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## **Perceptions of Peer Mentorship within Living Learning Communities: A Case Study**

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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Nicole Marie Nicholson entitled "Perceptions of Peer Mentorship within Living Learning Communities: A Case Study." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science, with a major in College Student Personnel.

Dorian McCoy, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

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(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

Perceptions of Peer Mentorship within Living Learning Communities: A Case Study

A Thesis Presented for the  
Master of Science  
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### Abstract

Living-learning communities (LLC) are seen as a way to help promote student engagement and retention using best practices in higher education (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2014). Resident Assistants (RA), also known as resident advisors, and LLC peer mentors are members of a residential community in college who are employed to help provide a sense of community among residents on their floor or in their building (Rieske & Benjamin, 2015). Previous research (Wyle, 2012) on LLC peer mentor interactions provided examples of how peer mentors could enhance a community within a college LLC. This qualitative study will explore LLC residents' perceptions of peer mentorship. I will focus on first-year resident interactions with their RA, in comparison to their LLC peer mentor. I will analyze the influence of the LLC peer mentor and RA on student's experiences within an LLC using environmental frameworks. Analyzing student perceptions on peer mentorship interactions, both RAs and peer mentors, within an LLC may help determine the necessity of a peer-mentoring program within the construction of an LLC.

*Keywords:* living-learning community, peer mentoring, student perceptions, academic performance, satisfaction

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The earliest records of colleges and universities in the United States (U.S.) provide examples of peer mentorship, specifically within a residential setting (Blimling, 2010). During Harvard's earliest years, tutors, similar in age to the students, lived in-hall with the students and provided academic assistance and disciplinary action. Soon thereafter, colleges began to educate more than just clergymen, adapting their missions to help students of all majors succeed (Rudolph, 1990). Changing missions at the universities led to new functional areas such as housing and residence life. As new generations of students arrived in higher education, administrators in both student and academic affairs worked with students to alter the expectations of college life (Blimling, 2010; Rudolph, 1990). One change was the introduction of student personnel administrators to the residence halls. These administrators included residence counselors, the precursor to contemporary hall directors and Resident Assistants (RAs) (Blimling, 2010). Universities and the roles of administrators continued to adapt and eventually, the definition of tutors, residence counselors, peer mentors, and RAs seemingly became interchangeable (Inkelas, Garvey, & Robbins, 2012; Rieske & Benjamin, 2015).

Peer mentor's roles have not been consistently defined except their stated position as a role model in their community (Jacobi, 1991). Merriam (1983) defined a peer mentor as a person who had valuable wisdom to share, gained from their experiences. Rieske and Benjamin (2015) included RAs in their definition of a peer mentor, stating that RAs were peer mentors who, "foster the development of students by encouraging a safe and interactive community within the residence halls" (p. 68). Despite differing opinions on the definition of a peer mentor and RA, both are frequently utilized as a resource on campus for incoming students (Rieske & Benjamin, 2015).



With a variety of contemporary challenges facing colleges and universities, higher education administrators are being asked to do more with less (Rieske & Benjamin, 2015). Rieske and Benjamin (2015) suggested that universities utilize their students' knowledge as a resource for their peers to help ease the institution's financial burden of hiring more staff. In student affairs, administrators are turning to students to be an effective and efficient resource for their peers (Keup & Martin, 2016). The introduction of living-learning communities (LLCs) at colleges and universities across the U.S. provided a new venue for social and academic peer mentorship within the residence halls. Universities with LLCs provide an avenue to influence students both academically and socially during their first year of college (Tinto, 2000). In 2008, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) first considered learning communities a high impact practice (Kuh, 2008). AACU's Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) program defines a high impact practice as "techniques and designs for teaching and learning that have proven to be beneficial for student engagement and successful learning among students from many backgrounds" (High-Impact Practices LEAP Campus Toolkit, n.d.). According to AACU (High-Impact Practices Association of American Colleges and Universities, n.d.), intentional program design such as first year seminars and experiences, undergraduate research, common intellectual experiences, service-learning, internships, and learning communities among other experiences can help enhance student learning and narrow achievement gaps between different populations of students. As a high impact practice, LLCs promote desired student outcomes through the purposeful use of collaborative experiences (Kuh, 2008).

As LLCs continued to expand without supervision of an accrediting body, it became necessary to define and compare the different LLC typologies because programs were created

differently to fit the mission of their university (Inkelas & Longerbeam, 2008; Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Pike, 1999; Priest & Clegorne, 2015). Without guidance on how to create or administer an LLC program, numerous LLC program types were established (Inkelas & Soldner, 2011). Inkelas and Longerbeam (2008) researched LLC typologies and suggested peer interaction and discussion on academic and social issues as a way to create a successful LLC. This mirrored previous research by Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) that revealed a positive association between peer interactions and LLC participation. Results reflected the idea that LLC environments helped facilitate peer to peer relationships. As LLC programs expand across the country, researchers (Inkelas & Soldner, 2011; Priest & Clegorne, 2015) have suggested there is more to learn about the influence of LLCs on students' academic (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003) and social experiences (Pike, 1999; Priest & Clegorne, 2015).

### **Problem Statement**

The National Study of Living-Learning Programs (NSLLP) provided detailed analysis of LLCs' contributions to significant student outcomes on the transition to college, student learning, civic engagement, and sense of belonging (Inkelas, 2004). Researchers (Inkelas & Longerbeam, 2008; Inkelas, Soldner, Longerbeam, & Leonard, 2008; Soldner & Szelényi, 2008) examined student outcomes for LLCs more in-depth. Inkelas, Garvey, and Robbins (2012) refined the research on LLCs by completing a four-program case study. They concluded that resident advisors (RAs) and peer advisors, also known as peer mentors, believed their roles could be better defined to incorporate the in- and out-of class learning experience for students. The same study provided examples of the frustrations shared by administrators, as well as the RAs and peer mentors, over the "vague and ambiguous role definitions" (p. 26) of the student-staff members. As LLC programs continue to expand, it is imperative to understand and define the roles and

expectations of those individuals so they can better serve their community of faculty, administrators, and most importantly, students.

### **Purpose of Study**

Researchers (Hill & Woodward, 2013; Smith, 2015; Tinto, 2000) have provided a considerable amount of research on LLCs' effects on student learning and development, but there is a lack of research on how peer mentors and RAs influence the specific LLC and the students within the LLC. The purpose of this study was to examine and better understand the perceptions LLC students have of their peer mentors and RAs and how those individuals influence the students' experiences and the LLC as a whole.

### **Research Questions**

This study was guided by the following question:

- 1) How do peer mentors and RAs influence the LLC participants socially and academically?

### **Theoretical/Conceptual Framework**

Student learning and development is at the core of what student affairs practitioners do on a daily basis, particularly within LLCs (NASPA, 2004). Student learning, in the case of LLCs, is supported by Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement. The theory of student involvement implies that to achieve the desired student learning, students must involve themselves and invest effort into their own learning and development. Not only does Astin (1984) encourage student motivation, but he also conceptualizes how to facilitate student development rather than looking solely at the developmental outcome of a program. Astin (1984) provided evidence that living on campus is positively associated with increased student involvement and chances of student persistence. When the theory of student involvement was introduced, Astin (1984) called for more research on the impact of peer groups on student's involvement in academic endeavors.

Today, LLCs provide the ideal format for peer groups to interact and encourage involvement both socially and academically across campus (Kuh, 2008).

Peer groups and learning are also associated in Bronfenbrenner's (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) ecological systems theory. Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) stated that the components of process, person, context, and time interact to influence development. In other words, a person is affected by everything that surrounds them in their environment. Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) divided the environment into different levels including the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Along with Bronfenbrenner's (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) revisions to the theory, Renn and Arnold (2003) and Dey and Hurtado (1995) encouraged the use of ecological systems theory when seeking to understand peer cultures. Specifically, Renn and Arnold (2003) suggested that by using the ecological model and the five environmental levels, researchers could better understand how peer cultures might be influenced particularly in a residential living environment by exploring the environment students' are living in and who they interact with.

### **Significance of Study**

Students are being asked more frequently to take on additional leadership responsibility and become peer mentors and peer leaders on their campus (Rieske & Benjamin, 2015). This study may help to better understand students' perceptions of their peer mentors and RAs within the context of an LLC. The analysis of LLC student perceptions will provide a deeper understanding of RA and peer mentor roles for their students and the LLC. As LLC programs continue to expand within higher education, it becomes increasingly important to understand the influence peer mentors and RAs can have on students' experiences to determine their influence within an LLC.

## Definitions

The following definitions are provided to give context to the study:

***Living Learning Communities (LLCs)*** are "programs in which undergraduate students live together in a discrete portion of a residence hall (or an entire hall) and participate in academic and/or extracurricular programming designed especially for them" according to the National Study of Living-Learning Programs (NSLLP) (Soldner & Szelényi, 2008, p. 15). For the purpose of this study, living-learning communities (LLCs) are defined as residence hall-based undergraduate programs that "link or cluster two or more courses, often around an interdisciplinary theme or problem, and enroll[s] a common cohort of students" (Smith et al., 2004, p. 20). The definition aligns with the Association of American Colleges high-impact educational practice definition of LLCs (Kuh, 2008).

