 16 were female and 1 was male. There were 14 students who identified as white/Caucasian/Non-Hispanic, 1 that identified as having a “mixed” racial/ethnic background, and 1 who indicated African American. There were a variety of academic areas represented with 2 sports management, 1 interior design, 1 psychology, 1 business administration, 1 early childhood education, 4 dental hygiene, 2 nursing, 1 criminal justice, 1 fine arts, and 3 general studies students. The age range for 16 of the participants was 18-20 years old. One participant was 22 years old.

The second focus group consisted of 9 participants, of which 6 were female and 3 were male. There were 6 students who indicated that they were White/Caucasian/Non-Hispanic, while 1 student indicated Black, 1 indicated Hispanic, and 1 indicated Spanish. In this group, there were 2 general studies student, 1 general studies – nursing, 1 social work, 1 radio-television, 1 criminal justice, 1 interior design, and 2 hotel management students. Again, all fell within the 18-20 age range, except one, who was 21-years-old.

The third focus group also had 9 participants, 6 of which were female, 3 of which were male. This groups was racially more diverse though with 2 students who indicated that they were Puerto Rican/Black, 3 African American, 1 white/Caucasian/Non-Hispanic, 1 Black Jamaican/Haitian, 1 Jamaican/Black, 1 Black/Latino. Similar majors as
the other two focus groups were represented with 1 general studies student, 1 social work, 1 general studies (with intent to enroll in the funeral services program), 1 liberal arts, 1 veterinary technician, 1 computer, 1 nursing, 1 undecided, and 1 criminal justice. All the participants were in the 18-20 age range. The following themes emerged from the analysis of the data from all focus groups.

Facilities. Descriptions of on campus living experiences from the focus group participants were remarkably similar despite variances in major, age, gender, and race. Students discussed the cleanliness of the bathrooms and the size of the rooms as a source of dissatisfaction. “I never shared a room in my life ‘cause I’m the only girl out of 6 kids…so it was hard to actually room with somebody,” one student commented. Another student commented that the size of the rooms made them feel like they were in cells. They also expressed a desire to see more laundry facilities, and said that the laundry facilities should be better monitored to prevent people’s laundry from being mistreated.

Rules. Focus group participants also discussed the numerous rules that apply to them when living on campus. One student said, “Living on campus is alright. It’s just like…it’s not like a real college. Just kind of feels like there’s so many rules,” but another student chimed in and commented that other schools have even more rules. Another student reminded the other participants in her group that, “People think that we’re coming to college and it’s all about having fun. It is not. It’s like you learn responsibility.”

“There’s nothing to do.” The initial response from almost everyone when asked to describe their residential experiences so far included “boring” and “there’s nothing to do,” but when asked about events and activities they could readily name several programs
held by the residence life staff, including a jeopardy game that focused on sexual health, Manhunt (an outside game that is a combination of hide and go seek and tag), and volleyball. Students also spend time in the MPR playing video games, watching TV, and hanging out. On the weekends, most students seem to go home or away from campus. Some students mentioned study groups and the Success Series programming as well, but from their facial expressions, many students seemed oblivious that these educational programs were taking place. Some students commented that some of the social events were fun to attend, but overall there was little mention the programs and events geared towards education.

“Thirsty Thursdays.” Drinking and going out seemed to be part of the culture, whether it is a weekend or a weekday. Because few students have classes on Fridays, they refer to Thursday as “Thirsty Thursday.” Those who remain on campus during the weekends typically spend their time working on homework, sleeping, or hanging out. There are few, if any, campus or residence hall events on the weekends. On the weekdays, students go to classes, work, or do other things like sleep, hang out, play video games, or do homework. Similar to other college students, they also spend time on the internet and talking on the phone. As one student said, “Sometimes, you gotta make your own fun.”

Drama. Students also discussed the “drama” in the residence halls resulting from everyone being in such a small community. “It’s so small it’s like…everybody knows everybody so if you do one thing, everybody will find out eventually,” a student said. Another student added to that sentiment, “In like two minutes, not the next day.” It was
also shared that there was a feeling that students who did not live in the residence halls seemed more likely to cause problems than those living there. Female students were often blamed as the source of the drama but female students vehemently denied being the sole cause of such controversies.

“It’s not bad.” Despite the apparent drama, nearly all focus group participants mentioned that they had enjoyed meeting new people as a result of living on campus. One student even lamented that he wished he had gone to a four-year institution instead. “This school isn’t bad, don’t get me wrong, but it’s like now I have my group of friends and then I have to leave. It’s like leaving high school again,” he said. Getting away from home and having the opportunity to experience a new environment was also mentioned as a “bonus” of living on campus. The decision to live on campus seemed primarily driven by a desire to “get out of the house,” while others commented on the convenience of living on campus. A number of students mentioned that their financial aid covered the residence halls, but not off campus housing.

Preconceived notions. When asked about what students thought living on campus would be like, focus group participants most often said “more exciting,” meaning there would be more things to do and “more parties.” Another student said, “I thought I’d be able to do my work.” When asked why he is unable to complete his work, he said, “I don’t know, I have a crazy roommate.” “Peer pressure,” another student chimed in. Friends and movies such as “Animal House” were credited with helping form those notions, although some knew people who had lived on campus before. Relatives told one student “It’s the best time of your life,” but students seemed skeptical. Students who
visited campus ahead of time said that the people giving the tours influenced their notions of campus life. “They were enthusiastic, usually,” one student said. Another one added, “They made it sound fun and exciting.” When asked what they thought now in comparison to their expectations, one student said, “Well, for your first semester, too, it’s real exciting. You meet new people, you do new things, it’s a whole new scene.” “Yeah, and after that first semester period…you’re just trying to do your time to get out and go to a real school,” added another student.

*Perceptions of staff.* There were mixed reactions from students regarding the professional level staff. Students discussed how they felt that various professional level staff members should be more approachable and more caring, while others felt that they were “right on point, very fair.” It seemed as though each student could find someone on the professional level that they could identify with though. One focus group participant expressed the belief that the waiting list was fabricated because the professional staff wanted people to think living there was more desirable than it really is. “They want you to work harder to stay here,” she said. Students can readily name administrative parts of the residence life staff members’ positions, particularly the student staff. When asked what they see the staff doing, they responded with nightly duty tasks such as sitting at the front desk and checking IDs. They also commented on the policy enforcement responsibilities. “They like enforce the rules, so [the professional level staff] and them can get a break.”

The Residential Counselor was cited as someone having a significant impact on the students’ residential experiences. Several students commented that they liked him and
liked meeting with him. In an informal conversation, a student I will refer to as “Mallory” mentioned to me that she goes to all of the programs and her meetings with the Residential Counselor because she was paying for them through her residence hall fees. Although Mallory’s grades had improved between semesters, she still lost her place in the residence halls and had to transfer to the Monroe campus to continue her studies. When I asked the Residential Counselor if Mallory was around during my second site visit, he told me of her fate and how he had tried to intervene on her behalf. Unfortunately, he was unable to convince the academic faculty to allow her to continue her course work on the Northampton campus.

*Different Experiences.* A focus group primarily made up of minority students did not think there was any difference in their experiences. “There’s mad Black people here,” commented one student. Another student added, “It depends on the type of person you are and how you take in your environment, how you can adapt to it and what you want out of it, you’ll put into it…” Another student joked that he was the only male student in his classes and he was just fine with that. Overall, the participants in this focus group indicated that they were very comfortable on campus.

*Cochise College Professional Level Staff*

At Cochise College, I interviewed two professional level staff members, both during my first site visit in November, 2007. I interviewed Director of Housing and Student Life and the Hall Director who also serves as the Head Coach for the girls’ soccer team. The Director of Housing and Student Life’s interview took place in his office in Chiricahua Hall residence hall. I interviewed the Hall Director in the lobby of
Chiricahua Hall, at a table in the far corner (see Appendix B for the Professional Staff Interview Guide). The themes discussed below emerged from the data collected.

