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The Efficacy of Residential Learning Communities on First Generation, First-Year College Students' Success at a Rural Regional University

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THE EFFICACY OF RESIDENTIAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES ON FIRST GENERATION, FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENTS' SUCCESS AT A RURAL REGIONAL UNIVERSITY

BY

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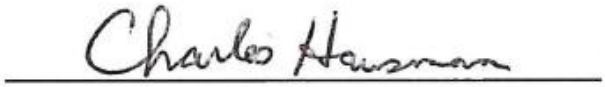

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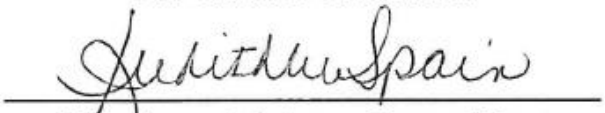

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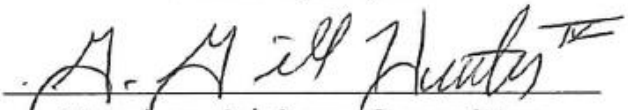

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THE EFFICACY OF RESIDENTIAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES ON FIRST GENERATION, FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENTS' RETENTION AT A RURAL REGIONAL UNIVERSITY

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the wonderful and amazing group of people who ride the crazy train of life with me. Dad, we miss you.

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Some accomplishments are bigger than yourself. This dissertation is one of them. This would not have been possible without the love and support of all my people. Dave, thank you for keeping the home fires burning during all my late-night dissertation sessions. I couldn't have done this without your love and support. Morgan, Abbie, and Bennett thank you so much for your patience and understanding throughout this process. You are the greatest joy this life has offered me. I look forward to lots more dancing in the kitchen and endless days on the lake.

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effect of residential learning communities on the success of first-generation first-year students. Using the theoretical framework of Tinto's Conceptual Schema this study looked at the social and academic integration factors of living in a residential learning community through fall-to-fall retention rates and EKU GPA. A large institutional database was used to identify the first-generation first-year students in the study as well as their demographic differences. When controlling for gender, race, Pell Grant eligibility, high school GPA, and composite ACT scores, results showed participation in residential learning communities did not make a significant difference in the fall-to-fall retention rates or the EKU GPA of first-generation first-year students. It did show that gender, race, high school GPA and ACT composite scores were statistically significant in the fall-to-fall retention of first-generation first-year students. Results also showed gender, high school GPA and ACT composite scores were all statically significant covariates when looking a first-generation first-year student EKU GPA's.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Overview

Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) is a rural, regional, four-year, coeducational, public institution of higher education in Kentucky's Central Appalachian region. Located in Richmond, Kentucky, a growing city of 33,000 near the center of Kentucky, EKU serves over 16,000 students ("About EKU | Eastern Kentucky University | Eastern Kentucky University," n.d.). The University offers general and liberal arts programs as well as pre-professional and professional trainings. EKU has a variety of programs including associate, bachelor, master, and doctoral degrees in more than 100 majors. Eastern Kentucky University has six colleges consisting of the College of Letters, Arts, and Social Sciences; College of Science; College of Business and Technology; College of Education; College of Health Sciences; and the College of Justice and Safety.

Eastern Kentucky University enrolls students from all over the state of Kentucky, however, there are 22 specific counties in the southeastern part of the state which constitute the EKU Service Region. It is from these 22 counties that EKU has primarily drawn its student body. This region of the country has some of the lowest socioeconomic, poverty-stricken counties in the nation. Of the 22 counties in EKU's service region, 19 are classified as distressed ("EKU Service Region | Office Of Institutional Research | Eastern Kentucky University," n.d.). In 2014, the New York Times designated six of these counties among the 10 hardest places to live in the United states ("Where Are the Hardest Places to Live in the U.S.? - The New York Times," n.d.).

A strong Appalachian culture permeates the region making higher education a difficult choice for incoming students who must balance family issues, food insecurity, and lack of support from home. Students are trying to earn a degree while struggling against the constant pull of family wanting them to come home.

The Kentucky General Assembly established the Eastern Kentucky State Normal School in 1906. The Normal School commissioned Richmond and the campus of Central University, founded in 1874, as the site for Eastern Kentucky State Normal School. In 1922, the institution became the Eastern Kentucky State Normal School and Teachers College, a four-year degree granting institution. The first degrees were awarded in 1925. The Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools awarded the school accreditation in 1928. In 1930, the school became the Eastern Kentucky State Teachers College ("About EKU | Eastern Kentucky University | Eastern Kentucky University," n.d.).