***Resident Assistants (RAs)*** also known as ***Resident Advisors*** are defined as an "undergraduate student employed by an institution of higher education who lives and works in the residence halls. The RA's general function is serving the other students in their assigned area of responsibility" (Blumenthal, 2011, p. 7). Rieske and Manjamine (2015) define an RA as a person who can "foster the development of students by encouraging a safe and interactive community within the residence halls" (p. 68).

***Peer Mentors*** are "The student who lived in the residence hall and was paid by the academic college to serve as a resource, tutor, and mentor to the students of the learning community" (Wylie, 2012, p. 15). Dugan, Kodama, Correia, and Associates (2013) defined a peer mentor as a person who "intentionally assisted the student's growth or connects the student to opportunities for career or personal development" (p. 10). For the purpose of this study, peer mentors were not paid by an academic college although they did live in the residence hall. The

peer mentor job description provided by the institution appears to combine the definitions of a peer mentor provided by Wylie (2012) and Dugan et al. (2013)

Despite inconsistencies between institutional definitions, *academic support* commonly refers to services and strategies used to help support curricular activities. Activities include areas of instruction, research, and other curricular goals. Academic advising, tutoring, study groups, and other services are examples of academic support (Blumenthal, 2011).

*Social Support* is broadly defined by the University of Pennsylvania Medical School (Health Behavior and Health Education, n.d.) as the various types of help that one receives from others. Many times, social support is divided into four categories: emotional, informational, appraisal, and instrumental (Health Behavior and Health Education, n.d.). For the purpose of this study, social support does not relate to curriculum to differentiate it from academic support.

### **Organization of the Study**

This study is presented in five chapters. Chapter One provided a brief introduction to LLCs and peer mentorship in the collegiate environment, a purpose statement, the research questions, and the significance of the study. Chapter Two offers a literature review on the history of LLCs and issues related to peer mentorship in LLCs, with limitations of the current research. Chapter Three discusses the research design, research method and procedures for conducting the study. Chapter Four presents the study's findings and Chapter Five discusses the study and implications for practice and research.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **History of Living Learning Communities**

Residential living-learning communities (LLCs) address student academic needs, including academic inquiry, as well as students' co-curricular interests (Schein, 2005). Residential learning communities were abundant when the first universities were created (Fink & Inkelas, 2015). Harvard, Yale, William and Mary, and Princeton, among other colleges, used Oxford and Cambridge as inspiration for their “Oxbridge” style residential model. The Oxbridge residential model was created with the intent to provide for the whole student. It brought together the space where students and tutors lived, worked, studied, and socialized (Fink & Soldner, 2012). An increase in the college student population during the 19<sup>th</sup> century introduced a need for larger campuses and more student housing (Rudolph, 1990). The newer dormitories departed from the Oxbridge residential model, providing less space for academics within the residence halls. This, in turn, increased focus on academics within the classroom (Fink & Inkelas, 2015). The Germanic model of higher education in the 19<sup>th</sup> century arose as colleges and universities showed an increased interest in research, subsequently decreasing the necessity of the residential college model (Chaddock, 2008). The work of John Dewey and Alexander Meiklejohn, however, helped lay the groundwork for modern LLCs (Fink & Inkelas, 2015).

### **Foundation of Modern Living Learning Communities**

Focused on holistic student development, Dewey encouraged ideal learning environments. Ideal learning environments occurred in academic and co-curricular settings and involved "shared inquiry" (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004, p. 6) between students as a way of gathering knowledge. Comparatively, the Germanic model of higher education encouraged students to learn only from experts (Smith et al., 2004). With a new ideal

learning environment in mind, Meikeljohn founded the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin in 1927, a precursor to modern LLCs. From 1927 until 1932 the program engaged student learning through "team-taught and clustered courses, as well as shared residences and dining facilities" (Fink & Inkela, 2015, p. 7). Soon thereafter, John Tussman created an interdisciplinary LLC at the University of California, Berkeley. The LLC was comprised of a two-year curriculum where students had a distinct physical space to support their community and learned through "self-guided study and writing intensive team-taught courses" (Fink & Inkela, 2015, p. 8). LLC initiatives increased exponentially after the 1960s, as both the private, government sector and the public sector called for undergraduate reform (Inkela & Soldner, 2011). The calls for reform lead to a renewed interest in researching the effectiveness of the LLCs (Fink & Inkela, 2015).

In 1984, the National Institute of Education (1984) encouraged higher education institutions to create small, intimate learning spaces for students based on intellectual themes. Similarly, the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities (1997) challenged public and land-grant institutions about their lack of attention on LLCs. The number of LLCs quickly grew and by 2000, Smith et al. (2004) reported more than 500 institutions had some type of LLCs. The number of LLCs expanded quickly for a variety of reasons. Inkela and Soldner (2011) suggested that LLCs expanded as universities attempted to keep up with their peers. Additionally, it is suggested that LLCs expanded as a way to provide accountability to governing bodies (i.e., state governments and accrediting agencies) for the quality of the undergraduate experience they provided for students (Fink & Inkela, 2015). Accounting for the number of LLCs across the U.S. still proved to be a difficult task (Henscheid, 2015). The task to define an LLC was difficult due to the various typologies of LLCs on college campuses



(Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Inkelas, Soldner, Longerbeam, & Leonard, 2008; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Lenning, Hill, Saunders, Stokes, & Solan, 2013; Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Smith et al., 2004). Incidentally, not all LLC programs are based on academics and some are solely based on social interactions with faculty and peers (Blumenthal, 2001).

Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith (1990) made the first attempt at defining LLC typologies in the 1990s. Inkelas and Soldner (2011) studied the LLC typologies and their history indicating that subsequent LLC typologies are either based on or are combinations of Gabelnick et al.'s (1990) categories. The original five variations of learning communities were linked courses, learning clusters, Freshman Interest Groups (FIG), federated LLCs, and coordinated studies (Gabelnick et al., 1990). Shapiro and Levine (1999) expanded upon Gabelnick et al.'s (1990) work by adding a 'residence based programs' typology. Shapiro and Levin (1999) also created the paired or clustered courses, cohorts in large courses, and team-taught programs typologies. Replicating Shapiro and Levine's (1999) work, Love and Tokuno (1999) used the same typologies but introduced the idea of LLCs for special populations. The six new typologies introduced included: academically underrepresented students, students from underrepresented groups, students with disabilities, honors programs, residential students, and students with specific academic interests (Love & Tokuno, 1999). Lenning and Ebbers (1999) created their own typologies: curricular learning communities, curricular cohort learning communities, student-type learning communities, and residential learning communities. Each typology was further subdivided into two categories. In 2004, Smith, MacGragor, Matthews, and Gabelnick (2004) provided an updated typology from Geblnick et al.'s (1990) original work which integrated the newly determined typologies, including the residential models.

Zeller, Jones, and Klippenstein (2002) began defining LLC program typologies as residential colleges, living-learning centers, theme housing, residential learning communities, or first-year experiences. Schoem (2004) then limited the typologies to residential colleges, residential learning communities, and residential education programs. Inkelas (2004) and Inkelas et al. (2007) condensed typologies as data was gathered for the NSLLP in 2004 and again in 2007. The 26 original LLC categories were then narrowed to 17 based on LLC program themes. This created a total of 41 types of LLCs including subcategories (Inkelas et al., 2007). In 2008, a similar study (Inkelas, Soldner, Longerbeam, & Leonard, 2008) was conducted to explore LLCs based on their structural themes. Researchers (Inkelas, Soldner, Longerbeam, & Leonard, 2008) narrowed them to three groups: small, limited resourced, primarily residential emphasis; medium, moderately resourced, student affairs/academic affairs combinations; and large, comprehensively resourced, student affairs/academic affairs collaboration. The study provided evidence that although program themes may change, LLCs can still be grouped similarly by how they are managed (Inkelas & Soldner, 2011).

### **Benefits of Living Learning Communities**

The continued popularity of LLCs is due in part to the increased awareness of LLCs as a best practice (Priest & Clegorne, 2015). The myriad of benefits for LLC students includes improved academic (Inkelas & Weisman, 2005; Tinto, 2000), interpersonal (Hill & Woodward, 2013), and critical thinking skills (Walker, 2016), as well as improved mental health (Fink, 2012). The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) (2014) recently acknowledged the benefits of LLCs in providing integrated academic and student life experiences, enhancing community building activities, and increasing interactions between students and their faculty. Also acknowledged is the LLCs ability to help increase student

retention rates, specifically from the first to second year of college (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2014).

Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) originally sought to understand the effect of an LLC on interpersonal skills. Results of the study gave evidence that LLC environments helped facilitate relationships, particularly between students and their peers. Grayson (2003) argued that students in LLCs have a higher commitment towards learning, enjoy benefits in terms of student engagement, are able to feel more comfortable in their communities, and foster critical thinking skills through a variety of teaching strategies. Schoem (2004) argued that due to the amount of time spent together in LLCs, both academically and socially, LLC students learn how to manage conflict, interact with their diverse peers, and meet the community standards.

