

The Whitman College Residential Learning Environment

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In recent years, institutions of higher education have been challenged to intentionally design programs that enhance and contribute to the student learning experience. In order to meet this challenge, the Residence Life and Housing Office at Whitman College has taken the charge to fully develop and understand the learning taking place within our residence halls. This document is the first step toward that development. *The Whitman College Residential Learning Environment* analyzes and describes the learning environment within the residence halls of Whitman College. As we embark on this journey, we begin by mapping the residence hall learning environment, using the definition of environment mapping proposed by the major student affairs organizations in *Learning Reconsidered 2* (Keeling, 2006): “Mapping a learning environment is the process of recognizing, identifying, and documenting the sites for learning activities on campus...” (Borrego, 2006, p. 11). In other words, our first step in this process is to identify the numerous sites for learning within the context of our residence life program in order to fully understand the type of learning that takes place in our halls.

The Whitman College Residence Life Program

The Residence Life and Housing Office is responsible for the day-to-day operations of the entire on-campus residential program for Whitman College, a private liberal arts and sciences undergraduate college with a student population of around 1450 students. The college has a two year on-campus residency requirement for all students. The residence life program consists of nine residence halls and an Interest House Community. Of the nine residence halls, two are devoted solely to first-year student housing. Two are mixed-class halls that house first-year and upper-class students. The remaining five solely house upper-class students (non-first-year students). The Interest House Community consists of 11 residential houses. Each house espouses an interest and students apply to them based on the interest. All of the residence halls are described below:

Residence Hall	Type of Hall	Max. Occupancy
Anderson Hall	First-year, mixed gender hall	140
Jewett Hall	First-year, mixed gender hall	180
Lyman House	Mixed class, mixed gender hall	99
Prentiss Hall	Mixed class, female only hall (also houses three national sororities)	150
North Hall	Upper-class, mixed gender hall	75
Douglas Hall	Upper-class, mixed gender hall	70
College House	Upper-class, mixed gender hall	40
Tamarac House	Upper-class, mixed gender hall (devoted to the outdoor pursuits)	21
Marcus House	Upper-class, mixed gender hall	27
Interest House Community	Upper-class, mixed gender. Themed houses include: Asian Studies, Community Service, Environmental, Fine Arts, La Maison Francaise (French language and culture), Das Deutsche Haus (German language and culture), Global Awareness, La Casa Hispana (Spanish language and culture), MECCA (Multi-Ethnic Center for Cultural Awareness), Tekisuijuku (Japanese language and culture), Writing	80

The residence life program employs seven live-in resident directors (RD's) and 37 para-professional resident assistants (RA's). Whitman's system is very unique in that RA's are hired on the calendar year as opposed to the academic year. RA's are selected in November and begin their positions after an intensive training program in January, working through the spring semester and the following fall semester. RA's are responsible for overseeing a group of students, either in a residence hall section or house. RD's are hired for academic years and are trained in August before the start of the year. They are responsible for supervising a staff of RA's and administering the residence life program in a given hall or set of halls/houses.

Through the development of students in their living communities, the residence life program aims to help students to gain a more fulfilling academic experience. "The experiences we seek to create in residence halls and interest houses are ones which enable an individual to learn and grow" (Residence Life, 1994-2007). Through various involvement opportunities, students develop skills conducive to community living and leadership. "At its optimum, we believe that the residence hall experience helps maximize one's potential for individual development, growth, and sense of community" (Residence Life, 1994-2007).

Learning in the Residence Halls

Before we can begin to fully analyze the learning that takes place in our residence halls, we must acknowledge that all students are at different places in their learning and development. Most students have experienced approximately 18 years of life before entering our residential environment. Astin (1993) referred to what students bring into their college experience as inputs, or "personal qualities the student brings initially to the education program (including the student's initial level of developed talent at the time of entry)" (p. 18). Some of these inputs can include demographic information, educational background, political orientation, behavior pattern, reason for selecting an institution, financial status, disability status, major field of study, life goals, and reason for attending college (Thurmond & Popkess-Vawter, 2003). This document speaks to the learning taking place in the environment of the residence halls and we acknowledge that this learning can vary depending on the inputs that students bring to the picture. We must also acknowledge that some students do not live a full two years in our residence halls and may very well have different learning experiences from those that spend the full two years within our residence hall system. These students include older transfer students, students who live with family in Walla Walla, and sophomore men who fulfill their residency requirement by living in a fraternity (a program not administered by residence life).