The state teacher's college continued to evolve and change as a graduate program was added in 1935. This led to the Master of Arts degree in Education. The word "Teachers" was removed from the institution's name in 1948 by the General Assembly. In 1966, the Kentucky state legislature officially renamed the school Eastern Kentucky University in a bill signed into law by Governor Edward T. Breathitt.

Eastern Kentucky University has increased in both the size of the student body and the size of the campus. Even with that growth, EKU's original mission of educating the people of Kentucky remains central to its core. EKU respects and values its history and is committed to its function of preparing quality teachers for the Commonwealth.

Its scope, however, has expanded into numerous programs and degrees enabling Eastern Kentucky University to serve an even wider population.

Mission, Vision, and Values

Eastern Kentucky University has a vision to be a "premier university dedicated to innovate student engagement and success, advancing Kentucky, and impacting the world" ("Vision, Mission And Values | Strategic Planning | Eastern Kentucky University," n.d.). The mission of EKU is written as follows:

> As a school of opportunity, Eastern Kentucky University fosters personal growth and prepares students to contribute to the success and vitality of their communities, the Commonwealth, and the world. Eastern Kentucky University is committed to access, equal opportunity, dignity, respect, and inclusion for all people, as integral to a learning environment in which intellectual creativity and diversity thrives ("Vision, Mission And Values | Strategic Planning | Eastern Kentucky University," n.d.).

Eastern Kentucky University also has a set of values that lead the institution's philosophy. It is stated The University has stated that these "values shall permeate the mission and will be the fiber of the institution for it to achieve its vision ("Vision, Mission And Values | Strategic Planning | Eastern Kentucky University," n.d.). The values are as follows:

- *intellectual vitality,* which is characterized by knowledge, scholarly inquiry, creativity, critical thinking, and curiosity, all with a global perspective;

- *sense of community,* which is characterized by a supportive environment with strong relationships and a commitment to service, shared governance, collaboration, and unity of purpose;
- *cultural competency*, which is characterized by equitable opportunities and treatment, mutual respect, and the inclusion and celebration of diverse peoples and ideas;
- *stewardship of place*, by which the University enhances the intellectual capacity, economic vitality, environmental sustainability, and quality of life of the communities it serves;
- *accountability,* which is characterized by fiscal responsibility, operational transparency, and responsiveness to the needs of internal and external stakeholders; and
- *excellence*, which is achieved through integrity, continuous quality improvement, and a focused emphasis on the personal and professional growth of students, faculty, and staff ("Vision, Mission And Values | Strategic Planning | Eastern Kentucky University," n.d.).

Retention

Retaining students has become an increasingly critical issue in higher education (Alarcon & Edwards, 2013; Arensdorf & Naylor-Tincknell, 2016; Astin, 1975; Bonet & Walters, 2016; Brownell & Swaner, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Reason, 2003, 2009; Tinto, 1975, 1988, 1999; Veenstra, 2008). Retaining students refers to the rate at

which students stay enrolled at the same institution from year to year. Most colleges and universities measure student retention in terms of fall to fall enrollment. When calculating retention rates, colleges and universities compare the number of students entering the institution in the fall cohort compared to the number of students who re-enroll in the following fall semester (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Seidman, 2005; Sweat, 2016; Tampke & Durodoye, 2013; Tinto, 1999). Typically, colleges and universities concentrate on freshmen retention rates. The first year of enrollment at an institution has been proven to be when a student is most at risk for dropping out (Alarcon & Edwards, 2013; Arensdorf & Naylor-Tincknell, 2016; Astin, 1975; Bonet & Walters, 2016; Brownell & Swaner, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Reason, 2003, 2009; Tinto, 1975, 1988, 1999; Veenstra, 2008).

Student retention has become increasingly more important to institutions of higher education. It has been identified as a key metric for measuring success and progress at institutions (Millea, Willis, Elder, & Molina, 2018). Several states, including Kentucky, have moved to a performance-based funding model. This model allocates state funding to an institution based upon completion of specific performance measures, such as retention (Miao, n.d.). Retention has also become a critical issue to institutions of higher education because of the loss of revenue institutions incur if students are not retained.