Previous studies have found that peer-to-peer interaction was one of the single most beneficial aspects for students in LLCs. The researchers (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Johnson et al. 2007; Rowan-Kenyon, Soldner, & Inkelas, 2007) found students felt supported academically and socially, benefitting as they transitioned to college, searched for a sense of belonging, and sought opportunities for civic engagement and better understanding of multiculturalism in their community. The use of peer mentors continues to provide another source of peer-to-peer interaction today (Priest & Clegorne, 2015).

### **Peer Mentors**

With limited resources, universities are turning to their students to act as peer mentors and, ultimately, paraprofessionals (Keup & Martin, 2016). Student leaders continue to take on more roles across campus, increasing the number of hours they work and lives they impact. A 2009 study evidenced that 81% of students would interact daily with a close friend at the university compared to 15% who would interact with a faculty or staff member (Keup & Martin,

2016). Peer mentor programs are aimed at helping retention rates, particularly for high-risk courses, not necessarily high-risk students. Peer mentors are utilized to help model behavior, advise students, and facilitate conversations rather than directly address academic course content. Other mentor roles include: campus resource, peer leader, learning coach, student advocate, and trusted friend (Colvin, 2015). Peer mentors help students acclimate academically and socially at an institution (Colvin & Ashman, 2010), provide targeted academic and social support for students (Minor, 2007), and increase retention rates (Tinto, 1986).

When peer mentorship started in 1636 at Harvard, tutors were used in the residence hall as a means of academic support and discipline (Rudolph, 1990). Today, tutors are considered one of the many peer mentorship positions on campus along with Orientation Leaders, LLC peer mentors, and Resident Assistants (RA) (Rieske & Benjamin, 2011). Colvin (2015) reported that today's tutors and mentors are utilized for social interaction and academic support. Students cited support, reapplication of the concept of course topics, and developing connections as three of the main themes surrounding mentors' roles. The 2013 National Survey of Peer Leaders indicated that 28.9% of peer leaders are used in the residence halls and 44.5% were involved as leaders in a student organization (Keup & Martin, 2016). Keup and Martin (2016) concluded that the benefits to peer leaders, many of whom are volunteers, included increased skill development in leadership, organization, communication, teamwork, time or project management, presentation, critical thinking, and writing. In a residence hall with LLCs, students will often view both RAs and LLC peer mentors acting in a way that fulfills the duties of a peer mentor as outlined by the previous studies (Keup & Martin, 2016).

### **Resident Assistants**

Resident Assistants (RA) are student staff members who reside in the residence hall (Blumenthal, 2011). Student personnel administrators were introduced in the 1950s as Residence Counselors. Residence Counselors helped engage students in social skills that would prepare them for their future (Blimling, 2010, p. 20). Student rebellion returned to the residence halls in the 1970s, producing a shift in the role of the Residence Counselors and introducing the new role of the RA (Blimling, 2010; Rudolph, 1990). At that time, the RA served as a peer mentor, a counselor, and an advisor. Contemporary RAs are students who are trained to be a role model, problem solver, conflict mediator, campus resource, trained observer, community builder, group facilitator, counselor, and administrator (Blimling, 2010).

CAS Standards (2014) indicate that administrators must train RAs, as well as other paraprofessionals, to accomplish the following tasks: community development, educational programming, administration, group and activity advising, leadership development, student conduct, role modeling, individual assistance and referral, providing information, crisis intervention, and facilities management. Based on these standards, RAs are often seen building a community amongst their residents and floor, responding to emergencies, serving as a role model, documenting school conduct violations, and creating a conducive academic atmosphere (Blumenthal, 2011). Blumenthal's (2011) research on RAs and academic support through document analysis provided evidence that RA's involvement in academic support met the standards of best practices for academic support according to the CAS standards.

### **Peer Mentor Roles in Living Learning Communities**

A 2007 NSSLP report indicated that 84% of learning programs provided leadership opportunities for undergraduate students in which 94% of those roles were live-in positions. The

role of those individuals were frequently (97%) identified as socializing, handling administrative tasks, and leading other student workshops (Inkelas et al., 2007; Soldner & Szelenvi, 2008).

Despite the data provided from the 2007 NSSLP study, the question of ‘what role does a student-staff member play’ was still left unanswered. Benjamin (2007a) examined how LLC peer mentor role has developed and how the peer mentors changed their job depiction over time based on their experiences. Examining the role of solo mentors, paired mentors, and grouped mentors, Benjamin (2007a) found that peer mentors often learned more about role expectations when working with others rather than working alone.

Typically, RA and peer mentor roles in LLCs are defined identically in a residence hall context (Inkelas et al., 2012). Priest and Clegorne (2015) described a peer mentor in their study as a teaching assistant and a connection between faculty and students who found mentorship organically or naturally in their leadership journey. A peer mentor is also defined as a person who “intentionally assisted the student’s growth or connects the student to opportunities for career or personal development” (Dugan et al., 2013, p. 10). Benjamin’s (2007a) study of peer mentorship compared the peer mentor role to that of an RA at the same university and found that both job descriptions included: acquainting students with and referring them to resources, attending training, meeting with supervisors, working in conjunction with residence hall staff, planning activities, holding office hours, spending a specified number of hours on peer mentor duties, and attend/assist with an LLC class. It was determined that the RA role, unlike the peer mentor role, required them to be a mediator for the LLC (Benjamin, 2007a).

Despite continued research, many stakeholders (i.e. students, RAs, peer mentors, and staff) described frustrations with the vague and ambiguous role descriptions provided for RAs and peer mentors (Benjamin, 2007a; Inkelas et al., 2012). Similarly, students have shown

confusion over the role their peer mentor or RA were supposed to have, but indicated that both individuals were helpful to their success (Inkelas et al., 2012). Inkelas et al. (2012) indicated that a lack of training may be to blame for the vague role descriptions. They also noted that universities that utilized a previous LLC member as a peer mentor found the peer mentor to be vastly more effective. It was suggested that this was due to their prior knowledge of the LLC rather than the amount of training received.

### **Summary, Limitations, and Considerations for Future Research**

Researchers have articulated the benefits of LLC participation and the influence a peer mentor can have on the students involved in an LLC (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Fink, 2012; Hill & Woodward, 2013; Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Inkelas & Weisman, 2005; Johnson et al. 2007; Minor, 2007; Rowan-Kenyon, Soldner, & Inkelas, 2007; Tinto, 2000). Despite numerous research studies which indicate how peer mentors and RAs feel about their role definition (Benjamin, 2007a; Inkelas et al., 2007; Soldner & Szelenyi, 2008), there is limited data on how students in LLCs perceive the role of the RA and peer mentor. This conflict between two very similar job descriptions brings into question the necessity of having both a peer mentor and an RA within an LLC. Frequently, an RA is described as a peer mentor who is also charged with mediating situations (Benjamin, 2007a). Other studies have indicated that there is little to no difference in the role of an RA and a peer mentor within an LLC (Inkelas et al., 2012; Reiske, & Benjamin, 2011). Wylie (2012) called for a study on the influence a peer mentor or RA has not only on an individual LLC member, but also on the LLC as a whole. With an increase in LLC programs across the country, and the more recent label of LLCs as a best practice (Priest & Clegorne, 2015), it is imperative to know the influence of the individuals working with LLC students. Future studies should be aimed towards better understanding the roles of the RA and

peer mentors as well as outlining the perceived need for both individuals to be present in an LLC.



### Chapter 3: Methodology

Colleges have often provided a variety of peer mentorship opportunities for their students, particularly within a residential setting. Changes in the types of residence halls and residential communities caused a shift in the role of the undergraduate students serving as peer mentors, residence counselors, and RAs in the residence hall (Blimling, 2010). With the shift in roles, the definition of these positions seemingly became interchangeable (Inkelas, Garvey, & Robbins, 2012; Riese & Benjamin, 2015).

The introduction of living-learning communities (LLCs) at colleges and universities across the U.S. in the 1900s provided new opportunities for peer mentorship within the residence halls. LLCs provided an opportunity for RAs and peer mentors to influence students both academically and socially during their first year of college (Tinto, 2000). Although there is research on the impact of the LLC experience on students (Hill & Woodward, 2013; Smith, 2015; Tinto, 2000), the influence of RAs and peer mentors on LLC students' experiences has yet to be explored. This study examined the role of the RA and LLC peer mentor based on LLC student perceptions of peer mentorship.

#### **Purpose/Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to examine and better understand the perceptions LLC students have of their peer mentors and RAs and how those individuals influence the students' experiences and the LLC as a whole. This study sought to answer the following question:

- 1) How do peer mentors and RAs influence the LLC participants socially and academically?

