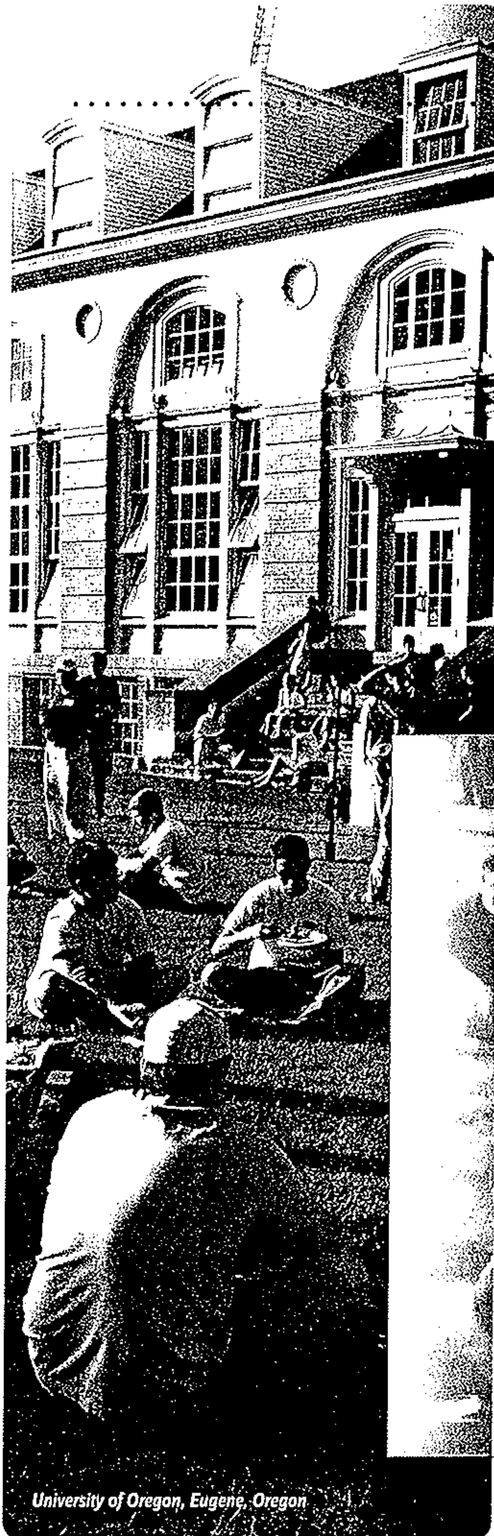
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INTRODUCTION

Innovative Directions for Living-Learning Program Research and Practice

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INNOVATIVE AND "FASHIONABLE" programs such as learning communities are not always viewed critically by administrators and may even be considered panaceas for longstanding problems. They may be implemented with the assumption that the benefits will inevitably accrue. Indeed, support for the concept of learning communities may be so strong that there is no evaluative burden of proof at all to show that it has a positive impact. (Jones, Laufgraben, & Morris, 2006, p. 263)

Although the above quotation concerns learning communities writ large, the same can be said about their conceptual cousin, the residential learning community, or living-learning program. Living-learning programs appear to embody everything higher education pundits advocate: They intentionally create small and intimate communities of membership; at their most optimal, they unite curricular, cocurricular, residential, and informal peer networks to augment student learning and development; and they often represent a partnership for learning between academic and student affairs units on college campuses. However, living-learning programs come in all shapes and sizes. Indeed, perhaps the only aspect all living-learning programs across the nation share is that they are primarily housed in residence halls. Otherwise, they vary in size, structure, mission, staffing, theme, funding, academic rigor, and a host of other facets.

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The variation in living-learning programs is partly explained by their popularity as an educational intervention on U.S. college campuses. The online Residential Learning Communities International Registry (*http://pcc.bgsu.edu/rlcch/*) includes more than 200 submissions, and the 2007 National Study of Living-Learning Programs assessed more than 600 programs. Thus, it's no surprise, with hundreds of programs around the country, that living-learning programs take many forms.

Yet, while the number of living-learning programs continues to grow, the assessment and evaluation of these programs have not kept pace. To be sure, living-learning program research is evolving, but it is still very much in its formative years. Even the nation's

first multi-institutional study of living-learning programs, the National Study of Living-Learning Programs (NSLLP), has only drawn preliminary connections in published research between living-learning participation and the transition to college, self-reports of student learning and cognitive development, a sense of civic engagement, and a sense of belonging to the college community (Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007; Inkelas et al., 2006; Longerbeam, Inkelas, & Brower, 2007; Rowan-Kenyon, Soldner, & Inkelas, 2007). However, the popularity of living-learning programs, the significant fiscal and labor resources that college campuses have put into this intervention, and the lofty goals living-learning programs are called upon to fulfill (including no less than the improvement of the quality of American undergraduate education) demand much more.