**Athletics.** Athletics plays a large role in student life at Cochise College. Out of approximately 120 students living on campus, approximately 114 of them (95%) are involved in the athletics programs on campus. Most discussions with professional staff members seemed to make the assumption that all students were athletes. Student athletes tend to be housed together by team, in an effort to match students with similar schedules together. Students were often referred to by their team affiliation such as “baseball guys,” “soccer girls,” and so forth, which is not that uncommon at many institutions where students are referred to, sometimes, stereotypically, by their major area of study, by the residence hall in which they live, or by the Greek house they belong to. Further contributing to the strong presence of athletics on campus is the fact that many coaches also serve as faculty members and the AODs in the residence halls. Professional staff members serving in these multiple roles allows them to know more about students and provides a sense of seamlessness to campus life. Faculty involvement in the residence halls seems to be somewhat of a given, although their interactions are usually related to either coaching or being the AOD, rather than actually reinforcing in class messages out of class.

**Faculty Involvement.** There is a high level of support from the academic community for residential program, even from faculty members who are not coaches and do not work in the residence halls, although they are not always present for residential or student activities. “I don’t get the resistance from faculty that I have at other institutions,”
one staff member said. He added, “I mean, they understand that there are some inherent benefits to the residence experience and I’m able to articulate or sell that to the academic community…” This support from the academic community, however, has not translated into academic success for all students. “I’m just appalled and still to this day, shocked by some of the things I read from my players,” commented one coach who also teaches and works in the residence halls. “We get a really wide range [of academic ability] because, again, the athletics drawing,” he finished. Although numerous efforts have been made to provide tutoring in the residence halls, few, if any, students have shown up to those kinds of events. Athletes are expected to maintain a certain GPA, though. At the time I was speaking with the women’s soccer coach, he commented that he had his entire team sitting in study hall at that moment due to academic concerns.

_Seamless environment._ The senior administrator for Residence Life is also responsible for Student Life and even teaches some classes on a part time basis. As with the other staff members, having involvement in multiple areas of campus life helps him know what is happening with his students in other areas of their lives. “If they’ve missed a class, they know I know about it… They know I’m going to say something about it,” he commented. He also reinforced that his comments to students weren’t meant to be intrusive, rather because he wants them to do well academically. Many of the current policies and procedures were implemented by this administrator, who was among the first residence hall administrators at Cochise to have a background in student development, complemented by experience in sports and teaching. Because he is only in his third year,
there are more changes to come, but focusing on assessing learning outcomes in the residence halls is among his highest priorities.

*Student Apathy.* The SGA and the RAs work in tandem to provide activities and events to all students on campus rather than isolating out events for “just” the residence hall students. Currently, there’s no specified model that students need to follow when planning events for the students. The Residence Life department is in the process of mapping out learning outcomes for living on campus, upon which programs can be based eventually. “The focus tends to be a lot on social programming, ‘cause those are easy sells and they tend to attract a lot of people,” one staff member said, “But I want them to sort of broaden their perspective of programming.” There was also an expression of frustration on the part of professional and student staff regarding lack of attendance at educational events. “How many times do you want to put on date-rape awareness night, and you know, nobody’s there,” one staff member said. “Wearing their cool shirts” was a phrase used to describe students who wouldn’t participate in activities, particularly student athletes.

*Different experiences.* For a smaller campus, there is a lot of diversity represented in the residence halls with fairly high numbers of African American and Native American students living on campus. The international student population is primarily made up of individuals from Mexico and South America, but there was one student from Japan and some additional students from Eastern Europe, under a special scholarship program. One interesting fact that surfaced was that there were a number of lesbians living on campus, but not gay men, at least not openly gay men. A professional level staff member
commented, “We’ve got famous female gay athletes, you know. Anybody on the male side who’s ever done that, nobody’s certainly active and nobody of real…” When asked if there were any problems with intolerance, he shared an example of a soccer player who confronted her roommate about her sexual orientation, but also said, “It took about a month and now [there’s] no further problems.”

**Student Staff Members**

I interviewed three student staff members at Cochise College. All interviews took place in the lobby of Chiricahua Hall. I met all three RAs during my first site visit in November 2007, but conducted the interviews during my second site visit in February 2008. Sarah is a 20-year-old Native American who is a second year student in the general studies program from Gallup, New Mexico. She is also a basketball player for Cochise. She hopes to transfer to Northern Arizona State University or University of Arizona to play basketball after this year. Eventually, she would like to become a doctor in sports medicine.

Ismael is an international student from La Paz, Mexico who is in his sixth year at Cochise. When he first arrived at Cochise, Ismael did not speak English at all and so enrolled in the English as Second Language program. After that, he enrolled in the aviation program. He has been an RA for four years including this year. Ismael is 24-years-old. He hopes to go back to Mexico and become a pilot after he graduates, hopefully this year.

Aaron is a 19-year-old Caucasian student from Elgin, Arizona in his second year at Cochise College. He’s studying business and hopes to transfer to University of Arizona
to continue his education. Although he is a basketball player currently, he is considering “hanging up his sneakers.” Aaron has also been accepted into Officer Candidates School for the Marines to help pay for his continued education (see Appendix C for the Student Staff Interview Guide). The following themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews.

Athletics. The student staff members also first and foremost spoke of the impact the athletics departments had on campus life, even those who were not athletes. The ebb and flow of students coming and going from the residence halls seems dependent upon athletic practice schedules rather than just class schedules. The impact of the teams’ schedules also impacts the amount of activity in the residence halls. Events are rarely, if ever, scheduled for a time when a team is away and when the teams are away, it is quieter in the common areas than when the teams are “in.” Ismael, who is not an athlete, said he felt the environment was more relaxing for them than for the athletes because “no one is going to take me out of my classes.” Sarah, who is an athlete referred to the residence halls as “cliquey” (by athletic team) and then went on to say, “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that because the way to have a strong team is to hang out with your team.”

Good experiences. Most staff members had positive things to say about living on campus. “They’re fun, I like it,” Sarah said referring to the residence halls, “You get to meet a lot of new people from all over,” she finished. Ismael made a similar comment, naming the many countries represented at Cochise, including Germany, France, Brazil, Italy, and some of the eastern European countries such as Kazakhstan. Ismael added, “It’s
not just like classes or whatever. You’re going to be there…you’re making friends from far away or making really special friends ‘cause your most special friends are going to be during college.”

*Role definition.* When defining their roles, student staff opinions were somewhat inconsistent. “I lock up the doors and fine people for being noisy,” said Aaron. Sarah focused on the “helping” part of the position. “I would say that an RA is somebody that it can be your friend, but actually like a real friend [who] will tell you what is wrong and what is bad, what is good and what is not,” he said. “We keep the peace,” said Sarah, focusing on the policy enforcement aspect of the position. “We’re just making our own little community,” she added. Each of the student staff members interviewed commented on the high levels of involvement from the professional level staff. Sarah further explained, “They attend events. They walk around. They talk to the people.” Perceived contributions to the residential experience also varied. “I think it contributes a lot,” she went on to say, “There’s some people that are not so, like, outgoing.” She also explained that by having the opportunity to attend different events in the halls, even the shy students get to know more people. Aaron said that he didn’t think living on campus (or the staff) really contributed anything to the student experience. Rather, being part of an athletic team is what defines the experience, at least for those students. “Rules are already, they’re already bound to the team rules,” he said. “People don’t care honestly about the rules themselves, but they don’t want to be kicked off the … team,” he finished. Rule enforcement is also easier when it’s a team member because of the previously established relationships.
“Wearing their cool shirts.” This was a phrase used by individuals at Cochise to describe a phenomenon where students don’t participate in activities because they think they are “too cool” to participate. Some of the events sponsored by the RAs have included Bingo night, a Super Bowl party, a barbeque at the beginning of the year, poker, and sports events such as volleyball and basketball. “We get good reports on what we do … A lot of people participate,” said Sarah, although she also acknowledged that one of the most popular events for students on campus involved going to Mexico. “There’s so many clubs in Mexico,” Ismael commented. They are also preparing activities for the upcoming college basketball March Madness. There is a pool table in the lobby of the residence hall, which is nearly always being used by students, even late in the evening. Guitar Hero and other video games also provide hours of amusement for students.