#### **Method**

The qualitative methodology used in this study was a single site case study with multiple cases to help better understand the participants' various perspectives of their LLC experience

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A qualitative approach was chosen to reveal a deeper understanding of the perspectives participants have regarding peer mentorship in LLCs. A case study was chosen as a way to look in-depth at a group or program so that the researcher can immerse themselves in the participant's worldview (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). Case studies involve the use of multiple sources of data including interviews and document analysis to provide an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon or interest (Patton, 2015). For the purpose of this study, I utilized interviews, document analysis of recruitment and assessment materials, and electronic productions (i.e. student videos of their experiences) to better understand the holistic experiences of LLC students. Flyvbjerg (2006) conducted a study looking at the implications of qualitative, case study research studies and found that case studies help to enhance the understanding of the practical, or human, implication of phenomenon. Multiple case studies allow researchers to enhance their understanding of a subject without generalizing their themes based on a single case (Flyvbjerg, 2006). A multiple case study analysis was chosen to allow for potential discrepancy in experiences and perceptions among participants so that a participant's individual experience would not be interpreted as a theme (Merriam & Tisdall, 2016). I focused this research on students who participated in an LLC, with both a peer mentor and an RA, during their first semester on campus.

## **Site**

Beta State University is a large university in the mid-western United States with approximately 22,000 students (Office of Institutional Research, 2016). Currently, Beta State has seven LLCs. The LLCs are limited to 25 first-year students in order to provide more faculty support for the students. Six LLCs, including the selected LLC for this study, have a Faculty-in-Residence (FIR) who lives in the hall and works with the LLC for two years. One LLC has a

faculty residence coordinator who lives outside of the residence hall. Other LLC staff include a Program Assistant (PA), who serves as an academic programmer for the community, and an RA. There is one PA for every LLC. There is one RA per floor who is tasked with administering floor meetings, programming, solving roommate conflicts, and enforcing policy. While PAs are required to attend the LLC class and often serve as a teaching assistant, RAs may attend class but are not required to do so. Peer mentors are previous members of the LLC who live in the residence hall but are not considered housing and residential life staff. Peer mentors work three to five hours per week tutoring current students, recruiting students for the LLCs, and providing leadership within the community (V. Smith, personal communication, July 21, 2016).

Students in the LLCs are required to take a one-hour, paired First-Year Experience (FYE) course. The Business LLC and the Health Professions LLC students are required to take an additional course during their first semester of college. The Health Professions LLC students are required to take an anatomy and physiology class, although they are not required to sign up for the same section. The Business LLC students sign up for a general business course but are required to take the same section of a general business course (V. Smith, personal communication, July 21, 2016). Fifteen universities were contacted about the proposed research study but Beta State was chosen based on the criteria for the study (i.e., an LLC with a peer mentor, an RA, and two or more paired courses) and the study's timeframe.

### **Participants**

The participants included the 25 students in the Business LLC. Criterion sampling allows for participants to be selected based on a specific set of criteria (Stage & Manning, 2016). Participants were chosen for the study based on criterion sampling whereby all participants identified as a first-year student belonging to the Business LLC at Beta State University.

Participants were chosen from this LLC program because the program matches the LLC, peer mentor, and RA definitions defined in Chapter One. Students were chosen from one LLC rather than multiple LLCs, as previous research (Wawrzynski, 2010) indicates that grouping together students of different learning communities (Pike, 1999; Pasque & Murphy, 2005) negate the influence of the LLC theme (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003) and LLC design (Inkelas et al., 2008) and how they influence the student outcomes or experiences. The Assistant Director for Residential Education at Beta State University contacted the Business LLC students, who persisted through November, via email (see Appendix A for sample email from the Assistant Director for Residential Education) to advertise the study. Business LLC students who were interested in participating in the study then contacted me to schedule a maximum thirty-minute interview.

### **Data Collection**

For transcription purposes, I video recorded all interviews. To maintain confidentiality, no identifying information was attached to the participants' recordings. Upon completion of the study, recordings of all the interviews were destroyed and transcriptions of the recordings will be kept in a secured file cabinet for three years, as required by the Institutional Review Board, before being destroyed. I also took hand-written field notes throughout the interview, in case of audio recorder failure and to assist in capturing key words and phrases from the students (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Interviews were completed until the point of saturation. Patton (2015) defines saturation as analyzing patterns and continuing to add samples until nothing new can be learned. Sampling until the point of saturation allows for maximum data collection without too much redundancy.

Document analysis was also used as a way to gather in-depth knowledge on the LLC. Case studies used document analysis such as letters, media items, social media postings, and other documentation to analyze a case further with multiple sources (Patton, 2015). In order to assist in the analysis of this study, I utilized student interviews and document analysis including but not limited to EBI data, the LLC website, social media, brochures, and other assessments conducted by Beta State University. The use of data triangulation, or the use of various data sources, allows for a well-rounded case study and strengthens the study (Patton, 2015).

Due to the qualitative nature of the study, I was the tool by which data was collected, transcribed, and analyzed (Creswell, 2013). My interpretation of the data collected, as mentioned in the reflexivity, is a limitation of the study; however, this limitation is cited as a limitation of all case studies and its weakness is outweighed by the potential for more in-depth observation of the topic, which could not be garnered through other research methods (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

**Interview.** The study sought to develop an enhanced understanding of students' perceptions and experiences and thus an in-depth, individual interview was conducted with the LLC students. Interviews were semi-structured. A semi-structured interview is a "series of open-ended questions addressing research questions" (Stage & Manning, 2016, p. 53) which attempts to answer 'how' rather than 'why.' Pre-determined questions (see Appendix B for full interview protocol) were used to help guide the interview but at times I used other probing questions with a participant to ensure an in-depth response. The interview focused on the students' overall LLC experience and their individual interactions with their LLC peer mentor and LLC RA, as well as their academic and social experiences both within and outside of the LLC. Sample questions include, "What was your most significant experience this year in your

LLC?” and, “How do peer mentors facilitate faculty-student interactions within the living-learning community?”

Each interview was scheduled for sixty minutes to allow for an in-depth response to the protocol questions. Questions were asked in low-risk to high-risk order to help the participants build rapport with the interviewer (Stage & Manning, 2016). Students who agreed to participate in an interview were informed of the interview time and place. After gaining verbal and written consent (see appendix C) from the participant, a digital video recorder was used to record the interview for transcription analysis at a later time. The interviews were completed on Skype via an account made for this study so as not to have any identifying information on the digital video recording.

Video recording was chosen as a way to increase the accuracy of the data collection (Patton, 2015). Patton (2015) suggests that video recording allows for the interviewer to be more attentive to the interviewee and allows the entire conversation to be captured. By video recording, both verbal and non-verbal parts of the conversation are captured to analyze at a later time.

### **Data Analysis**

Open and axial coding was used to analyze the data for interviews (Stage & Manning, 2016). A code is the smallest identified form of data which is given a name it can share with similar data. Codes are then grouped into categories, or themes, based on their displayed concepts (Stage & Manning, 2016). This type of open and axial coding groups common codes according to conceptual categories (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). I used the constant comparative method to facilitate the creation of the codes. The video recordings of the interviews were reviewed in conjunction with the transcripts to determine that the non-verbals

and the presented narrative from the student are consistent. These results were analyzed and coded along with other data including the document analysis.

The constant comparative method facilitates the search for comparisons and similarities within the data set and between all study data sets resulting in themes (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). For this study, the LLC student's experiences helped define the themes. The emergent themes from the constant comparative method are why the method is often used in grounded theory studies. Grounded theory studies are well-known for the creation of theories based on the determined themes (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Wylie (2012), used a grounded theory model to describe and explain LLC student's stories of interactions with their peer mentor providing data on how peer mentors characteristics, and the environment, helped benefit their students. I do not intend to generate a theory from this study; however, the methods used for coding grounded theory studies suits the exploratory nature of the study. Discrepant data, or data that counters the themes was also presented to add credibility to the study (Creswell, 2013).

### **Trustworthiness**

Throughout the research process I engaged in member checking, peer debriefing, and reflexive journaling. The use of multiple methods of trustworthiness allows for triangulation, which strengthens a study through the use and combination of methods (Patton, 2015). To ensure that the data interpretations were consistent, participants engaged in member checks. Member checking involved engaging the participants in verifying the analysis of the data completed by the researcher and having participants correct the researcher if they believe the interpretation to be incorrect (Creswell, 2013; Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013; Stage & Manning, 2016). Peer debriefing, a "check of the analysis process by a non-participating peer" (Stage & Manning, 2016, p. 59) was also utilized for this study. Peer debriefing allows

researchers to become more aware of their own bias and influence on the data interpretation. Peer debriefing can also be used to explore other interpretations of the data with colleagues familiar in the discipline (Ezzy, 2002) and enhances research validity (Creswell, 2013; Houghton et al., 2013). In addition, thick description of the interview transcripts was utilized to provide trustworthiness of the study. Thick description involved “making detailed descriptions of the context and other aspects of the research setting so that other researchers can make comparisons with other contexts in which they are working” (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 296). Thick description can add validity to the findings of a qualitative study (Creswell, 2013).