With this special issue, we begin a new conversation by focusing on four critical questions regarding living-learning programs. I hope these questions will stimulate practitioners and scholars to engage in a dialogue about living-learning programs and the issues we must address to ensure the programs' effectiveness for the future.

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Matthew Soldner and Katalin Szelényi ask the first simple, yet profound question: What is a living-learning program? This question may appear straightforward, but is it? When one conjures an image of the prototypical living-learning program, what features does it have? Are there certain characteristics that must be present in order for a program to be able to call itself a "living-learning" program? Soldner and Szelényi analyze the structural and organizational features of more than 600 living-learning programs that participated in the 2007 NSLLP, and the results, I believe, will surprise some readers. The authors found a wide variation in the composition of today's living-learning programs, and indeed, no distinct portrait of a living-learning program emerged. So, the article finishes where it began: What is a living-learning program? But, perhaps more importantly, it asks: Are the great differences in programs found across the country something to be concerned about, or something to celebrate?

One problem with the wide variation in living-learning programs is the inability to assess programs with both breadth and depth. The NSLLP, in an attempt to create an omnibus assessment tool that is appropriate for the broad range of living-learning programs in existence, can only examine basic patterns and general trends among its data. However, to

truly understand a program's effectiveness in reaching stated goals and objectives, a customized assessment must be done. Furthermore, with multiple external stakeholders demanding greater accountability, program assessments and evaluation are becoming the norm instead of the exception. Thus, the second question explored in this special issue speaks to how individual programs can develop and maintain effective student learning assessment efforts. Greig Stewart, in his commentary, chronicles the process through which one living-learning program, the College Park Scholars Program at the University of Maryland, developed an assessment plan to evaluate student learning outcomes that simultaneously addressed institutional mandates and localized complex and idiosyncratic needs. Through his description of the development of the Scholars assessment plan, practitioners can learn valuable lessons on what worked and did not work for the College Park Scholars Program and perhaps model their unique assessment demands after its precedent.

> Together, I hope that these works foster sustained reflection on the advancement of living-learning programs. I believe that the contributions to the special issue point to a need for the next generation of scholarship and practice to embark upon some of the unresolved issues in the living-learning arena.

Aaron Brower addresses a third question in his study of binge drinking and related alcohol behaviors: What other types of results can living-learning programs facilitate, other than their stated goals and objectives? In his study, Brower found that living-learning program participation promoted more healthy decision-making and behaviors among undergraduates. It is important to underscore that nearly all of the living-learning programs in the NSLLP (and, correspondingly, Brower's study) were not explicitly designed to focus on binge drinking behaviors, yet Brower's results show that living-learning participants drank less and suffered from fewer adverse alcohol-related events. Brower asserts that this relationship is due to a community of learning formed in living-learning programs that supplants a drinking culture with one of personal and community responsibility. Brower introduces a tantalizing thought: Are other unintentional outcomes set in motion by the community of learning established through living-learning programs?

Finally, Bill Zeller propels us squarely into the 21st century by asking about the role of technology in the living-learning program of the future. First, Zeller argues that living-learning programs are ideally situated as locations for learning through the infusion of technological resources in the residence hall. He draws connections between students' preferred ways of interacting, residence hall infrastructures, and conditions for optimal learning. Then, he makes concrete recommendations for ways

in which living-learning programs can install and integrate technology to best serve their objectives.

Together, I hope that these works foster sustained reflection on the advancement of living-learning programs. I believe that the contributions to the special issue point to a need for the next generation of scholarship and practice to embark upon some of the unresolved issues in the living-learning arena. For example:

- Should there be a consistent definition of and, perhaps, set of standards for a living-learning program?
- How can individual living-learning program assessments raise the efficacy of the programs and facilitate student learning and development?
- What are all of the outcomes of participation in a living-learning program, including those that are known but not yet empirically tested and those that still remain unknown?
- And, finally, how must living-learning programs adjust in relation to changing student needs and emerging technological tools for advanced learning?

I look forward to tackling these issues with you in the years to come.

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