There are a variety of factors which may lead to a student leaving their college or university. Students may leave due to fiscal reasons, lack of college readiness, not

feeling at home, dissatisfaction with a course or the institution, lack of community, or pursuit of a more attractive opportunity (Barclay, Barclay, Mims, Sargent, & Robertson, 2018; Tampke & Durodoye, 2013; Alarcon & Edwards, 2013). It is essential for colleges and universities to examine and understand factors contributing to a student's persistence in order to set programs in place to address retention gaps and assist in students' matriculation.

First-year Retention at Eastern Kentucky University

Eastern Kentucky University shares in the nation's struggle to retain students. Kentucky's Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE) has established retention goals for colleges and universities across the state. EKU's retention goal for first-year students is 75 percent. In 2016-2017, EKU had its highest retention rate for first-year students at 73.43 percent. This was slightly higher than most other public, four-year, regional institutions in the state. According to Kentucky's CPE, the retention rates for first year to second year retention in the fall of 2016 through the fall of 2017 at EKU's benchmark institutions in the state are as follows:

- Kentucky State University 67.70%
- Morehead State University 72.31%
- Murray State University 77.31%
- Northern Kentucky University 72.49%
- Western Kentucky University 69.88%

("First to Second Year Retention Rates—Ky. Council on Postsecondary Education," n.d.)

First-Generation Students

First-generation college students are defined as college students who do not have parents who graduated with a degree from an institution of higher education (Ishitani, 2003). Because of the unique challenges first-generation college students face, they are considered an at-risk population. First-generation college students are at a higher risk for drop out than their peers who have parents who have graduated with degrees from colleges and universities. According to Choy (2001), first-generation college students are more than twice as likely (23 percent versus 10 percent) to leave a 4-year institution before their second year than students with a parent(s) holding a bachelor's degree.

Most colleges and universities are seeing a significant increase in first-generation college students (Irlbeck, Adams, Akers, Burris, & Jones, 2014; Padgett, Johnson, & Pascarella, 2012). At Eastern Kentucky University, 893 students of the 2,300 first-year class were first-generation college students ("Factbook 2016-2017 | Office Of Institutional Research | Eastern Kentucky University," n.d.). Colleges and universities must find ways to address the specific needs of this unique population if they seek to retain these at-risk students.

Learning Communities

High-impact practices have been defined as practices which have been proven to impact students in positive ways including increasing student retention rates (Brownell & Swaner, 2009; McCuen@aacu.org, 2013; Seidman, 2005). Learning communities or

communities where students share one or more core classes have been proven to be a successful high-impact practice (Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Brownell & Swaner, 2009; Price, 2005; Seidman, 2005; Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Soria & Mitchell, 2015). Typically, these communities are small cohorts of 10-30 students who together take two or more linked courses, one of them being a student success seminar (Brownell & Swaner, 2009, Maher, 2005, Siedman, 2013, Sweat, 2016).

Students usually participate in learning communities during their first semester at an institution of higher education allowing them to transition to the institution with a group of peers. Although the types of learning communities vary, all learning communities have programmatic and academic expectations (Brownell & Swaner, 2009, Sweat 2016).

Residential Learning Communities

Many colleges and universities have added a residential component to learning communities (Arensdorf & Naylor-Tincknell, 2016; "Assessing Learning Outcomes in Living-Learning Pro...: Full Text Finder Results," n.d.; Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Daffron & Holland, 2009; Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007; Inkelas, Vogt, Longerbeam, Owen, & Johnson, 2006; Wilson, Bjerke, & Martin, 2015). Students participating in residential learning communities are clustered together in a residence hall. These students share a space and participate in a common interest or academic program. Residential learning communities combine the benefits of living on campus, such as higher-grade point averages and higher retention rates, with the benefits of learning communities such as

linked courses and faculty support (Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Hall & O'Neal, 2016; hobbins, Eisenbach, Jacobs, & Ritchie, 2017; Inkelas et al., 2007, 2006).

Residential learning communities can be thematic, academically focused, or have a learning community with linked academic courses. Most residential learning communities have programmatic requirements connected to their living experience. Programmatic requirements revolve around attendance at programs put on by the residential learning community staff. Residential learning communities also typically have faculty and staff partners linked to the community that help to foster engagement and success both inside and outside of the classroom (Price, 2005).

Eastern Kentucky University Residential Learning Communities

Eastern Kentucky University has 17 residential learning communities. They are a combination of academic and thematic communities. The communities are supported with both staff and academic partners. They have specific learning outcomes as well as a residential curriculum tied to each community. There is an application process for selection into each community, and students must apply for admittance. There are also residential learning community requirements a student must complete in order to be considered an active participant in the community.