To students who complain about being bored or having nothing to do, one staff member said, “Sometimes people are like ‘Oh, that’s stupid. I don’t want to that’ …they think they’re too cool.” Aaron said, “I think people put too much on RAs and other people to create all this fun stuff. Your college experience is what you make, your life is what you make of it.” He went on to say that the same people usually attended the residence life staff sponsored events, but “we do what we can do.”

Living on the border. The close proximity of the Mexican border also influences life for students at Cochise. Sarah said, “There’s clubs right at the border so you don’t have to walk very far like the Las Cruces kids…. Here it’s just like not even half a mile to get to the first club from the border.” “It is better to go to Mexico,” said Ismael, after commenting on the lack of student friendly bars in Douglas. Aaron said that fewer
students are going to Mexico due to the newly implemented passport policy. However, prior to the implementation, students frequently did not return until three or even four in the morning on the weekends after heading out to Mexico for the evening.

*Different experiences.* Discussions with student staff did not reveal any difference in the student experience until asked about the athlete and non-athlete student experience. When I asked Aaron about the non-athlete experience, he said, “I have no idea. Don’t hang out with them, don’t see them other than, you know, there’s 20 other non-athletes in class usually…” Ismael commented, “It’s more relaxing ‘cause you don’t have, the only thing you’re doing is the studying. But since you’re an athlete, you have to study, you have to go away on games. You have to be playing. You have to practice. You have to be with your peers and stuff.” He also commented on the international diversity in the residence hall, “I feel like I know Russia even though I’ve never been there because I have Russian people in here.”

*Focus Groups*

All three of the focus groups were held in the lobby of Chiricahua Hall, the hall not being occupied by students this year. Students filled out general information forms to collect demographic data (see Appendix D for the Focus Group Interview Guide). The first focus group consisted of 13 participants, of which 5 were female and 8 were male. There were 7 students who identified as Caucasian, 1 Asian American, 2 Venezuelan, 1 Mexican, 1 Black Islander, and 1 who did not respond. A variety of majors were represented including 1 biology, 2 undecided, 1 sports medicine, 1 psychology, 5 general studies, and 1 international relations student. All students were in the 18-20 age range.
The second focus group consisted of 5 participants, of which only 1 was female and 4 were male. This group had the largest number of international students with 1 student from Tajikistan, 1 from Georgia (Russia), 1 from Kazakhstan, and one from Azerbaijan. The remaining student was from Springfield, Ohio originally, but had moved to Arizona nearly 10 years ago. She was the only Caucasian student in the group. In this group, there was 1 art student, 1 accounting, 1 economics, 1 political science, and 1 business administration. Again, all fell within the 18-19 age range, except one, who was 57 years old.

The third focus group also had 9 participants, 4 of which were female, 5 of which were male. This group had 2 students who identified as Black, 1 Lithuanian, 6 Caucasian students. There were a lot of athletes present for this focus group, which led to a higher number of undecided majors (5). Two of the students were studying in the aviation program, while one was Business/Computes. All the participants were in the 18-19 age range, except 1 who did not list an age.

*Athletics.* The assumption that “everyone” is an athlete was also prevalent throughout the focus groups from responses to questions about general student experiences. Most students when asked about things that students do in their free time, on the weekends, or on week days identified “practice” or “games” as something that “all students” are engaged in. When asked specifically about whether or not athletes and non-athletes have different experiences, one athlete said “I’m sure they do ‘cause we’re busy for five hours a day.” Students, for the most part, also agreed that social lives tend to revolve around athletics too.
“Middle of nowhere.” The size of the campus and its rural location was also discussed. “You have to drive really far to like get anywhere,” complained one student. “You can’t even go to the movies,” said another. However, living off campus never occurs to these students, not just due to the athletics scholarships, but also because “that would probably be even worse… ‘cause no one, you don’t even know anyone there. You’d probably have to come here to do things,” one student said. Some of the students said that they frequently go to a gas station located on the outskirts of Douglas to get something to eat or to get coffee. They can end up spending hours at the gas station like other students might spend time at a student center or campus coffee house.

Reconciling preconceived notions. Sports and special academic programs such as aviation seemed to drive most students’ decision to attend Cochise. Living on campus was a given due to lack of convenient options in the area. Focus group participants’ pre-arrival expectations ranged from completely unknown to wild and crazy. For the international students, many of them had never experienced anything similar to residence hall living and neither had their friends or family members. For the American students, most commented that they were looking forward to partying and having fun, although one did say he thought the halls would be “calm, real calm.” When asked if it was calm, he smiled and said, “Yeah, more than that.” One focus group participant said, “You have to have a passion for why you’re coming here. Like all of us love sports…and she’s [referring to the one international student in the group] from …thousands of miles away, so if we were just going here for school, I wouldn’t be as big of a … probably wouldn’t come back.”
Some also thought there would be more students. Students reported that they had gotten these impressions from television and movies as well as family members and friends who had come to Cochise or had heard of it. A few students had previous experiences at other institutions. A student who had previously been in Los Angeles expressed that what made Cochise more “horrible” than the school in Los Angeles was the lack of things to do, while others simply said it was “more boring.” A student from Kazakhstan commented on the initial disappointment he felt upon arrival at Cochise because of the very different the environment. Despite the surprise at the environment, he was grateful for the opportunity to meet so many different people “I have other friends who are at different colleges and universities…they do not have this opportunity to get to know more, not only U.S. culture, but also Mexican and Venezuelan…” He went on to say, “There’s always something to do,” on campus, demonstrating a more positive view than some of the others. From the comments by students, it seemed as though regardless of the disparity between what they thought campus would be like and the reality, sports and/or their academic program kept them at Cochise.

“Nothing to do.” Similar to Northampton, the complaints of “there’s nothing to do” and “it’s boring” were expressed. One student said, “It’s like high school all over again.” Other participants nodded their heads and said “yeah.” “’Cause it’s so much smaller and everybody knows everything about you,” he elaborated. Increasing the size was a recommendation for improvement. “I think they should make another dorm room and maybe get more sports teams or something,” said one student. However, international students seemed more content. While one American student commented that Cochise was
“boring compared to the regular universities,” a student from Eastern Europe said, “Maybe it depends on the campuses ‘cause I know the campus is very … cheerful.”

When talking about weekends, most students laughed and one commented “There’s, like, barely anybody here.” One basketball player said, “We usually have a game so then we usually go [out] after if [we] do go anywhere.” Some of the non-athletes in the group said that their weekend activities ranged from “sitting around doing nothing to hanging out.” They also mentioned going to Mexico. Some of the aviation classes have fly time on the weekends, too, according to some aviation students. One of the older students said she gets up early to do her homework and then she can use the internet and the computer. One of the international students commented that sometimes, when they are done with their homework and don’t want to go to Mexico, they go to the nearby town of Sierra Vista to the mall or to be with friends.

Weekday descriptions were just as brief. Most students said classes, sporting events, and practice initially. Some mentioned doing homework. “It’s busy all day,” commented one athlete. In their free time, students commented that they doing things like sleep, go to meetings, play video games, and go to Wal-Mart. Students also commented that they spend time on MySpace or just on the computer in general. When asked to talk about their weekdays, one of the international students said, “classes, classes, classes.”

