

## **A Quest for Lifelong Learning: Aligning my Personal Values with my Research of the Sigma Phi Epsilon Residential Learning Community**

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Inspired by my organization's value of lifelong learning, I decided it was time to write the next chapter in my own book of education, a terminal degree. The admission essay prompt for the doctorate in education program I chose challenged me to think about what type of research I would focus on while in this program. It was important for me to identify something that not only would contribute to the body of research in the field of fraternity and sorority life, but would also support the value of lifelong learning. This is when I became inspired to research the Sigma Phi Epsilon Residential Learning Community (Sig Ep RLC) program because of its commitment to this same value. It is my hope that by uncovering the hypothesized benefits of the RLC that my work inspires other fraternity/sorority professionals to look at this model as a way to improve living conditions in fraternity housing. This is especially relevant considering the recent blasts of criticism that organizations living in these structures are currently receiving, whether earned or not. Aside from the promise of improved academic performance, these programs can be the vehicle in which to implement the education we strive to impart as student affairs professionals. Topics such as academic responsibility, social justice, bystander intervention, Title IX training, cultural appreciation, and responsible adult behavior could be taught in these environments with potentially increased success; the literature shows that this is the case in on-campus versions of RLCs.

RLCs are a popular approach used by institutions of higher education to increase academic performance and support the development of life skills for college students who live in campus residential facilities (Brower & Inkelas, 2010). They have been shown to be successful in promoting academic achievement (Pike, 1999; Stassen, 2003), which has been attributed, in part, to faculty/student interaction (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Stassen, 2003) and engagement in the social setting of the residential space. Participants occupy the same living space and engage in programs designed to foster an academic learning environment, which stresses social and academic development (Inkelas, Zeller, Murphy, & Hummel, 2006). These types of programs are especially helpful for men who are "less likely than others to engage in academically desirable uses of time" (Brint & Cantwell, 2010, p.2461). These students may struggle with issues such as engagement, social development, and academic performance.

Given that fraternity men are underperforming academically when compared to their female counterparts, structured engagement strategies must be implemented in order to address this. Findings from the literature tell us that affiliated members experience little academic benefit through their participation in fraternities and sororities (Pike & Askew, 1990; Blackburn & Jonosik, 2009). As a result, Sigma Phi Epsilon (Sig Ep) chose to implement a program to address these findings. They chose to design an RLC, which engaged students in educationally purposeful activities, which leads to increased learning (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). The Sig Ep RLC is based on the structure of residential or living learning programs that have historical roots in the "social clubs" of Oxford and Cambridge and their later incarnations at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton (Brower & Inkelas, 2010).

The Sig Ep RLC has four main components which were deliberately chosen: faculty fellow engagement, personal and academic development, a learning environment, and a network of support. They identified three main individuals who oversee the program. The faculty fellow attends meetings and holds office hours where members can come to seek both academic and non-academic advice. The resident scholar is a graduate student who lives with the students and is tasked with mentoring, tracking, educating, and developing members. Lastly, there is an undergraduate RLC chair that is responsible for maintaining accreditation through executing proper programming and following through on required paperwork.

I decided to focus my research on the Sig Ep RLC's ability to advance academic performance and social development. I will collect data that tells me about the impact of living in the RLC as well as the key elements of the program that support the students' growth and development. In order to measure the impact of this program, a concurrent quantitative methods approach will be used. The Educational Benchmarking, Inc. (EBI) will be used to measure the impact that the fraternity/sorority experience has on students based on the CAS Standards. The EBI can also assist in the assessment and comparison of the performance of fraternities to determine which programs are most efficient and yield the most satisfaction. Interviews of the faculty fellow, graduate student in residence, and the undergraduate RLC Chair may be used as an additional opportunity to see how they feel their role contributes to the goals of the RLC. These interviews may help me to tease out best practices of this program for future use.

The main sample for my research will consist of ten chapters, which demonstrates 20% of the total number of RLC chapters. These chapters will be identified by the national headquarters of Sigma Phi Epsilon as "effective examples" of this program. Once identified, the entire membership of these chapters will be asked to take the Fraternity/Sorority EBI. The responses of these 10 Sig Ep chapters will be compared to the national data collected by EBI since 1994. This will be done to compare effective exemplars of Sig Ep RLC's student outcomes to other comparable fraternities.

In addition to the EBI assessment, I am considering executing a comparison of grade point averages. I will look at the GPA of the 10 RLC chapters before the men affiliated with the fraternity and then after their first semester of membership. I will then compare it to a grouping of 10 high performing Sigma Phi Epsilon chapters that do not have the RLC program implemented. Lastly, I will look at the mean of the average of Sigma Phi Epsilon and the average of non-RLC chapters to see if there is a difference and how big of an effect there may be.

The main purpose of my research is to identify whether this program has an effect on the lifelong learning of the members engaged, as reflected by their GPA and the impact on social development. If the findings from this study show the RLC is an effective way to improve academic achievement for underperforming fraternity men, there will be important implications for my own campus as well as nationally. I would use these findings to help other organizations create similar programs, by offering it as a guideline for other organizations to improve their RLC programs. Other national organizations may want to adopt this type of program. Additionally, the RLC model can be a useful for campus-based professionals trying to implement structures and strategies for other, non-Greek affinity groups struggling with the same academic and social development issues that many fraternities experience.

It is demonstrated in the literature that RLCs have many redeeming qualities and can help a student have a successful college career, which may be an effective way to set up people to be lifelong learners. It is my hope that through this research I can continue to build my skills as a scholarly practitioner and will continue to lead change and improvement in the field of student affairs. These plans include but are not limited to creating detailed descriptions of RLCs for other fraternities to use to guide further implementation or perhaps continue my research on this program to continue on my path as a lifelong learner.

## References

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