As we begin to take an in-depth look at our residential learning environment, we observe that learning occurs by two means: (1) through day-to-day living and interaction within a residence hall community and (2) through intentional residence life programming and procedures that contribute to student learning. In other words, ***the residential learning experience at Whitman College consists of learning that takes place through community living supported by resources to help make meaning of that experience.*** We have analyzed this learning through the lens of the interconnectedness of student learning as described in *Learning Reconsidered* (NASPA/ACPA, 2004). The four processes of comprehensive student learning that are described by this framework are identity formation, emotional and cognitive learning, behavioral learning, and meaning making processes. By living within our residence halls, students learn through all four of these processes. By analyzing the learning that takes place through these frameworks it allows us to better understand and intentionally design our programs to foster maximum student learning through the residential experience. *In addition to the text that follows, the diagram on page 6 of this document*

provides a visual representation of the type of learning that takes place through the Whitman College residential experience.

Identity Formation. Identity formation refers to how students respond to both external and internal challenges that they face and the various identities and competencies that develop through dealing with these challenges (NASPA/ACPA, 2004). Students' sense of self and identity is greatly developed within our residence halls. Students enter their first year and are immediately surrounded by individuals of varying backgrounds and lifestyles that force them to reassess their own identity formation. They now have to navigate a varied landscape of relationships with people that are members of their community. Through this navigation, our residents develop a sense of self that is informed by their lives to that point and is transformed by the new experiences they have with the community members around them. As individual identity forms, a sense of community identity forms through the programs and community norms developed both intentionally, through planning on the part of hall staff members, and passively as residents learn through trial and error the intricacies of their surrounding community. This continues past a students' first-year experience as they navigate the new community of their second-year housing, surrounded by new community members and most likely new staff members.

The live-in staff (RA's and RD's) is trained to help students make meaning through these peer interactions in order to help them form their senses of self. Staff members aid their residents and help them to make meaning of the lessons learned through interacting within their community. Issues of individual freedom and boundary setting become crucial means by which students begin to form their own senses of self in relation to the members of community that surround them. Staff members also assist residents as they begin to learn more about diverse backgrounds and lifestyles through formal programming and informal interactions that help students to better understand the community around them and how that shapes their own experience and identity. One aim of the residential experience is that students, through the assistance of their hall staff, will leave the halls having gained a firmer and more confident sense of self.

Emotional and Cognitive Learning. Learning also occurs in emotional and cognitive domains in the residence halls. "Emotional elements of personality respond to the demand for increasing coherence or integrity while cognitive elements support the development of cognitive complexity..." (NASPA/ACPA, 2004, p. 15). Students begin to manage and better understand the emotional cues of life. Through constant interaction with such a diverse group of people in their residence hall community, students have the potential to experience a myriad of emotions brought on by circumstances with by fellow community members or circumstances external to the community. Residents learn to manage these emotions in a trial-and-error fashion as they respond differently in different situations and gain feedback from those living around them. Some residents learn that their means for handling emotions create difficulties within community living and they use support structures in place through the residence life program to help them through these difficulties. These structures range from informal conversations with staff members who role model effective emotional responses within the community to more structured policy and judicial processes that help students who need assistance with how to respond effectively to various emotional cues and community standards.

Cognitive growth also occurs through the various situations that students encounter in the residence halls. Daily interactions with roommates and other community members require students to respond in appropriate ways after fully analyzing situations. Growth occurs as thought processes

mature and students make more-informed decisions based on previous experience and knowledge gained both before and during college. Students are also asked to make more decisions for themselves regarding issues of housing arrangements for upcoming years, roommate pairings, whether or not they want to move from their current housing situation, and the list goes on. The supportive structure of the residence life program helps students make these decisions with a sense of freedom and autonomy while providing the resources for them to make informed decisions that will best benefit their experience while at the college.

Behavioral Learning. Similar to the means by which students form their senses of identity through their experiences in the residence halls, students learn behaviorally through their interactions with the members of their residential communities. Behavioral learning refers to issues of both interpersonal and intrapersonal growth, as well as the development of life-management skills (NASPA/ACPA, 2004). Merely living in our residence hall environments helps students to develop more effective communication skills as they navigate the relationships that they participate in with their fellow community members. Students must adjust to what is, for most, a new set of community standards and this brings with it an adjustment in behavior, typically on multiple levels. Students must adjust behavior in their very personal life when living with roommates. They also learn what it requires to become an engaged member of their community within their section, house, or hall. As conflicts arise, students learn more about how they react to such situations and how to deal with conflicts in broader terms. In other words, every single opportunity that residents have to interact with one another can be viewed as a learning opportunity of how to relate to others and how their actions affect those around them.