Perceptions of staff: Focus group participants had mixed reactions to the programming and events provided by the residence life staff. Some didn’t even realize that they RAs helped the SGA plan and implement programs. Others said they attended some of the events planned by the residence life staff because “there’s nothing else to do
so…” Another student commented that Bingo night was fun and that she and her roommate had won a toaster. Some of the other students laughed at her recollections. The international students were more vocally appreciative of the efforts made by the staff. “It depends on the person, of course. But there is a person who creates something very interesting from nothing and the person who can take something interesting and say ‘I’m so bored’. Usually there are a lot of activities and you can have fun here.” A non-traditional student commented on entertaining herself by playing on the piano or going to the art department to work on her projects.

The focus group participants had diverse opinions of the staff’s roles and responsibilities. When asked what they see the residence life staff doing, comments ranged from “having their doors open” to “nothing.” The RA’s role in discipline was also mentioned. “You’re just having a good time hanging out with your friends or something and it gets a little late. They come over, break everything up,” commented one student. Another student commented that it depended on the night, while others mentioned that the RA’s play pool with them, sometimes. Some students voiced opinions on one particular staff member with one student summing it up, “Some people think he’s mean. I personally have no problem with him. He seems okay.”

Some students believed that the department was overstaffed leaving them time to be too “nosy.” “They like to go around and treat this place like a prison,” said another student, referring to the professional level staff. Other students said they didn’t really even notice their presence that much. “Staff are really attentive,” said one international student. “I’m not telling that because most of them are my friends. Obviously they would
not be my friends, if they were not good people.” “We always see them try to do their best,” said another international student.

Findings by Research Question

Research Question One: How does the institutional environment contribute to student experiences?

Location

Looking at the environment from a broad perspective, the campus environment plays a large role in the student experiences at both institutions. Northampton’s location, which is somewhat rural, yet close to two large cities and their suburbs, contributes to the diversity on campus. In this context, “diversity” does not just refer to the commonly considered concepts of diversity, but also in terms of academic under preparedness. Cochise’s location also impacts residential experiences at that institution. Students from a variety of backgrounds live on campus and it is not uncommon to hear Spanish being spoken throughout the halls and the lobby. The international students are very involved in campus life.

Academic Under Preparedness

Moos (1986) asserted, “the character of an environment is implicitly dependent on the typical characteristics of its members,” (p. 286). Students at both institutions come to college with varying levels of academic preparedness. At Northampton, there is an emphasis on academic success as evidenced not only by the grade point average requirement to live on campus, but also by the large number of support services available, particularly the services of the Residential Counselor. At Cochise, students do not have to
meet a grade point average requirement to live on campus, but they do have maintain a 2.0 to remain eligible to play sports, which drives many students to work harder to be academically successful. Loss of an athletic scholarship often also results in a withdrawal from the institution. Some students commented that they did not feel like they had to work very hard academically, while others struggled with math and writing especially. Cochise provides computer labs complete with printers and supplies to help provide some physical support for students, but most frequently, students appeared to make use of these computers for MySpace and other internet browsing. I did observe some students working on papers, particularly in the late afternoons before dinner.

**Affiliation with Campus**

At Northampton, there was also discussion of the sense of affiliation and belonging that residential students possess as a result of living on campus and being there all the time. Comments made by staff were reinforced by observations in other parts of campus such as the cafeteria where the residential students seemed to congregate together. They were also more boisterous than commuter students, who were typically sitting by themselves or in smaller groups near the edges of the cafeteria.

The influence of the strong athletics program can be said to contribute to the same feelings of belonging at Cochise. This influence is also felt throughout the residence halls as nearly 95% of students are involved in athletics and have athletic scholarships that help pay for their tuition and/or housing. Whereas at other institutions students might be stereotyped for their gender, their race, or other differences, here they are often stereotyped by the athletic affiliation with little regard to other differences. This idea is
reinforced by the indications that having lesbians on campus is just a part women’s athletics, but gay men remain invisible, despite several notable professional male athletes coming out in the past few years.

Although such a strong influence from the athletic program could lead to feelings of marginalization among non-athlete students, none of the non-athlete students spoken to identified these feelings. Most non-athletes felt as if life was a little easier for them because they did not have the pressures of intercollegiate sports. The basketball games attended during campus visits demonstrated that non-athlete students were involved as spectators during athletic events, cheering their fellow students to victory (in the women’s basketball team’s case) or providing support after a loss (as in the men’s basketball game attended). Students and staff members said that similar support was shown for the other sporting events, particularly the annual rodeo. At Cochise, the academic, student life, and residence life boundaries are so blurred that it is nearly impossible to separate out the individual components. As mentioned previously, professional level staff members serve in capacities other than their residence life roles so residential students see them performing various functions around campus. Paradoxically, there is almost no faculty involvement in the residence halls in terms of study sessions, classes being taught, or other academic programming.

“Nothing to Do” and Alcohol Use

Students also complained about having nothing to do, although they could frequently name many programs and activities sponsored by the residence life staff members. At Northampton, there also seemed to be no shortage of evening activities, as
students were typically talking about their evening plans including parties and clubs in nearby towns. Students talked about drinking as being one of the things they do on weekends or weekdays with Thursdays being nicknamed “Thirsty Thursday” due to the fact that there are rarely any classes on Fridays. At Cochise, the proximity of campus to the Mexico-United States border contributes to this issue, as the drinking age is lower in Mexico. Prior to the implementation of the new passport laws, students frequently crossed the border to go to clubs and bars, whereas it is a little more difficult now.

At Northampton, when alcohol was discussed, there was a spirited discussion among students about policies and policy enforcement, which seemed to be a topic stressed by professional level staff members as well. Students complained about the restrictive nature of the many of the policies including visitation, even after identifying non-resident students as the source of many issues in the residence halls. Students at Cochise did not talk about enforcement of policies as frequently.

Research Question Two: How do students living in residence halls at community colleges describe their residential experiences?

Positive Perspectives

Student staff members had the most positive perspective of living on campus than did other residents who were interviewed. All of the student staff interviewed could talk about things they had gained as a result of living on campus, whether it was help academically or personal growth and development. They also talked about their experiences initially transitioning to college in terms of learning to live with roommates, being away from home for the first time and other first year college student issues.
Students in various focus groups at both institutions also spoke highly the diversity on campus and getting to know new people. This was especially true of the international students at Cochise College.

*Drama*

The small size of the residential community contributes to a phenomenon Northampton residential students call “drama” where students get unnecessarily involved in the business of other students. Frequent comments were made about how quickly “news “travels in the residence halls and how what other students are doing or have done is a frequently topic of conversation, often leading to disagreements between students, even among students who do not live on campus. Although it was the students at Northampton who called this phenomenon “drama,” life in the residence halls at Cochise can apparently be just as “dramatic.” Students frequently cited the small environment as an issue because students knew everything about each other, frequently causing disagreements.

*“It’s Boring”*

As stated earlier, the student perception seemed to be initially that it was boring and that there was nothing to do. Most students, though, upon further discussion, admitted that living on campus was not all bad, but they had some complaints about some of the physical attributes of the building, perceived strictness of policies, and variations in staff personalities. Students laughed and talked about different social events that had taken place, but many seemed unaware that there were also educational programs taking place. Only one student mentioned study sessions, while more than a few made mention
of the Success Series programming. So, while students complain of there being “nothing to do,” what they may really be saying is “We don’t want to do the things being offered.”

As in the case of Northampton, Cochise students complained about having nothing to do and being bored regardless of the numerous events hosted by the SGA and the residence life staff. In fact, students seemed to ignore the differences between the two groups, adding to the seamlessness of the campus environment. Some students think that the addition of more athletics teams would help increase enrollment and therefore they would have more students to interact with. They also feel that another residence hall would encourage more students to live on campus, although Cochise currently has one residence hall that is nearly empty because of declining occupancy. Descriptions of typical weekend and weekday events were also similar with video games, hanging out with friends, and visiting nearby towns to go shopping as commonly mentioned activities. Of course, going to Mexico was always an option for students at Cochise, too, while students at Northampton could get away to New York, Philadelphia or other locations providing more “excitement” than Bethlehem. International students seemed to have more positive views of living on campus, particularly at Cochise.