Each residential learning community at Eastern Kentucky University is connected to academic partners who are faculty or staff committed to helping the students within the program succeed. The academic partners help with a variety of programmatic efforts for students within the residence halls as well as mentoring students within the

community. Prior to the beginning of the fall semester, academic partners attend a specific training designed to educate them on the intricacies of being an academic partner. Each academic partner volunteers to help with the community and is asked to attend both planning meetings and programming within the residence halls. They also help with move-in day and welcome week activities for the community.

Table 1.1 is a list of Eastern Kentucky University's residential learning communities, as well as the number of student participants in each community.

Table 1.1

Residential Learning Communities at Eastern Kentucky University 2016

Residential Learning Community	Placement	Number of Participants
American Sign Language	Walters Hall	18
Colonel's Barracks	Telford Hall	19
Colonel Fan	Telford Hall	50
Colonel's First	Telford Hall	20
ConneXtions	Palmer Hall	59
Education	McGregor Hall	34
Fine and Creative Arts	Telford Hall	29
Flight Deck	Clay Hall	43
Forensic Science	Clay Hall	29
Global Village	Telford Hall	23
Honors	Burnam Hall	159
NOVA	Sullivan Hall	17

Table 1.1 (continued) Residential Learning Community	Placement	Number of Participants
Outdoor Pursuits	Telford Hall	27
Professional Golf Management	Keene Hall	17
Sophomore Overdrive	South Hall	28
Weekend Warriors	Telford Hall	14

Theoretical Framework

College administrators must look at student retention through the framework of social and academic integration. Tinto created a conceptual Schema for Dropout from College diagraming reasons that students drop out of college (see figure 1.1) (Tinto, 1975). The Schema displays how students enter an institution with individual attributes. Both academic and social integration are essential to a student's commitment levels which affect a student's decision to drop out. Tinto cited family background, individual attributes and motivations, and pre-college schooling as intrinsic factors that affect how committed a student may be to staying at an institution when entering institutions of higher education (Tinto, 1975).

Terenzini and Reason (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) completed a conceptual framework which they presented at an annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education that furthered Tinto's research by showing an expanded integrated model for studying student outcomes. The model encourages higher education researchers to examine the multiple forces affecting college student outcomes in a

broader way. It is based on the understanding that students enter college with an array of individual pre-college background characteristics, academic preparation and experiences, and social and personal dispositions and experiences. These individual attributes affect the likelihood of a student persisting through college.

The Terenzini and Reason (2005) framework also recognizes that a student's individual experiences affect the classroom experience, the out-of-class experiences,