In addition to interpersonal skills, residents in our halls also develop a new sense of autonomy as they begin to make their own decisions with regards to certain aspects of their lives. The residence life staff works to provide a safe atmosphere for students to set their own boundaries and gain practice in living within their own boundaries while interacting with others. For many students, the experience of living in a residence hall also provides opportunities to practice life-management skills that they have never had the chance to practice before, from washing their own laundry to cooking a meal for themselves to effective planning and organization of programs for their peers. The staff is in place to help students develop these skills while providing opportunities to make connections between what may be intangible problems and concrete solutions to these problems.

Meaning Making Processes. As mentioned in previous sections, learning takes place in the residence halls as students make meaning of the experiences they have had. The meaning making process comprises the “students’ effort to comprehend the essence and significance of events, relationships, and learning; to gain a richer understanding of themselves in a larger context; and to experience a sense of wholeness” (NASPA/ACPA, 2004, p. 15). Living and involvement in our residence halls encourages the development of leadership, character, and personal responsibility within a community. These skills contribute to a students’ ability to make meaning of the experiences they have had. Through identity formation, emotional and cognitive development, and behavioral learning, students develop some of the necessary attributes and knowledge in order to take more responsibility for this meaning-making process. The residence life staff and program provides outlets to assist students in this experience. From educational programming to preparing staff members to counsel and help students to better understand their impact in a larger community, residence life provides the structure for students to take the reigns and make meaning of their experiences with the proper guidance and support.

Learning through the Resident Assistant Role

A “map” of the residential learning environment would be incomplete without a mention of a specific type of learning that takes place; that is the learning one experiences from being a resident assistant (RA). Through an intensive training program, supportive professional staff, and lived experience, the RA’s within our halls experience a tremendous amount of learning. In addition to the learning that takes place in the four previously mentioned areas, RA’s also learn much more as they take on different roles of educators within their halls and houses. They develop skills and better understandings of life in a community. Some of the lessons and areas that RA’s directly develop are in the areas of leadership and role modeling, teamwork and support, responsibility and time management, boundary-setting, counseling and mediating, and teaching and programming, some of the very learning that takes place for residents but in a different sense and structure. While RA learning is not the focus of this document, it is important to realize the tremendous learning that occurs through the RA experience.