For researcher trustworthiness, the process of reflexive journaling was employed. Reflexivity occurs when a researcher, “reflects about how their role in the study and their personal background, culture, and experiences hold potential for shaping their interpretations, such as the themes they advance and the meaning they ascribe to the data” (Creswell, 2013 p. 186). Reflexivity helps researchers provide rationale for the methodology they have chosen and their interpretation of the data (Goldblatt & Band-Winterstein, 2016; Jootun, McGhee, & Marland, 2009). Jootun et al. (2009) suggest that full detachment from qualitative research is “unrealistic” (p. 46) but acknowledging the researcher’s reflexivity encourages participant engagement and enriches the research quality. While my reflexive journal was not directly shared with the students I interviewed, I could more readily share my experiences with the students when the topic arose. I journaled throughout the research process because I was able to better reflect when I wrote down my thoughts. Journaling also allowed me to share my reflexivity with others.



**Positionality/Reflexivity.** My interest in peer mentorship within LLCs stemmed from my experiences as a member of an LLC and my work with living-learning programs at both my undergraduate institution and within my current graduate assistantship. During my experiences as an LLC member, I often found more comfort with my peer mentor than I did with my RA, who was not an LLC member. However, after working more closely with university housing at two institutions, it became clear to me that there were differences in how the peer mentors and RAs were being utilized and trained. The perceptions of the students about their LLC peer mentorship roles were seemingly altered. Within my role as a graduate assistant working with LLC peer mentors and RAs, I seek to better understand the role each individual plays in the lives of their students so I can better support them in their endeavors. Due to my position as a graduate student, I chose to complete the study at a different institution than the one I attend in an attempt to remove some bias from the study. As a previous LLC member and as a graduate assistant working with peer mentors and RAs, I fully acknowledge the bias I may present.

### **Institutional Review Board**

The study followed ethical guidelines for research, including formal review and approval by the University of Tennessee, Knoxville Institutional Review Board (see appendix D). To help protect the identities of all participants, pseudonyms (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016) were used for the focus institution, personal communications, and the participant names. Until data transcription occurred, both the audio recordings and signed informed consents were kept in separate, locked filing cabinets only accessible to me. After the study was completed, any audio recordings were destroyed. Typed transcriptions and consent forms will be kept for three years in the locked filing cabinet, per Institutional Review Board requirements, before being destroyed.

### **Summary**

In college, peer mentorship opportunities are abundant and with the introduction of LLCs, those opportunities continue to develop. The purpose of this study was to answer the following questions: How do peer mentors and RAs influence the LLC participants socially and academically? I examined the question by completing qualitative interviews with students in the Business LLC at Beta State University. A qualitative case study was used to gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences and perceptions. Data was collected through both video-recorded semi-structured interviews and written field notes. Throughout the process, I engaged in member-checking, peer debriefing, and reflexive journaling. Participating in these processes allowed me to better understand the biases I may have had towards this research topic. After all data was collected and transcribed, it was analyzed through open and axial coding. Themes were identified using the constant comparative method of coding. Data will be kept in secured filing cabinets for three years per IRB requirements before being destroyed. Pseudonyms were also used to help protect participant's identities.

## Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this study was to better understand living-learning community (LLC) students' perceptions of their peer mentor and RA and how those individuals influence LLC students' experiences. This multiple case study included four participants from a Business LLC at Beta State University. Although exploratory in nature, several themes emerged from the participant interviews: 1) academic and social motivation; 2) academic support for LLC students; 3) authority within the LLC; and 4) engagement with LLC students.

### **Academic and Social Motivation**

Participants in the study frequently described the role of the RA as being a source of motivation for them both academically and socially. All four students discussed how the RA got them involved in a variety of academic and social events across campus. When it came to academics, the RA was recognized for not only promoting academic events, but also for being a source of motivation for students in the LLC. One student, Kelsey, spoke about her RA as a source of motivation for by stating, "She's [the RA] constantly showing us and being a great example that you can graduate." Similarly, Mary noted, with a chuckle, the motivation she obtained daily from observing her RA's habits. "I always see her go to the library and stuff so that kind of motivates me to be like, 'Oh, she's studying. I should probably do the same.'"

In addition to being a source of personal motivation for community members, the RA was also cited as somebody who encourages students to participate in academic events. Mary stated, "Once a month they have a professor that comes to our classroom in our building and they'll do 'Meet the Professor' night and she [the RA] always encourages us to go." Not only is the RA encouraging events within the building, but she is also encouraging students to meet faculty outside of their major. Cole, another Business LLC student, declared, "With our

Resident Assistant, we get interaction with other faculty-in-residences and I've met a few of them through her . . . kind of been facilitated into conversations through her when she's present around them."

In addition to encouraging academics, the RA is also noted for her ability to get students involved socially across campus. When discussing social support within the community, Cole specified, "Our RA is also really good at getting us together with other communities." Through a variety of planned events such as ice skating, snow tubing, and participation in teambuilding events at a cosmic rope course, the RA creates social settings in which student interact.

Encouraging students to participate in those events is an additional aspect of her role that was described by students. Greg stated, "We were all really blessed to have an RA [that is] this enthusiastic about the floor and about the community as any of the PAs or peer mentors. . . She was one of the most enthusiastic ones there [at the LLC talent show] trying to get everyone pumped up and glad to be there." Additionally, Ashley, the RA, encourages students to get involved in campus activities involving the greater campus community. When discussing whether the RA provided social support for the community, Mary stated that Ashley:

...really is about events and getting us together . . . As an RA, she does events with housing so she's always telling us about all the housing events that are happening, getting us to go to them, and that gets us all out and involved in the school so that's really helpful.

Participants described Ashley as somebody who motivated them to be academically and socially involved in their LLC and across campus. This was similar to the RA description in the Beta State University RA Position Description and Agreement. Specified in the agreement is the RA's role within community building. Per the agreement:

RAs are responsible for creating intentional interaction with their resident by fulfilling all aspects of the interaction model for their area as prescribed by the department. Intentional interactions are intended to create a sense of community, promote good citizenship, encourage civility, foster academic success and assist in the personal growth of resident. Also indicated in the agreement is the expectation that RAs serve as positive role models both on and off campus. When discussing the support he received from his RA, Greg declared that, “you wouldn’t want to disappoint her because she is such a strong influence in the community.”

The RA position description states that “RAs are expected to be in their community and available to residents a significant portion of their time.” However, many of the RA interactions described by students fell into the category of secondary responsibilities. Secondary responsibilities were defined in the position description as “drop-in discussions with residents, referrals, or even studying in the common area.” While these interactions fell into the category of secondary responsibilities, students indicated the important role those interactions played in their social and academic experiences both within the LLC and across campus.

### **Academic Support for LLC Students**

While the RA is cited as being a source of academic and social motivation for LLC students, the peer mentor is most often cited as the individual who provides academic support for the LLC students. Students described academic support as assisting with homework, providing academic resources, and facilitating study sessions. This student definition aligns with the definition of academic support provided by Blumenthal (2011). When discussing the role of a peer mentor, Cole indicated that peer mentors are individuals “... who have taken the classes before and know[s] what they’re doing in the LLC.” Cole continued by describing how he receives academic support from his peer mentors:

Peer mentors, they're about a year above us so they've taken all the classes that we're in, for the most part and so it's really nice to be able to go up to them and say, 'Hey, I'm having trouble with accounting homework. Can you show me how to do this?' . . . When all of us on the floor were taking our general business class, they held review sessions for us and put together different [review] games and things to play.

Each participant described the peer mentors as individuals who were generally helpful. Greg explained that "He's [the peer mentor] helped with things like picking out classes... and figuring out how all this works because it's, uh (*long pause*), it's different than high school."

In addition, the peer mentors were cited as helping with academics and serving as a resource for the common courses in which the LLC students enrolled. Mary detailed her interactions with the peer mentors as follows: "I'll have a bunch of freak outs over homework or something so he'll sit down and say, 'Hey, it's ok. Let's work through it.' Because he's had the same classes as me." Greg also noted the importance of the work the peer mentors did with planning review sessions:

They just did a jeopardy game with questions all surrounding our review and that was really helpful... They put some time into working on the questions and stuff. They didn't just copy and paste anything. They took time to make sure that it was material that we would need.

While peer mentors were cited as providing academic support to the LLC students, the RA was also discussed in clarifying the academic support LLC students received from their peer mentors. When discussing the RA role in academic support for the community, Cole specified that, "for the most part with academics... she's [the RA] taken a lot of things [classes] but I feel like the more academic side comes from the peer mentor rather than the Resident Assistant."

Similarly, Greg surmised, “I don’t think she’s [the RA] utilized as much as the peer mentors just because they just went through the classes.” While the RA for the community is not required to be a business major, the students in the community indicated that their RA was a business major and had taken the many of the classes. However, they also noted that the RA had taken the courses a significant time ago in comparison with the peer mentors.

In addition to citing the types of academic support peer mentors provided, the students indicated the importance of having a peer mentor as an academic resource. Mary disclosed:

He’s [the peer mentor] helped because he has so many connections on campus and he’s helped me out with projects... Right now, we’re working on a project in our LLC and we needed help with catering, and he worked for catering. So, he was able to give me all the contacts because I couldn’t get a hold of them (*laughs*).

Mary also described the importance of the peer mentor having taken the common courses, “They have given me a lot of advice on, ‘oh, this is what you do,’ or they’ll direct me where to go if they can’t answer [a question].”