**Athletics (Cochise College only)**

Again, the influence of the athletics department was expressed both by student staff and participants in the focus groups. When asked about what students do in their free time, responses such as practice, go to away games, and work out were common. Students who were in other programs felt as though they had more free time and commented about how they supported the athletic teams, but more than one expressed
relief at not having such busy days. Most students seemed to accept the differences in lifestyle between student athletes and non-student athletes without feelings of inferiority on either side. One athlete mentioned that he felt he got special treatment from time to time because of his basketball abilities, while the non-athlete students I interviewed seemed not to notice any difference in treatment.

*Preconceived Notions of Living On Campus*

Friends, family members, movies and television played a major role in forming what students thought living on campus would be like. Students in focus groups at both institutions came with similar perspectives of what they expected out of residential living. Movies such as “Animal House” and “National Lampoon’s Van Wilder” created dreams of parties, constant activity and socializing in the students’ minds. Only one student at Northampton stated that he thought he’d be able to focus on his classes more than he was able to. Some had previous experiences at other, larger, institutions. For the international students, living on campus was a completely foreign concept. Some, in fact, were under the assumption that they would be living with host families until they reached the United States for their orientation. With many students being first generation college students, even their parents weren’t able to provide much guidance in terms of what to expect from living on campus.

*The Reality*

Most students agreed that the first semester was closer to meeting their expectations, but as time passed and they adjusted to college life, it seemed less new and exciting for them. The residential environment was also cited as having too many
distractions that, in reality, could be controlled by the students themselves. Living off campus was barely a thought to the students at these two institutions. At Northampton, there is a lack of affordable housing options in the area and at Cochise, there simply are not off campus housing options near the campus. Students at Northampton frequently cited a desire to get away from home while attending college as one of the reasons they chose to live on campus instead of commuting from home, while students at Cochise were drawn to the college for their athletic or specialized academic programs, such as the aviation program.

Research Question Three: What events have helped shape these students’ residential experiences?

Residence Hall/Campus Programming

While students may complain that there is nothing to do, the residence life staff members at both institutions could readily name numerous opportunities for students to get involved in campus and/or the residential life that students simply do not take advantage of. The frustration of planning events or trying to organize the Residence Hall Council was frequently discussed with both professional and student staff members, but students seemed oblivious to some of the efforts, particularly the educational efforts. Even luring students to attend the focus groups was somewhat challenging, despite the fact that pizza was being offered as an incentive. Programming at Cochise has shifted to an almost exclusively social programming model, but the Director of Residence Life is reviewing a variety of methods of moving the focus of programming back to more educational topics. There are also other activities happening on these campuses as
evidenced by the many fliers around the campuses and advertisements on the websites. Some students said that they attend the social programs because “it’s something to do,” but others shrugged off these efforts, likely a demonstration of the “too cool” phenomenon brought up by one staff member at Cochise.

Faculty Involvement

Another interesting aspect was that faculty members do not seem to be involved in the residence halls at all, regardless of the very open lines of communication between residence hall personnel and faculty members. Students did not comment on their absence, but professional staff expressed a goal of involving more faculty members in programs and activities in the future. The Residential Counselor shared one example of a faculty member who came to the hall several years ago to help some students who had asked him to attend, but said that students rarely show this level of initiative so it is hard to convince faculty members to come to the halls.

Free Time

Students seem to have adequate free time and spend it in ways typical of college students. Favorite activities included sleeping, playing video games, spending time with friends, and going out. Some students talked about doing their homework, being involved in other clubs and activities, and attending athletic events, particularly basketball games. At Northampton, when the Spartan’s Den opens in the evenings, the lines are frequently out the door and down the hallway. Some students stayed in the snack bar to watch television while others went back to their rooms or stayed in the lobby talking the CA or Mentor on duty.
Students at Cochise spend a lot of time hanging out in groups in the lobby of the residence hall where they can play board games, billiards, and foosball. They also watch television and spend time on the computers. Members of the baseball team have a poker group that meets more than once a week to play poker together. When the sports teams are playing at home, most students can be found cheering on their friends and hall mates, but some do remain at the residence halls, taking advantage of the opportunity to play pool or use the computers.

*Research Question Four: How do residence life staff members’ perspectives and practices relate to the living and learning environment of residential students?*

*Student Apathy*

One of the most common ideas expressed by staff was the level of frustration over the lack of student involvement. Student staff in particular could readily name efforts they make to reach students whether it was helping them adjust to college life, providing activities, or assisting them with their classes. This creates an interesting “gap” between the efforts made on the part of the staff and the perceptions students have. Student staff members have a very positive perspective of living on campus and make an effort to talk with students and create a sense of community within the residence halls, but students still primarily highlight the policy enforcement role. Many of the student staff members could also share a “success story” about how they had helped one particular student, but it seemed as though they were somewhat disappointed in students’ overall lack of involvement.

*Staff Roles*
Role definition on the part of the student staff may be a cause for concern as some view it as a primarily “helping” role, while others view it as an “enforcement” role. The professional level staff members seem to be involved in the community, to the point where some students felt as if it was intrusive, despite efforts on the part of the professional staff to help students rather than lecture them.

At Northampton, the services provided by the Residential Counselor seemed most influential for students. Many students discussed what they had learned from those interactions and shared examples of how their grades had been positively affected by changes made to their study habits. Although students receiving less than a 2.0 are considered to be “on probation” and required to meet with the Residential Counselor, most students did not express the opinion that meeting with him was “punishment” even though the meetings are required and they are at risk to lose their positions in the residence halls.

Disciplinary interactions were also discussed. While professional and student staff members discussed the importance of policy enforcement to help keep the residential environment conducive to academic success, students felt as though their freedoms were being curtailed. The judicial system has fines involved in addition to appropriate educational sanctions. At Cochise, one staff member expressed opinion that it was not loyalty or respect for the residence halls or its staff that students obeyed the rules, but rather because of their team rules, again focusing on the student athletes.

*Seamless Environment*
The seamlessness of the campus environment at Cochise is partially due to the organization of the department. With so many professional staff members acting as faculty members, coaches, and AODs, students have access to numerous academic resources, although it seems as though they choose not to utilize them in this manner very often. Efforts to incorporate academics into the residence halls have not been met with success, especially in terms of student attendance. One way of getting around the attendance issue and providing academic assistance for at least some students is the mandatory study tables required by some coaches when their teams’ academics are suffering.

*Research Question Five: How do the experiences of students vary based on membership in subpopulations within the student body (race, gender, athletes, non-athletes, etc.)*

When different subpopulations in terms of students were discussed, most of the interviewees and students discussed the racial and ethnic differences within the residence halls, especially at Northampton. Minority students, however, did not express any discomfort on campus or in the residence halls on either campus. Only one person provided a real example of a dispute based on race at Northampton, but there may be other things occurring that are not reported. Racial and ethnic diversity seem to be embedded in the culture of the residence halls at Cochise, so little discussion came about when asking about the experiences of different groups of students. Arizona is a very diverse state and Cochise’s border location invites many Mexican citizens to take classes on the campus. Spanish is spoken in many areas of campus so much that after a while it becomes unnoticed. The athletics department brings in students from many states from a
variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, but with the bonding that takes place among team members, there was no mention made of racial issues within the residence halls.

There appeared to be no issues between men and women on either campus. In fact, at least between student athletes at Cochise, there was a great deal of respect for the opposite gender and equal support was shown for the women and men’s sports teams. Both women and men seemed equally comfortable contributing to the discussions in the focus groups at both institutions. Female staff members did not express any more difficulty with their policy enforcement role than their male peers, either.