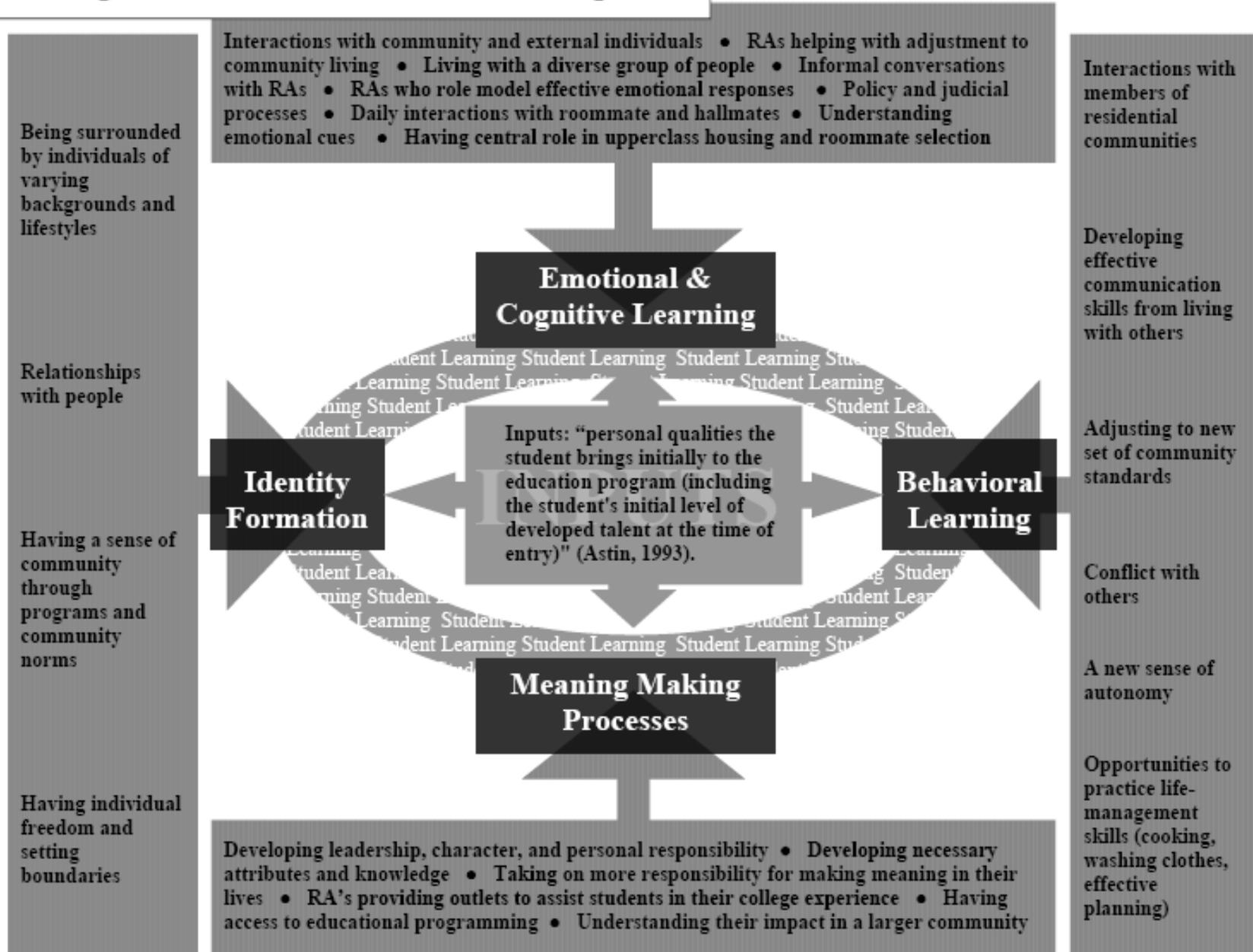
Conclusion

The learning that takes place within the Whitman College residence halls is very complex. This document is a strong start to truly understanding the learning that takes place in this environment. A review of the learning that takes place through the four outlined processes reveals a transformation that takes place within our students through the residential experience. Learning through identity formation, emotional development, cognitive development, behavioral learning, and development of meaning-making processes truly transforms students in a holistic sense that contributes to the overall mission of a liberal arts education to “foster intellectual vitality, confidence, leadership, and the flexibility to succeed in a changing technological, multicultural world” (Mission Statement, 1994-2007).

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Learning in the Residence Halls occurs through...



This diagram provides a visual representation of the learning environment within the Whitman College residence halls. The four boxes around the outside contain various learning sites throughout the environment. These each coincide with four processes of learning and contribute to the overall learning experience of each student. This learning is affected by the inputs that students bring to their residential experience, as denoted by the arrows leading out from the middle box and in from the outer processes of learning.

APPENDIX A

The following is list generated by the following prompt given to our live-in resident director staff: Create a list with all the possible opportunities for learning that might occur, both for general residents and for RA's, with our residence life system. This could include programs, policies, procedures, etc. Be creative and try to think both within and outside the box.

While it is impossible to create a comprehensive list of all sites for learning within a residence hall, this list contributes to our understanding of the possibilities for learning through residential living at Whitman College.

For residents:

- “I would say that every moment in a residence hall provides a learning opportunity, or at least the possibility for one.”
- Application process for RA selection
- Coeducational living
- Completing house/hall chores
- Dealing with things they cannot change
- Discussions about classes
- Eating on the “bin system” (food delivery system in the Interest House Community)
- Friends and section/housemates moving due to issues beyond the control of the resident
- House obligations
- Housing selection
- Independent living and life skills
- Interacting with and living with a diverse group of people
- Interacting with people who have diverse living habits
- Intimate relationships
- Involvement in hall council
- Learning how to study
- Lifestyle experimentation
- Living in an established section
- Living with hall/housemates
- Living with roommate(s)
- Living within a community of policies and regulations
- Maintaining connections with friends across campus
- Moving from year to year and adjusting to change
- Needing to ask for help
- Ownership of communal spaces
- Passive learning
- Policy violations
- RA-resident relationship
- RD-resident relationship
- Relationships with house advisors
- Relationships with non-traditional-aged students living in the residence halls

- Responsible behavior in challenging/tempting situations
- Self-care
- Social conversations
- Struggling with issues of identity
- Study groups
- Teaching new staff members intricacies of a new community
- The move-in process
- Transition from first-year to upper-class housing
- Transitions to new staff members
- Wellness through programming around the wellness model

For RA's

- Administrative procedures (ie. weekly logs, incident reports, maintenance requests)
- Application process for RA position
- Assessing needs/wants of a community
- Boundary-setting
- Communicating with diverse individuals
- Counseling and helping relationships with residents
- Crisis management
- Learning from residents
- Policy enforcement, even when in disagreement of policy
- Programming for community
- RA-administrator/staff relationship
- RA-RD supervisory relationship
- RA-resident relationship
- Responsibility through the position
- Role modeling for students who are the same age/year
- Role modeling for younger students
- Self-care
- Time management
- Working toward common goals with a staff team