The description of the peer mentor as an academic resource and support system for the Business LLC students aligns with the position description provided to peer mentors on the Peer Mentor Program application. In the description, it states that the objective of a peer mentor is “To connect incoming LLC students and the broader community of BSU students to experienced [Business] LLC students who will serve as ambassadors, foster individual relationships, provide academic support...” It is conveyed later in the description that peer mentors are to “plan and offer special academic tutoring/support events,” for approximately three hours a week and use one hour a week, in conjunction with the program assistant [PA] to hold other events such as group study sessions. Specific mention of assisting with homework is not mentioned within the

position description although it is stated that peer mentors will participate in the General Business 150 course along with the Business LLC students. Students describe the academic support they receive from their peer mentor as more than what is expected based on their position description; however, academic support was also one of the most commonly referenced aspects of the peer mentor position.

### **Authority Within the LLC**

While there were no specific questions related to conflict management, the Business LLC students generally expressed their thoughts on authority and conflict management when discussing social support or negative interactions that they experienced with a peer mentor. Greg chuckled, while explaining, “The RA, if they see you doing anything you shouldn’t be doing you have to get in trouble but a peer mentor can just advise you [by saying], ‘that’s not a good idea.’” Others commented on Business LLC students viewing the peer mentor as an authority figure. Mary asserted:

Because he’s a mandatory reporter they [the other Business LLC students] feel like he’s a police and an authority figure, that if they say anything to him that he’ll report them... they feel like they can’t go to him for that, which is not true because you can.

Kelsey commented on the role of the peer mentor stating that she felt as though she could not be herself around a peer mentor who acted in the role of an authority figure. Instead, she indicated that the RA should be the one who had the responsibility of “reporting stuff.” In addition, Kelsey stated, “If I have problems on the floor, I’m going to go to the RA if it’s a major issue.”

When social support was brought up, most students commented on the idea of conflict resolution and indicated that solving conflicts was part of the responsibilities of the RA. In discussing the RA’s involvement with social support, Cole stated:



She's even more of the conflict resolution [person] I feel like... especially on the more technical side, because that's part of her job, and to make sure that everything is running smoothly with the roommate contracts and everything like that.

Whether it is a roommate quarrel or a community issue, the RA is cited as being the primary individual to address the situation. Expanding upon his initial statement, Cole explained:

If someone is being rude on the group chat she'll [the RA] direct them and talk with them. Whenever I have a problem with someone on the floor or there's a conflict, I'll go to her and she'll directly shut it down and make sure that everything is solved and that there's no hurt feelings between anyone. So, she's very good about solving conflict.

The role of the RA as a conflict manager is not articulated in the RA position description. The description indicates the RA's responsibility to meet one-on-one with a supervisor to communicate specific information regarding their residents and indicates the importance of creating a welcoming community for their residents. The description also states that "all reporting must be done immediately (example: if a behavioral situation occurs on call the report must be filed as soon as the incident has concluded)." The description provided aligns with the general idea of the RA's role in serving as an authoritative figure and solving conflicts for the floor as described by the Business LLC students.

### **Engagement with LLC Students**

The purpose of this study was to better understand LLC students' experiences and the roles the RA and peer mentor has in those experiences. Study participants described the role of the peer mentor as somebody who engages with students. Kelsey laughed as she stated, "I know in your [the peer mentor] contract it says, 'engage with students on the floor.' I mean, I'm pretty sure that's what it says." The peer mentor position description states that peer mentors will

“foster individual relationships . . . help integrate new students into campus resources and engagement with [Business] LLC opportunities.” In addition, the peer mentor is expected to “attend orientation, planning, and welcome events for new students, including freshman convocation.” Similarly, they are expected to spend approximately one hour per week “support[ing] extracurricular LLC events and program, such as social gathering . . . and community building activities.”

The participants shared how the peer mentors engaged with students in a variety of social settings. Most students discussed the peer mentors’ ability to get a group of people together to go to the convenience store (the POD) or the cafeteria as a group. Mary declared, “He’s [the peer mentor] always asking is anybody wants to go to the POD or to the cafeteria or anything like that and I really enjoy that about them [the peer mentors]. They’re just willing to include themselves.” In addition, Greg noted the peer mentor seemed to attend all of the events.

Each participant considered their peer mentor as a friend. They described the peer mentor as somebody who they could just hang out with, go to the cafeteria, or just talk to about personal matters. Greg compared the peer mentor to a doctor. “You could just compare them [peer mentor] to a doctor who’s always on call.... They don’t always have to be helping but when they’re asked or called upon, they seem to come through.” Cole described his relationship with the peer mentors, “I’m friends with both of them and we hang out and do things. I think it’s just sort of another opportunity to make connections and just have somebody there who understands everything.” Similarly, Kelsey explained that she felt comfortable going to the peer mentors for anything she needed help with, both academically or socially. When it came to asking for advice, peer mentors were also the first staff the participants indicated they would go to. Mary clarified, “I go to him [the peer mentor] any time I’m not feeling ok about a situation

that may be happening in the community . . . They're just there for advice and they're just a good support system."

Participants elaborated on why the peer mentors were effective at engaging with LLC students. They indicated that the peer mentors are on the floor most of the time and that they are enjoyable to be around. Cole asserted:

I feel comfortable going to either of them with personal problems I might be having and I have done that before actually and asked them for advice and things. They're actually both really good at whoever's hanging out with them... [getting] any of us to feel welcome.

One caveat to being a peer mentor on the floor that Greg noted was that students might not always reach out to the peer mentors first. When discussing a negative interaction with a peer mentor, Greg described the need for an outgoing individual:

I feel like if you're going to have that position [peer mentor] you need to be a little more outgoing on willing to make the initial step and not just wait for people to come to you because we're all new here. So we're just trying to figure things out [and] we're probably not reaching out as much as we probably should.

Mary also noted that peer mentors sometimes had difficulty taking the initial step to reach out to students.

LLC students described peer mentors as individuals who were involved socially and who remained actively engaged in what was happening on the floor. The Business LLC students described active engagement as anything from going to the cafeteria with other students on the floor to getting to know students as individuals. In many instances, students in the LLC described peer mentors as somebody that they could go to for anything, although they mostly

described them as providing support for personal difficulties the students encountered. While the students did indicate that peer mentors should be active in the community, they also mentioned the importance of having a peer mentor who was outgoing and willing to take the initial step to engage with students. Students stated that the primary need for an outgoing peer mentor was due to the fact that students in the LLC were transitioning to college and might not reach out as much as they should.

### **Summary**

Four prominent themes emerged from this study as it relates to the roles of peer mentors and RAs: 1) academic and social motivation; 2) academic support for LLC students; 3) authority within the LLC; and 4) engagement with LLC students. Participants' detailed accounts of their experiences in the Business LLC indicated that they felt RAs served as a source of academic and social motivation. While the RA did not hold study sessions, she modeled the behavior expected of her LLC students both academically and socially. Additionally, students indicated the importance of peer mentors providing academic support for LLC students. Students defined academic support as peer mentors assisting with homework, facilitating study sessions before large exams, and serving as a general resource for the business major. Business LLC students also described their RA's role as an authoritative figure and conflict manager counter to the peer mentor's role as individuals who are socially and actively engaged on the floor and within the LLC.

## Chapter 5: Summary, Discussion, and Reflection

Peer mentorship, specifically in a residential setting, has existed since the creation of the earliest colleges and universities in the U.S. (Blimling, 2016). Universities continued to change their missions and concepts of peer mentorship. As new generations of college students entered higher education, administrators worked with students both academically and socially, creating new functional areas including housing and residence life (Blimling, 2010; Rudolph, 1990). With the changing college structure came a change in the role of peer mentors. Peer mentor's roles have not been consistently defined (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Jacobi, 1991). A variety of contemporary challenges facing colleges and universities has encouraged administrators to turn to their students to be effective and efficient resources for their peers (Keup & Martin, 2016).

Living-learning communities (LLCs) are programs within higher education that have received more attention due to their ability to help students succeed both in and out of the classroom (Inkelas et al., 2012). In many instances, peer mentors are used in conjunction with RA as student staff members for an LLC. The purpose of this study was to better understand the perceptions LLC students have of their peer mentors and RAs and examine how those individuals influence the students' experiences and the LLC. The qualitative methodology for this study was a single-site case study with multiple cases to help better understand the participants' perspectives of their experience (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Participants included four students from the Beta State University Business LLC.

Students were asked to participate in the study by the Assistant Director for Residential Education at Beta State University. They were asked to give both verbal and signed consent to participate in the study and, after giving consent, participated in a semi-structured interview via Skype with predetermined questions. Several themes emerged from participant interviews and

document analysis: 1) academic and social motivation; 2) academic support for LLC students; 3) authority within the LLC; and 4) engagement with LLC students. This study revealed the significance for LLC students of having both a peer mentor and an RA within the LLC in terms of both academic and social support and for their persistence in college. However, it also reinforced the importance of training individuals for their roles within the LLC. While the LLC students were certain of the role the peer mentors and RA should or should not play for the community, it became clear that they thought this concept might not have successfully been articulated to all staff.