At Cochise, international students in the focus groups seemed to be more positive, in general about their residential experiences commenting that the staff was helpful and they enjoyed living on campus. When walking through the buildings, it was not uncommon to see students from all different backgrounds in small groups together playing billiards, talking, or walking to and from campus together. It did appear as if sports teams were more likely to spend time together socially.

One aspect of diversity somewhat “missing” from discussions at both campuses was that of homosexual students. Male homosexual students would likely be the most invisible population at Cochise as no mention was made of their experiences at all. There is a student organization on campus for homosexual students and their allies at Northampton, but it was not evident in the residence halls.

Summary of Findings

As can be seen from the previous discussion, professional level staff members, student staff members, and students provide very different perspectives about the
experiences of students living on campus. All of these perspectives, thoughts, and opinions come together and contribute to the experiences of students living on campus at each of these institutions.

In Chapter Five, these cases will be discussed, compared, and contrasted in more detail. Recommendations for practice and recommendations for future research will also be provided.
CHAPTER FIVE

Summary of Research Questions and Procedures

This study was intended to contribute to the research about community colleges by exploring the experiences of students living on campus at community colleges. More community colleges are considering building residence halls to attract students to their campuses and provide the “complete collegiate experience.” I used a qualitative methodology to examine this issue, employing observation, interviews, and focus groups, with students, administrators, and the residence hall staff involved in the residence halls.

The following research questions were explored:

1. How does the institutional environment contribute to student experiences?
2. How do students living in residence halls at community colleges describe their residential experiences?
3. What events have helped shape these students’ residential experiences?
4. How do residence life staff members’ perspectives and practices relate to the living and learning environment of residential students?
5. Do the experiences of students vary based on membership in subpopulations within the student body (race, gender, athletes, non-athletes, etc.)

During two visits to each site, I interviewed professional level staff members, student staff members, and conducted three focus groups. I also spent significant periods of time in the common areas of the residence halls observing interactions among professional level staff, student staff, and students.
Cross-Case Analysis by Research Question

*Question 1: How does the institutional environment contribute to student experiences?*

There were several themes identified from the data collected at both institutions. Academic underpreparedness of students is an issue that both colleges face and it influences many of their interactions with students. At Northampton, the 2.0 grade point average requirement to live on campus calls attention to residential students’ academic performance whereas at Cochise, the requirements to remain on the athletics teams does the same. Despite the academic performance issues of students, there were comments from professional level staff at both institutions about the high levels of support from and interaction with their academic colleagues.

From students, there were the frequent comments about having “nothing to do” often contributed to the locations of the campuses in small towns. However, when students were asked about living off campus, it was clearly an option they had never considered. The positive aspects of living on campus appear to far outweigh any negative aspects of residential living.

Geographic location clearly has an influence on both of these institutions. Being located within 30 minutes of the United States-Mexico border plays a role in the lives of students living on campus at Cochise whereas the close proximity to larger cities such as New York City and Philadelphia influences student life at Northampton. Students at Northampton frequently discuss going to clubs and going out to party, while students at Cochise merely slip across the border to find clubs where they can legally be served alcohol due to the lower drinking age.
At Northampton, there was discussion among all professional staff members interviewed about the levels of affiliation residential students feel. These comments were supported by observations in common areas of the campus such as the cafeteria. Although no specific comments were made about this topic at Cochise, it seemed to be echoed in the behaviors of residential students. The strong athletics program also contributes to feelings of affiliation with the campus. The significantly smaller size of the Cochise campus also likely influences these feelings.

Policy and policy enforcement seemed to contribute to the perceptions of the environment at Northampton more so than at Cochise. Discussions of discipline and policies were more prevalent among professional and student staff members. Students at Northampton also brought up policies and the perceived restrictive nature of the residence halls more frequently than students at Cochise.

Question 2: How do students living in residence halls at community colleges describe their residential experiences?

Student descriptions of their experiences living on campus at these two community colleges were more similar than different. Student staff at both institutions had very positive perspectives of living on campus, for the most part. Staff members at both places specifically mentioned the ability to meet students from a variety of places, particularly international students, as one of the things they loved about living on campus. A consistent comment from students at both institutions pertained to the small size of the community within the residence halls and the propensity for students to know everything about one another. Students at Northampton described this phenomenon as
“drama” meaning students getting involved in the lives of other students unnecessarily. Drama is often a source of disagreements between students, particularly at Northampton.

Descriptions of the weekends and weekdays were also very similar, except the influence of the athletics programs at Cochise. Many students seem to leave these campuses on the weekends and there are few activities on the weekends, unless there is an athletic event, which influences students’ decision to remain on campus, particularly at Cochise. Students at Cochise felt that the addition of another sports team would bring more students to living on campus at Cochise and would make the environment a little better.

Alcohol abuse is an issue prevalent on many four-year college campuses (www.collegedrugabuse.com). These two year colleges seem to also have those issues. Students at Northampton simply go to the clubs available within a relatively close proximity, while students at Cochise cross the border to Mexico to have access to alcohol. New passport laws are discouraging some students from crossing the border, but students at Cochise frequently mentioned to me in informal conversations that they had already applied for their passports.

Student notions of what living on campus would be like seemed to be predominantly influenced by friends, family members, and movies or television. Students did not mention the literature produced by the college and most said they found out about living on campus from the websites, from their tours, or, at Cochise, from their coaches.

When asked what they thought it would be like, students frequently laughed and said they thought it would be fun, exciting, and cited “parties” as one of the main
attractions. Students initially said they were somewhat disappointed that the reality did not match their expectations. However, with further discussion, students seemed to be more willing to admit that living on campus was “OK” and that they were fairly content. Descriptions such as “boring” and “nothing to do” were common at both institutions as mentioned previously, but students could readily name off events hosted by the staff in their residence halls and some students even indicated that they attend these events. No mention of the influence of academics in the residence halls was made by any student, except a student at Northampton who commented that he thought he’d be able to focus on his work, but there seemed to be many distractions for him in the residence halls.

Question 3: What events have helped shape these students’ residential experiences?

As stated previously, a popular complaint from students is that there is nothing to do and they are bored. However, both residential programs require a certain level of programming from their student staff members. Lack of attendance at educational programs is a frustration expressed by both professional and student staff members at these colleges. Another interesting similarity between the two residential programs is that despite the open communication and good relationships with faculty members, there are rarely faculty members involved in the residential programming efforts.

Cochise College focuses on social programming, although it is the intention of the professional staff to keep trying to find different ways of providing educational programming for the students. Cochise College also has an active Student Government Association (SGA) that assists in providing activities for students to attend. Events at Cochise are open to all students on campus, whereas at Northampton, programs are
focused for the residential population. Also at Northampton, they offer more educational programming and are currently using food as an incentive for residents to attend. They are considering whether or not to continue that practice, but are understandably concerned by the impact that may have on attendance. The services of the Residential Counselor were particularly influential on students at Northampton from the informal conversations, as well as the story from the staff member who had been involved in the intervention program during his early days at college.

Students at both institutions cited video games, sleeping, and hanging out as common activities during their free time. Students mentioned doing homework, as well, although students at Cochise commented that there was not very much homework assigned. Students at Cochise were commonly found spending time in the lobby of the residence hall in the evenings, either playing board games, billiards, or on the computers provided in the labs. At Northampton, the MPR was usually not in use during the day or early in the evening, but later in the evenings, students could be found playing video games or talking in smaller groups. The lobby of the residence hall was also a popular place to hang out, particularly while the CA or Mentor was on desk duty or during the Spartan’s Den hours.

*Question 4: How do residence life staff members’ perspectives and practices relate to the living and learning environment of residential students?*

A common issue related to residence life staff members’ practices and the experiences of residential students is the gap between the services and efforts made by staff members, particularly student staff members, and the perceptions from students.
Residence life staff members can provide lists of interactions and opportunities for students while students respond that they don’t think the staff does anything for them, except enforce policies. Student staff members describe the efforts made to design programs that are fun, yet educational, and while students can readily name events such as this that take place in the residence halls, they still complain of “nothing to do”.