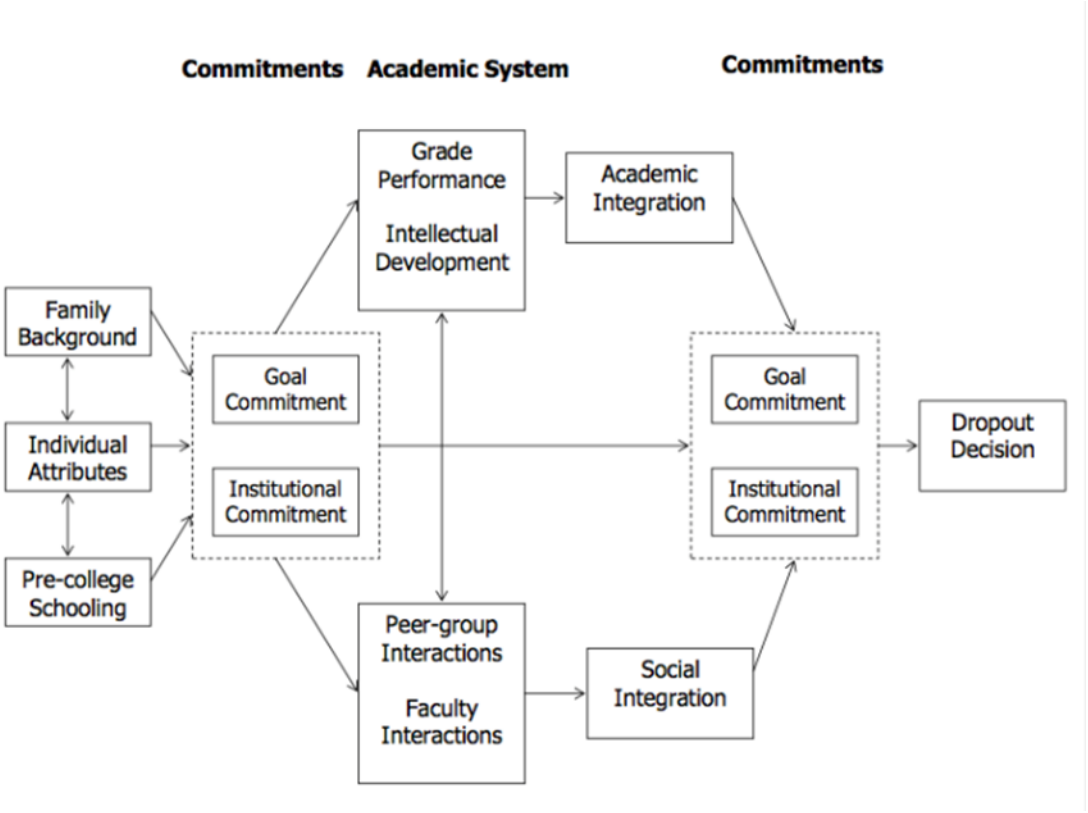

Figure 1.1 *Tinto's Conceptual Schema for Dropout from College*

and the curricular experiences. The peer environment in which the student lives wraps around the individual student and gives a lens through which the student interacts and

sees their experiences playing out. All of the experiences a student had before coming to the institution work together to create an individualized experience for each student once at the institution. Even if two students have the same in-class experience, because of their unique background and experiences coming to the institution, the students may view the in-class experience differently (Reason, 2009). This framework shows that persistence and retention are very personal and individualized experiences and must be treated as such by institutions of higher education.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine whether first-generation, first-year college students who participate in residential learning communities at Eastern Kentucky University retain at a higher rate than comparable first-generation, first-year college students who do not participate in residential learning communities. The study will also examine the efficacy of residential learning communities on first-generation, first-year college students at EKU by comparing grade point averages from first generation, first-year college students participating in residential learning communities to grade point averages from comparable first generation, first-year college students who do not participate in residential learning communities.

Rationale for the Study

This study will focus on the efficacy of residential learning communities in the success of first generation, first-year college students who participate. Presently there is a lack of research examining the effects of residential learning communities on first

generation, first-year college students, especially those enrolled at higher education institutions in rural areas. This study will provide a deeper understanding of the efficacy of residential learning communities at Eastern Kentucky University on first generation, first-year students and help address the gap in research surrounding this high impact practice on this at-risk population at a regional university. This study will also help other institutions who struggle in the retention of first generation, first-year college students.

Significance of the Study

Retaining students is critical to institutions of higher education. There is a substantial loss of tuition revenue as well as loss of state funding if students are not retained (Seidman, 2013, Sweat, 2016). First generation, first-year college students are an at-risk population for higher levels of dropout due to the unique challenges they face. Understanding how Eastern Kentucky University and other similarly situated four-year public regional institutions can improve retention rates for first generation, first-year students will enable these institutions to become more fiscally resilient and financially sound.

Research Questions

1. What is the effect on the fall-to-fall retention rates of first generation, first-year college students participating in residential learning communities compared to the fall-to-fall retention rates of first generation, first-year college students who do not participate in residential learning communities?

2. What is the effect of residential learning communities on the fall-to-fall grade point averages of first generation, first-year college students participating in residential learning communities compared to the fall-to-fall grade point averages of first generation, first-year college students who do not participate in residential learning communities?

Definitions of Terms

First-Generation College Students—college students whose parents did not graduate from college.

First-Year College Students—students who are enrolled in their first year of college.

High Impact Practices—practices that affect student engagement and have had positive impacts for students participating.

Learning Community—a community where students are scheduled together in at least one or more classes assigned to faculty members designated to support and facilitate building community.

Residential Learning Community—a community of students who live together in a shared living space, such as a residence hall, and who share a common interest or academic program.

Retention—refers to the rate students stay enrolled at the same institution from the fall of their first year to the fall of their second year.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Retention

According to the National Center for Education Statistics ("Digest of Education Statistics, 2016," n.d.), more than 20.4 million students were expected to attend American colleges and universities in 2017. Unfortunately, if current retention rates remain the same, only 59 percent of those students will graduate with a college degree within six years. At institutions with open admissions, 48 percent of incoming freshmen will drop out before their sophomore year ("The Condition of Education—Postsecondary Education—Postsecondary Environments and Characteristics—Characteristics of Postsecondary Students—Indicator April (2017)," n.d.). At regional institutions in the state of Kentucky, the retention rate of first year students is 68 percent. This statistic highlights one of the biggest problems plaguing colleges and universities, the persistence and retention of its students. Because of the loss of revenue and state funding institutions incur if students are not retained, retaining students is critical. (Seidman, 2013).

