

The Whitman College Residential Learning Environment

-Executive Summary -

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. 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 employs seven live-in staff members, called resident directors (RD's), and 37 student resident assistants (RA's). 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. 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 have observed 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). 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.

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). Learning through identity formation occurs in the residence halls through these sites:

- ≈ **Being surrounded by individuals of varying backgrounds and lifestyles**
- ≈ **Relationships with people**
- ≈ **Having a sense of community through programs and community norms**
- ≈ **Experiencing individual freedom and setting boundaries**

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). Emotional and cognitive learning occurs in the residence halls through these sites:

- ≈ **Interactions with community and external individuals**
- ≈ **RAs helping with adjustment to community living**
- ≈ **Living with a diverse group of people**
- ≈ **Informal conversations with RAs**
- ≈ **RAs who role model effective emotional responses**
- ≈ **Policy and judicial processes**
- ≈ **Daily interactions with roommates and hall-mates**
- ≈ **Having a central role in upper-class housing and roommate selection**

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). Behavioral learning occurs through these sites:

- ≈ **Interactions with members of residential communities**
- ≈ **Developing effective communication skills from living with others**
- ≈ **Adjusting to a new set of community standards**
- ≈ **Conflict with others**
- ≈ **A new sense of autonomy**
- ≈ **Opportunities to practice life-management skills (ie. cooking, washing clothes, effective time management, etc.)**

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). Learning and developing meaning making processes occur through these sites:

- ≈ **Developing leadership, character, and responsibility.**
- ≈ **Taking on more responsibility for making meaning in one’s own life**
- ≈ **RA’s providing outlets to assist students through their college experience**
- ≈ **Having access to educational programming**
- ≈ **Understanding one’s impact in a larger community**

Conclusion

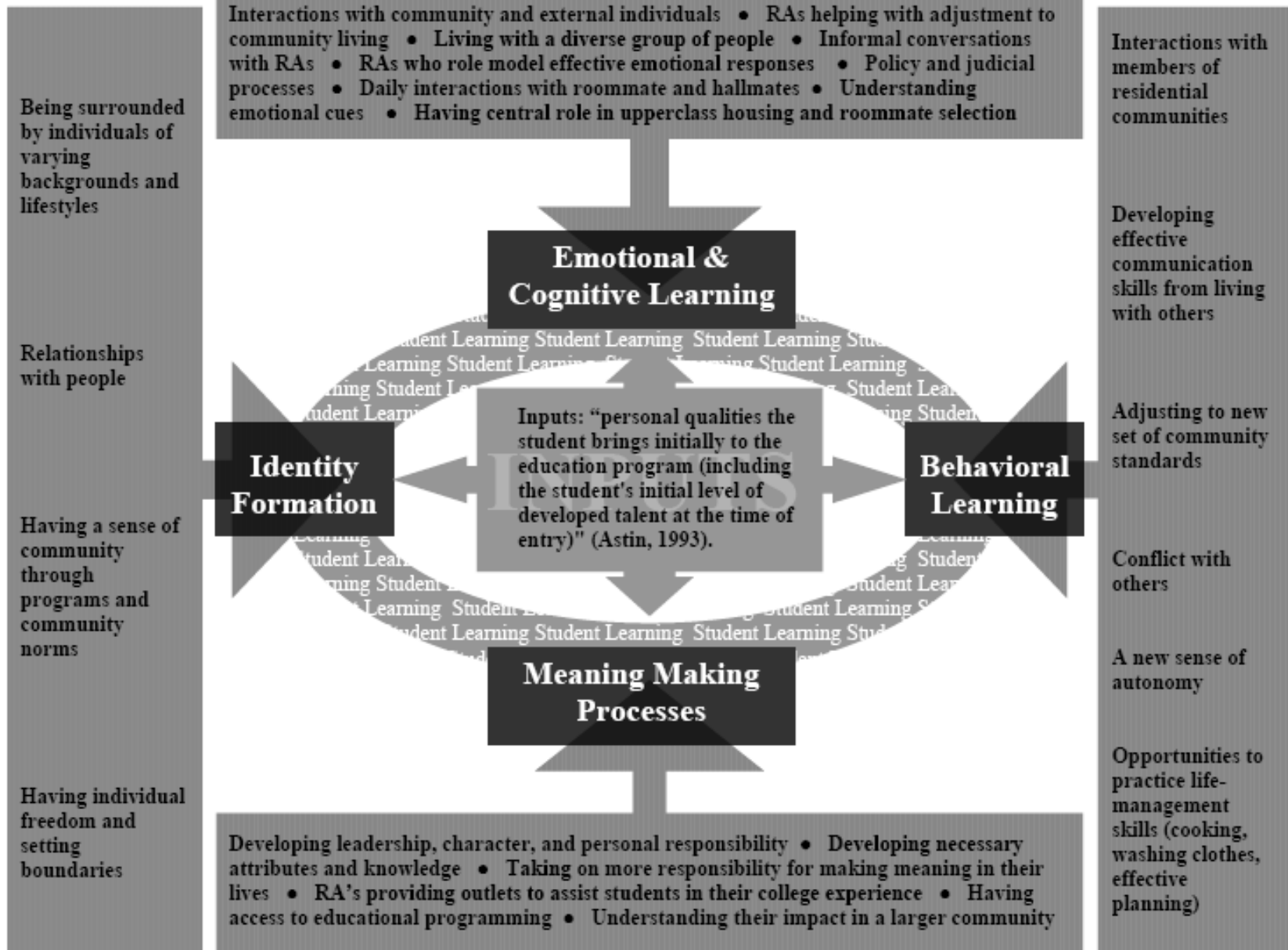
The learning that takes place within the Whitman College residence halls is very complex. Learning through identity formation, emotional development, cognitive development, behavioral learning, and development of meaning-making processes truly transforms our students in a holistic sense that contributes 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).

References

- Mission statement.* (1994-2007). Retrieved January 22, 2007, from Whitman College Web site:
http://www.whitman.edu/content/about/mission_statement
- NASPA/ACPA. (2004). *Learning reconsidered: A campus-wide focus on the student experience.* Washington, DC: NASPA & ACPA.
- Residence life: Basic information.* (1994-2007). Retrieved January 22, 2007, from Whitman College Web site:
http://www.whitman.edu/content/residence_life/basic-information

The Whitman College Residential Learning Environment (Full Report) is available at
http://www.whitman.edu/content/residence_life/learning/learning-environment

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.