At Northampton, there are more concrete efforts to reinforce academic messages in the residence halls through the efforts of the Residential Counselor, the Success Series, and other study related activities. At Cochise, academic affairs, student life and residence life are blended across campus so that it can be difficult to determine where one ends and the other begins, likely due to its smaller campus. With a larger commuter population at Northampton, this seamlessness is impossible to achieve. Disciplinary interactions at both institutions are related to the “educational moment” rather than being purely punitive. Both institutions have a fining system in place as part of their judicial systems.

**Question 5: How do the experiences of students vary based on membership in student subpopulations (race, gender, athletes, non-athletes, etc.)**

Diversity on these two campuses means very different things. At Northampton, the racial diversity among the students living on campus was very noticeable in the residence halls. Even the responses on the focus group participant information forms revealed greater diversity within the building than obtained from the school’s mainframe system. Students who were not Caucasian/Non-Hispanic provided a more specific picture of the cultural diversity in the residence halls. However, no one identified any specific racial issues on campus. There were isolated incidents discussed, but overall, students
from minority groups described their experiences on campus as comfortable. The geographic location of the campus as well as the diverse hometowns of the student population probably contributes to the comfortable climate on campus. Women and men seemed equally comfortable expressing opinions and thoughts in the focus groups as well as in informal conversations. Although women were “blamed” for most of the drama in residence halls, the women in the focus groups were quick to defend themselves and provide examples of men being involved in those same situations. No mention was made about homosexual students, which may mean that there are not many “out” students on campus or in the residence halls. I did not hear derogatory comments made about homosexual students at any point.

For students at Cochise, there is so much racial/ethnic diversity on campus, likely due to its location in Arizona, near the border, that these issues were never brought up. International students were very popular on this campus and frequently found at the center of discussions and activities in the lobby of the residence hall. With the very small population in the residence halls, the international students seemed to stand out as being very positive and very involved in campus life.

There was a brief discussion of the stereotype related to a large percentage of the female athletics being lesbians. If there are any gay men on this campus, they remain fairly invisible. Similar to Northampton, I didn’t witness any derogatory comments made about homosexual students.

The biggest source of “differences” found on campus at Cochise was that of athletes versus the non-athletes. In discussions with students and staff, comments were
often made as if all students on campus were athletes, when there is a small pocket of non-athlete students. When asked about their experiences, the non-athletes commented that their experiences are less stressful because they do not have the same time constraints as the athletes and their positions in their classes are secure, whereas athletes can lose their positions on the teams if their grades are not high enough or if they misbehave. Athletes felt that they received some perks from their status as athletes, but non-athletes never mentioned that they felt discriminated against or like the athletes were the beneficiaries of undeserved privileges.

Despite the fact that no direct signs of oppression of individuals based on their gender, race, sexual orientation or membership in different student subpopulations were observed or discussed, students may or may not have negative experiences during their enrollment at these two institutions for these reasons.

Discussion

Providing a residential experience at community colleges has the potential to provide many of the same benefits for students as residential experiences at four year institutions (Astin, 1985; Berger, 1997; Christie & Dinham, 1991). Students in these two residential programs appear to have very similar experiences, despite the different geographic locations of the campuses. These two residential programs have different foci for their programs at this time, likely due to the different lengths of time their senior administrators have been responsible for the department. At Northampton, the Director of Residence Life has been the same for a longer period of time than at Cochise. Both spoke of their plans for the future, which include increased efforts to integrate students’
academic and residential experiences. Finding a way to entice students to participate in these kinds of events is on the forefront of these discussions.

The academic under preparedness of students is an issue faced by many community colleges as approximately 40% of first time community college students take at least one remedial class (Cohen & Brawer, 2003) and it influences residential living as well. Northampton has chosen to place an emphasis on grade point averages as a requirement to live on campus as there is almost always a waiting list for housing (J. Howey, personal communication, November 7, 2007) whereas Cochise College only has approximately 100 students currently living on campus and has no grade point average requirement for living on campus. However, since 95% of the students living on campus are athletes and there is a grade point average to remain active in athletics, there is still incentive for residential students to maintain a high grade point average.

Student staff members share similar experiences and frustrations, as well. In both cases, student staff members discuss their positive experiences living on campus and comment on the services they believe they provide for students. They also express the same frustration with lack of attendance at events and believe that they work hard to work with the students under their supervision. All professional level staff involved commented on the dedication of the student staff members and expressed appreciation for all that they do to influence the lives of the residential students positively.

Students expressed dissatisfaction with the physical attributes of the rooms and the common restrooms (at Northampton). They also complained of boredom and lack of things to do, while being able to identify events taking place on campus and in the
residence halls that were designed for them. Further conversations revealed that, in a broad sense, students were satisfied living on campus, although they may express a dislike for certain policies, staff members, or other individual items, and rarely, if ever, consider living off campus.

As more students enroll in community colleges (Education Commission of the States, 2004), administrators need to consider the possibilities of providing residence halls for students. Providing residence halls may give students the opportunity to have a more traditional college experience, provide exposure to a diversity of peers, and the implementation of residential learning communities could provide further academic support to a population that clearly needs assistance in this area. Each community college considering providing on campus housing need to do a thorough assessment of their campus environment and its needs before embarking on such an undertaking.

Recommendations for Practice

Community colleges could benefit from the presence of residence halls. The recommendations for practice by Baker (2006) are also still relevant today, based on these two institutions. Based on the data gathered from these two community colleges, some suggestions for practice are included below. The suggestions should be taken with caution as they are based on site visits of a relatively short period of time at two community colleges. Obviously, an assessment of individual campus needs and environment would predicate any adaptation of these suggestions.

The benefits of residential learning communities are well documented. Similar programs may serve the same purposes on community college campuses. Retention is
known to be an even bigger challenge at community colleges than on four year campuses. Pike (1997) found that students participating in residential learning communities reported more positive college experiences and increased involvement on campus, which we know from Astin (1985) is a major contributor to student retention. The study regarding the positive impact participation in a Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs) has on retention highlights another type of residential learning community that could be implemented at community colleges. Pascarella and Terenzini’s (2005) review of the literature regarding living learning community outcomes revealed benefits such as the creation of a supportive peer group, further involvement in the classroom, and the integration of students’ academic and social lives that could be instrumental in changing the climate in the residence halls from one of distractions to one of support for students struggling academically. In fact, programs such as these may be even more appropriate at community colleges where the open enrollment policy often results in a higher presence of academically under prepared students, such as were seen at Northampton and Cochise.

Even small efforts to incorporate the academic mission into the residence halls, such as what is happening at Northampton can be useful (Stassen, 2003). Both students and staff members at Northampton commented on the positive influence the Residential Counselor was having in the residence hall environment and with individual students. Hiring an individual such as this would clearly be an asset to any residential program.

Residential programs at two year colleges should initiate discussions with their academic colleagues as to how to best provide these experiences. A wide diversity of models are available to use as a guide. These efforts should begin with an assessment
such as the Assessment for Living and Learning (ALL) referenced in Murrell and Denzine (1998). One of the challenges for the implementation of such programs may be the reliance on part time faculty prevalent at community colleges (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Individual institutions will need to best decide how to overcome this challenge in a way that works for their institution’s environment and budget.

The difference between students’ expectations and experiences living on campus may be a cause for some dissatisfaction with living on campus. It is not surprising that community college students are unsure of what to expect from living on campus with 45% of community college students nationally being first generation college students (Education Commission of the States, 2004). Even their parents are unable to provide a realistic picture of residential living. Some institutions provide an overnight visitation experience as part of the college shopping process. Participation in such a program may help some students gain a more realistic view of living on campus and provide greater satisfaction with the residential experience. Caution should be taken when selecting students to serve as hosts to ensure the safety of prospective students as well as the kinds of experiences the student is likely to engage in.