### **Student Involvement and Ecological Theory**

Although exploratory in nature, this multiple case study provided a clearer picture of how students perceive their peer mentors and RAs in a residential setting. Two concepts, academic support and social support were examined through this study. Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement implies that students must involve themselves and invest effort into their learning and development efforts. Astin (1984) also provided evidence that living on campus was positively associated with increased student involvement and student persistence. LLC students in this study described the motivation they received from their RA to be both academically and socially involved in the LLC. Using Astin's theory, this would predict that there were higher persistence rates for LLC students at Beta State University. The Office of Institutional Research (2016) provided data which revealed that students in LLCs were retained at higher percentages and were more likely to graduate within four years when compared to their peers who either lived off campus or lived on-campus but not in an LLC.

In addition, this multiple case study provided some insight into how environmental factors can influence students' experiences and development. Bronfenbrenner's ecological

theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) suggests that people are influenced by everything that surrounds them (i.e., process, person, context, and time). When discussing residential settings such as LLCs, there are a variety of factors that might influence the students. For example, the microsystem focuses on groups that immediately and directly influence students' development. In the case of Beta State University, this could be peer mentors in the LLC, RAs, and even the FIR, in addition to the university's environmental factors and students' personal beliefs or experiences. The mesosystem focuses on the interconnection between the microsystems. For the Business LLC, this could be how peer mentors or RAs interact with the FIR or how those individuals interact with the remainder of the university community and affect the student. All of these systems are influenced by the Department of Housing and Residence Life, Beta State University, and the environment in which the students live. As research continues on LLCs, it is imperative to note how the experiences of the students and their development are impacted by varied environmental factors where they be a single individual or factor, such as a peer mentor, or the interaction of multiple factors.

### **Mentoring Versus Discipline**

While LLC students indicated their satisfaction with the RA and peer mentors for the Business LLC, it became clear that they still felt as though the peer mentor overstepped their role at various times. These perceptions of the peer mentor as an authority figure limited students' interest and confidence in approaching the peer mentor to seek advice. While the RA was depicted as the authority figure in terms of solving conflict and being a disciplinarian; students still felt as though they could approach their RA with certain topics knowing that there was the possibility the RA would have to report to their supervisors. When discussing the peer mentors,

students felt more comfortable knowing that the peer mentor was not a mandatory reporter and should not have to report policy violations to their supervisors except in extreme circumstances.

### **Implications**

This study addressed a gap in the literature concerning students' perceptions of peer mentorship within a residential setting, particularly the role of the LLC RA and the LLC peer mentor. While there is previous research on RAs' and peer mentors' perceptions of their roles, the students' have their own experiences and play a key role in the success of the LLC. By learning about LLC students' experiences and perceptions, practitioners can learn how to better train their staff to serve as the proper support for the LLC students and their experiences and they can further the conversation on "best practices" for creating a successful LLC.

### **Peer Mentor Training**

A significant implication for this study was the need for proper peer mentor training to emphasize their role as a support system but not as an authority figure for the LLC. In order to provide the correct support from both the RA and the peer mentor, it is important that each individual know the role he or she plays in supporting LLC students. It is also important that they know the boundaries for their role and that they abide by them. For example, training the peer mentor so that they understand their role is to provide advice to students when asked, but not to be an authoritative figure on the floor. One participant in the study did seem uncertain of whether the peer mentor should be a mandatory reporter or if they took the role upon themselves. This indicates the need to present the same information about the role of the RA and the peer mentor to the LLC students, particularly when it comes to whether peer mentors are supposed to serve as a mandatory reporter. The findings of this study align with previous research that



indicated students may be confused over the role their peer mentor or RA were supposed to have (Inkelas et al., 2012).

At Beta State University, RAs and PAs are staff and participate in a two-week training. Their training covers includes responding to mental health issues and reporting policy to working with LGBTQ students and properly opening the halls. Peer Mentors are not considered staff and receive only a brief overview of expectations but are not required to participate in training. Similarly, since they are not staff members, they are not designated mandatory reporters. Inkelas et al.'s (2012) research previously discussed that a lack of peer mentor training could be the source of blame for vague role descriptions for RAs and peer mentors. Future work could be done to help create a training session for peer mentors at Beta State University which would not only discuss their role within an LLC but also discuss the different ways in which they can mentor others. Peer mentors may be successfully navigating the majority of their role without training; however, as research (Benjamin, 2007b; Inkelas et al., 2012) indicates, this may be due to the fact that the peer mentors were previously LLC members giving them insight into how to be effective in their role.

### **Quantity of Support and Resources**

In addition to the RA and peer mentors on the floor, the Business LLC in this study also had a faculty-in-residence (FIR). While students seemed to articulate a difference between the academic motivation the RA provided and the academic support the peer mentors provided, it was clear that there was also some overlap between the two positions. In addition, students mentioned their involvement with the FIR as a third source of support on the floor. Students described some instances when a peer mentor was unsure of an answer, but would direct students to the FIR. Many times, students mentioned that their FIR was generally a source of social

support on the floor as the FIR would interact with the students by inviting them to watch movies as a group or provide a social setting for students to interact with each other. Students' descriptions of the FIR, peer mentors, and RA roles at times overlapped. Similar to the differentiation of the peer mentor role and the RA role through increased training, the findings reveal the need to explore additional training and role differentiation for the positions.

In addition, the data appears to indicate a need to discuss the quantity of resources provided to students in an LLC. With at least three individuals on the floor who seemingly share similar responsibilities, it brings into question whether students are exposed to too many resources for social and academic support on the floor. Although mainly used in analogies for consumer behavior in the business world, there is increased evidence which states that having too many options can be counterproductive (Broilo, Espartel, & Basso, 2016; Iyengar & Lepper, 2000; Shah & Wolford, 2007) to the end goal of your program or business. With students, having too many options for academic and social support could not only be counterproductive but could promote a tendency to deny responsibility to the self and undervalue the need for a peer mentor for the LLC. For example, one student described an instance where a peer mentor would direct students with academic questions to the FIR. While this may provide the student with an answer from a reliable source, this takes away from the experience of the mentor and student and instead transfers it to a faculty member. The next time the student has a question, they might bypass the peer mentor all together and go straight to the faculty member displacing the peer mentor's role onto a faculty member thereby devaluing the position and perception of a peer mentor.

### **Limitations/Future Research**

My role as the study's primary instrument and data analyzer created a limitation due to the bias I may have brought into the study. My experiences working within housing and residence life, particularly with LLCs may have influenced my interpretations of the LLC students' experiences. The sample size of four LLC students was small; however, the size of the LLC was also small. The LLC is capped at 25 students each year; thus, 20% of the LLC participated in the study. The choice to limit the study to one LLC within a focus institution was intentionally done based on previous research (Wawrzynski, 2010) which stated that combining students from different learning communities (Pike, 1999, Pasque & Murphy, 2005) negates the influence of the LLC theme (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003); however, this also served as a limitation for the study. These limitations make the study's findings relative only to the focus institution although they provide a starting point from which to discuss similar programs at other institutions. Additionally, students remarked on the limitation of having to complete an interview online versus on site due to their time constraints and access to a computer or internet at the time of their interview. In hindsight, interviewing the students in person might have made them more comfortable discussing their experiences and would have allowed for better thick description of the students' actions during the interview in comparison with interviewing them via Skype. Skype may have also contributed to the shorter length of the interviews than was desired and expected. While students did share a lot of their experiences in a short amount of time, in person interviews may have allowed for a more controlled and comfortable environment for both the students and me to expand upon the topics being discussed.

Further research on the topic of perception of peer mentorship within LLCs should include a greater number of participants. Additionally, research could be expanded to include a

greater number of LLCs at a single institution. While the study was intentionally limited to one LLC, expanding the research to include multiple LLCs with the same design at the same institution may provide a more well-rounded description of how that LLC design affects perceptions of peer mentorship and students' LLC experiences. In particular, students' perceptions of their community members' experiences with peer mentors was a common topic that could be explored. When students were asked about others' experiences, they relayed stories that indicated their peers might not have had good experiences with the peer mentors; however, this did not converge with their own experiences and appeared to show that students felt their experiences were unique to the rest of the group. Continued research could help better define peer mentors influence on student's individual psychosocial and cognitive development. This research could reveal whether having multiple sources for academic and social support on an LLC (i.e. a FIR, peer mentor(s), and RA) is overwhelming for students or provides just the right amount of support to encourage student success. This could also lead to future research and discussion on how to create successful LLCs.

### **Conclusion**

Living-learning communities (LLC) are seen as a way to help promote student engagement and retention using best practices in higher education (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2014). RAs and LLC peer mentors are members of a residential community who are employed to help promote community among residents on their floor or in their building (Rieske & Benjamin, 2015). Previous research (Wyile, 2012) on LLC peer mentor interactions provided examples of how peer mentors could enhance a community within a college LLC. Through in-depth interviews with four Business LLC students, this multiple case study provided a clearer picture of how students perceive their peer mentors and

RA within a residential setting. The findings reveal that students see their peer mentor and RA as playing two very distinct roles within the community and indicate the importance of the academic and social support they provide for the LLC students. By exploring the student perceptions of these roles, student affairs practitioners can better understand the LLC student experience. This study provides a launching point for further discussion on how student affairs practitioners train additional student staff members, such as peer mentors who live in the residence hall, and how to best utilize the resources those students provide for their peers. Understanding these concepts allows for enhanced support and services for students in LLCs and provides a point from which to discuss the ways in which to create a more successful LLC.