Educating students as to the many expectations of the student staff may assist in closing the gap between what student staff members believe they provide for students versus the perceptions students have of student staff members. As one student staff member discussed, residents seem to expect the staff to provide social and educational outlets for students, without taking initiative themselves. Providing some level of education to what is expected of student staff members, as well as what is expected from
students may lead to greater levels of student involvement or at least an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the student staff.

Although professional and student staff members often express frustration with the lack of student involvement in the residence halls, a greater understanding of college life from a student’s perspective may be helpful. In her book, *My Freshman Year*, Rebekah Nathan (2005), an anthropology professor, details her experiences re-enrolling as a freshman student at a university and living life as a first year college student might. She describes the choices students are forced to make every day in terms of which courses will get the most attention, which activities warrant participation, and how to best manage their college experience. One of the lessons learned by Nathan was that when students turn in a paper late or otherwise appear to be disengaged in her class, “as hard as it may be to realize sometimes, it is really not personal” (p. 145). The same lesson can be applied in the residence halls. Students have a lot of demands on their time. Nationally, almost 85% of community college students are employed in addition to pursuing their degrees (Education Commission of the States, 2004). Even considering the fact that most residential students are full time students, they are likely among the 30.4% of community college students (Education Commission of the States, 2004) who hold a part time job to help finance their education. After making time for their academics and their employment, students may elect to spend what free time they have with their friends, engaged in social pursuits or spending time furthering personal interests rather than becoming heavily involved in activities in the residence halls. This is not to say that staff members should give up on those efforts, but rather keep extending the help and
opportunities to those who choose to participate. Success of a program or activity should not be measured by the number of participants, but rather by the quality of the experience. Having an understanding of students’ interests, schedules, and outside activities will also help administrators, professional staff, and student staff to plan events that are relevant to their students and that work within their students’ schedules. Ongoing assessments can assist in this area.

Finally, this study also serves as a reminder to individuals supervising and working with residential programs that even the most well planned and intended initiatives to foster student success may not always result in greater student success. Given the fact that student demographics, particularly at community colleges, are rapidly changing (Education Commission of the States, 2004), administrators and other residence hall staff should make special efforts to keep a hand on the pulse of student life. Engaging in frequent discussions with students, such as those in the focus groups, is a necessary part of the ongoing assessment efforts mentioned earlier.

Recommendations for Future Research

Because community colleges receive little attention in research (Cohen & Brawer, 2003), opportunities for future research exist in nearly every dimension of the community college. It is important that community college practitioners conduct research in order to respond to the increasing calls for accountability within higher education. Similar to the initiative to measure learning outcomes described by the Director of Residence Life at Cochise College, all community colleges that provide housing need to assess learning outcomes in the residence halls to demonstrate their contributions to the college
experience. Some other topics for future research that emerged as a result of this study are discussed below.

The role of athletic programs at community colleges, as well as its influence on the student experience should be examined. No scholarly research on this topic could be located in the Ohio Link Electronic Journal Center or Ohio University’s library catalog (ALICE). There was an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in July of 2007 reporting on the use of athletics to increase enrollment at some community colleges. At least one of the athletes spoken with at Cochise expressed a desire to transfer to a four year institution and to keep playing sports. Are these students successful in these efforts? Do they go on to become professional athletes? Are they able to play at a four year institution? Do they graduate from a four year institution?

Both institutions studied were proud of their international student enrollments. International students at Cochise spoke repeatedly of their positive experiences in the residence halls and at the college. This topic warrants further exploration, perhaps with some comparisons with experiences at four-year institutions.

The number and scope of residential programs operating at community colleges, similar to the Summers and Budig (1988) study, provides a rich area for additional research as well. In my search for suitable campuses to study, it became clear that there are some community colleges for which housing is simply a convenience for students and not an educational tool, while at others, such as these two, conscious efforts are being made to provide a more educationally diverse college experience for their students.
Studies similar to those performed at four year institutions investigating the impacts of living on campus on students as compared with those who commute from home and those who choose to live off campus may also provide insight into the experiences of students living on campus. Additionally, if there are any community college with classroom based learning communities, perhaps a residential component could be piloted and the results compared to those of residential learning communities at four year institutions. Results of such studies may help a community college determine whether investing in residence halls will produce the desired results for their campus.

The differences between these two campuses suggest that there are substantial differences based on institution location, mission and history, staff roles and responsibilities, cocurricular offerings and student background characteristics. Additional studies can illustrate even more variety and can serve to highlight the different configurations of residential programs at community colleges, including institutions that can serve as models to institutions considering the additional of residence halls.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

The following research study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Ohio University for the period listed below. This review was conducted through an expedited review procedure as defined in the federal regulations as Category(ies):

Project Title: Student Experiences in Residential Programs at Community Colleges: A Multiple Case Study

Researcher(s): Lisa Smith

Faculty Advisor (if applicable): Peter Mather

Department: Higher Education

Rebecca Cale
Institutional Review Board

Approval Date: 10/19/07
Expiration Date: 10/18/08

This approval is valid until expiration date listed above. If you wish to continue beyond expiration date, you must submit a periodic review application and obtain approval prior to continuation.

Adverse events must be reported to the IRB promptly, within 5 working days of the occurrence.

The approval remains in effect provided the study is conducted exactly as described in your application for review. Any additions or modifications to the project must be approved by the IRB (as an amendment) prior to implementation.
APPENDIX B: PROFESSIONAL STAFF MEMBER INTERVIEW GUIDE

Individual Interview with Director of Residence Life

- Please share a little bit about your background and how you came to be in your current position?
- What are some of the things about your program that you are particularly proud of?
- What are some of the ways your department tries to imbed the mission and philosophy of the department into the day to day life of your residents?
- What are some of the tasks completed by the staff (at any level) that shape the experiences of students living on campus?
- What is the level of involvement from faculty members and/or other administrators?
- What impact does their involvement (or lack thereof) have on students?
- How do you assess the impact of living on campus on students? What have the results been?
- What would you say is the most significant impact living on campus has on your students?
- What are some of the things you’d like to do with your program that you’ve been unable to do thus far?
- What are some of the greatest challenges you’ve faced professionally and how have you overcome those challenges?
Individual Interview with Live-in Professional Staff Member

- Please share a little bit about your background and how to you came to be in your current position?
- What are some of the ways your department tries to imbed the mission and philosophy of the department into the day to day life of your residents?
- What are some of the things you do every day that impact the experiences of students’ living on campus?
- What is the level of involvement from faculty members and/or other administrators?
- What impact does their involvement (or lack thereof) have on students?
- What would you say is the most significant impact living on campus has on your students?
APPENDIX C: STUDENT STAFF INTERVIEW GUIDE

- How would you describe your experiences living on campus so far?
- What made you decide to become a Resident Assistant?
- How would you explain to your parents or first year students what you do as a Resident Assistant?
- In what ways does your position contribute to the experiences of students living on campus?
- What, if anything, do you think students gain from living on campus?
- Please share some ways, if there are any, that faculty members and/or other administrators have been involved in the residence halls.
- How would you describe a typical weekend? A typical weekday?
- How has being a Resident Assistant contributed to your experiences living on campus?
- What, if anything, would you do differently as a Resident Assistant to contribute to the experiences of students living on campus?
APPENDIX D: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE

- What made you decide to attend **name of institution**?
- How would you describe your residential experience so far?
- What made you decide to live on campus?
- How did you find out about living on campus at **name of institution**?
- What were your impressions of living on campus prior to your arrival?
- What influenced these impressions?
- What parts of living on campus have been particularly challenging for you?
- What parts of living on campus have you enjoyed the most?
- What does a typical weekend look like? A typical weekday?
- What things do you see your RA doing? What about the hall director?
- How do these things contribute to your experiences?
- Are there particular people that have had an impact on your experiences? How have they made an impact on your experiences?