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## Appendices



## Appendix A: Sample Recruitment Email

To: Student Name

From: Assistant Director for Residential Education, Beta State University

Hello!

We hope the end of your semester is going smoothly. Below is an email request from a Graduate Student who is working on her thesis and would like your help.

---

Hello Friends!

My name is Nicole Nicholson and I am a graduate student at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. I am emailing you because I am working on my thesis which revolves around LLC experiences. As a former LLC student and as somebody who currently works with LLCs at my institution, I'm very excited to hear about your experiences. Your participation would include a Skype interview with approximately 11 questions. While I will schedule interviews in 90 minutes increments, the interview may or may not take that long. Your only other obligation to the study may be to take a few minutes to review your transcript for accuracy about a week after your interview takes place.

Below is a link with a list of interview times which you can select from before your finals week. Since we know that beginning of the semester is very busy, I'm also willing to complete interviews during winter break if you have an interest. Please do not feel obligated in any way to do an interview, especially over break but if you do have an interest, please email me at nnichol8@vols.utk.edu. If you are interested in interviewing for this research study after the spring semester begins, please sign up for a time slot at the link below using your email (instead of your name) at least 12 hours before the timeslot you are signing up for. I will email you information in regards to the interview as soon as I see that you have signed up. I have attached a signed consent form which would need your signature before we can begin our interview. Should you have any questions about the consent form after reviewing it, please feel free to email me and I would be happy to answer your questions. It also describes the study in a little more detail. The consent form also describes the confidentiality of this study. I will do my absolute best to make sure that your confidentiality is kept including using pseudonyms in place of your names throughout my paper. If you chose to participate in the study, please sign and date the consent for and return it to me at nnichol8@vols.utk.edu as an email attachment. If you have any other questions, I would be happy to answer them for you. You can feel free to reach out to me at nnichol8@vols.utk.edu. I look forward to speaking with you!

Interview Time Sign-up: <http://doodle.com/poll/ssmkem6vm3x9uysx>

**Nicole Nicholson**

Graduate Assistant, Living and Learning Communities

University of Tennessee

## Appendix B: Interview Protocol

## Interview Protocol

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_ Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Informed Consent signed?    Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

### Introduction:

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. I believe this discussion will be valuable to the study and contribute to better understanding the experiences of students in similar roles.

Your responses will be confidential, though quotes from our time together may be used in the study. If this occurs, you will be given a pseudonym. Additionally, I will send you the themes I find in this interview and certain statements I think may be pertinent for you to review and clarify your statements if necessary.

This interview should not take more than 90 minutes and to assist with note taking, it will be recorded.

### Questions

(Probing questions may be used in addition to the questions listed below)

1. What has been your most significant experience this year in your living-learning community?
2. What is the purpose of the Peer Mentor?
  - a. How would you describe your Peer Mentor to a student who is new to the living-learning community?
  - b. How would you characterize your relationship with your peer mentor?
  - c. Provide a specific example of a positive interaction with your peer mentor.
  - d. Provide a specific example of a negative interaction with your peer mentor.
3. How does the living-learning community members perceive Peer Mentors?
4. In what ways do peer mentors affect the academic support within the community?
  - a. What are some examples?
5. In what ways do Resident Assistants affect the academic support within the community?
  - a. What are some examples?
6. In what ways do peer mentors affect the social support within the community?
  - a. What are some examples?
7. In what ways do Resident Assistants affect the social support within the community?
  - a. What are some examples?
8. How do peer mentors facilitate faculty-student interactions within the LLC?

- a. What are some examples?
- 9. How do Resident Assistants facilitate faculty-student interactions within the LLC?
  - a. What are some examples?
- 10. How do peer mentors facilitate peer interactions within the LLC?
  - a. What are some examples?
- 11. How do Resident Assistants facilitate peer interactions within the LLC?
  - a. What are some examples?

## Appendix C: Informed Consent

## Informed Consent

### **Perceptions of Peer Mentorship within Living Learning Communities: A Case Study**

Researcher: Nicole Nicholson

#### **Description of the research and your participation**

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Nicole Nicholson. The purpose of this research is to better understand how students in living learning communities perceive the role of their resident assistant and their living learning community peer mentor based on the experiences they have had within their first semester.

Your participation will involve one, one-on-one interview with the researcher. The interview will be digitally video recorded for transcription purposes. Additionally, you may be asked to review your transcript for accuracy. The amount of time required for your participation will be approximately 30-90 minutes.

#### **Potential Benefits**

While there are no known benefits to the participants of the study in regards to the results of their participation, the research may help to inform the practice of building a living learning community. The research may help us understand how peer mentors and resident assistant roles are perceived and how they affect students in the community and the overall community.

#### **Risks and Discomforts**

There are no foreseeable risks associated with this research project other than those encountered in everyday life; however, should you feel uncomfortable at any time, you can skip any questions and/or discontinue your participation in the study. Most studies involve some risk to your confidentiality and it is possible that someone could find out you were in this study or see the study information, but we believe this risk is unlikely to occur because of the procedures used to protect your information.

#### **Confidentiality**

The researcher will do everything they can to protect your privacy. The information in the study records will be kept confidential. Data will be stored securely and will be made available only to persons conducting the study unless participants specifically give permission in writing to do otherwise. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link participants to the study. Pseudonyms will be used to help protect your privacy and will be used in place of your name so that your name will not be linked to the interview, video recording, or transcript.

#### **Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in the study is voluntary and as such, you may withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You will not be penalized in any way should you decide not to participate or to withdraw from the study. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will not be used.

### Contact Information

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures (or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study), you may contact the researcher, Nicole Nicholson, at [nnichol8@vols.utk.edu](mailto:nnichol8@vols.utk.edu) and 865-974-3885, or their advisor, Dr. Dorian McCoy at [dmccoy5@utk.edu](mailto:dmccoy5@utk.edu) and 865-974-6140. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact the University of Tennessee IRB Compliance Officer at [utkirb@utk.edu](mailto:utkirb@utk.edu) or (865) 974-7697.

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*By signing below, you consent to be a part of 'Perceptions of Peer Mentorship within Living Learning Communities: A Case Study' until such time that you withdraw your consent to participate.*

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

*By signing below, you consent to having your interview video recorded until such time that you withdraw your consent to participate. All video recording will be destroyed upon completion of a transcript.*

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_



#### Appendix D: IRB Approval Letter

## IRB Approval Letter



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
TENNESSEE  
KNOXVILLE

December 13, 2016

Nicole Nicholson,  
UTHSC - Chief of Staff - University Relations - Admin

Re: UTK IRB-16-03395-XP  
Study Title: Perceptions of Peer Mentorship within Living Learning Communities: A Case Study

Dear Nicole Nicholson:

The UTK Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed your application for the above referenced project. It determined that your application is eligible for expedited review under 45 CFR 46.110(b)(1), categories (6) and (7). The IRB has reviewed these materials and determined that they do comply with proper consideration for the rights and welfare of human subjects and the regulatory requirements for the protection of human subjects.

Therefore, this letter constitutes full approval by the IRB of your application (version 1.3) as submitted, including Informed Consent (v1.2), Recruitment Email (v1.1) and the Interview Protocol (v1.0). The listed documents have been dated and stamped IRB approved. Approval of this study will be valid from December 13, 2016 to December 12, 2017.

In the event that subjects are to be recruited using solicitation materials, such as brochures, posters, web-based advertisements, etc., these materials must receive prior approval of the IRB. Any revisions in the approved application must also be submitted to and approved by the IRB prior to implementation. In addition, you are responsible for reporting any unanticipated serious adverse events or other problems involving risks to subjects or others in the manner required by the local IRB policy.

Finally, re-approval of your project is required by the IRB in accord with the conditions specified above. You may not continue the research study beyond the time or other limits specified unless you obtain prior written approval of the IRB.

Sincerely,

Colleen P. Gilrane, Ph.D.  
Chair

Institutional Review Board | Office of Research & Engagement  
1534 White Avenue Knoxville, TN 37996-1529  
865-974-7697 865-974-7400 fax irb.utk.edu

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Flagship Campus of the University of Tennessee System

### Vita

Nicole Nicholson received a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from Shippensburg University in May, 2015. Her previous research included studies on stress responses in college students who have symptoms of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), and studies on stress responses and frontal lobe asymmetry in relation to symptoms of NPD, Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD), and binge drinking behaviors. Nicole's previously published research includes *The Effect of Therapeutic Riding on Children with Autism: Two Case Studies* (Johnson, Nicholson, & Potoczak, 2015). She will graduate from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK) in May 2017 with a Master of Science in College Student Personnel. Nicole currently works as a Graduate Assistant for the Living and Learning Communities in University Housing at UTK, but has experience in housing and residential life, orientation, and student success.