Importance of Retention Numbers for Colleges and Universities

Higher education is in uncharted times. Funding sources for colleges and universities from both federal and state governments have dwindled to all-time lows (Mitchell, Palacios, & Leachman, 2014). The funding still awarded in some states is linked to performance-based initiatives. Colleges and universities must qualify for funding based on achieving metrics set forth by the government. In these situations,

institutions often must compete against their own numbers by surpassing those numbers from the prior year. In most cases, they also have to compete against other institutions in the same state (McLendon & Hearn, 2013). Many of these numbers and metrics are linked to student retention and graduation rates. Colleges and universities not achieving these prescribed metrics will be further penalized with yet more funding cuts. Because of this funding structure, colleges and universities must place further emphasis on student success. Institutions need to work diligently to identify sources of attrition while seeking to increase practices that will help retain students.

Monetarily, it benefits a university to retain students. Colleges and universities rely upon students as a source of revenue. If an institution has a low retention rate, that institution must work to replace the students and the revenues it is losing. Seeking out new students takes resources that the college or university could use elsewhere (Alarcon & Edwards, 2013).

Economic Implications for Retention

Students attend colleges and universities for a variety of reasons. One of these reasons is financial motivation and the promise of better employment opportunities upon attaining a degree. The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics reports college graduates had a lower unemployment rate (2.7%) than those individuals with a high school diploma (5.2 %). The 2016 report also states that college graduates made around $1,156 a week while individuals with a high school diploma earned just $692 a week ("Unemployment rates and earnings by educational attainment," n.d.). Being able to

graduate with a college degree will nearly double a student's estimated lifetime earnings (Alarcon & Edwards, 2013).

By 2020, it is estimated that 57 percent of all jobs in Kentucky will require certifications or a college degree. In 2015, only 21.5 percent of adults in Kentucky had either an associate's degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). The lack of skill and education in the Kentucky workforce could cause industries to leave the state to find a better skilled and educated employment market. For people seeking employment, the lack of industries would reduce the economic appeal of a state that is already struggling economically.

Tinto's Theory of Retention

Research pertaining to retention in higher education spans more than 70 years (Braxton, 2000). Tinto's theory of retention has been highly influential and widely discussed. He proposed a sociological approach to retention that focused on the first-year student because there was a higher likelihood of a first-year student dropping out of college compared to his/her upperclassman peers.

According to Tinto (1975), there are many factors that contribute to a student dropping out of college. Tinto's theory identified that a student's background characteristics could affect a student's retention. The experiences and preparation a student had could be used to predict whether a student would struggle with transition to a college or university. He also concluded that a student's expectational and motivational attributes, such as their institutional commitment, peer group, faculty

interactions, and their social integration, affect a student's decision to stay in school. Tinto concluded these are critical elements to retention.

Tinto created a conceptual schema diagraming reasons for student dropout from college. The schema shows how both the academic and social system interact with various commitments and a student's background which all merge to contribute to a student's decision to continue with their education. He cited family background, individual attributes and motivations, and pre-college schooling as intrinsic factors that affect how committed a student may be to staying after arriving at an institution of higher education (Tinto, 1975).

Tinto emphasized that a student must go through a process of separation from their home environment in order to become part of their new college community. This stage of separation is critical for students to be able to form new bonds and relationships. This stage is particularly difficult for most first-generation college students. They sometimes lack the parental support needed to fully integrate into their new community.

Once arriving at an institution, Tinto concluded, a student must acknowledge the academic and social sides of a college or university as these aspects contribute to the student's willingness to stay at the institution. A student's grade performance, as well as their intellectual development, contribute to the academic system while their peer-group and faculty interactions affect the social system. Each of these systems have an integration that students feel at the institution. How tightly a student is integrated

directly correlates to the level of commitment they feel when trying to achieve their education goals as well as their commitment to that specific institution. According to Tinto, both academic and social integration affect a student's decision to drop out (Tinto, 1975).

The second part of Tinto's theory (1988) concentrated on the transition phase. As a student enters college and begins their transition, they need to have the skills that will help them adjust to their new environment. Without these skills, students can start to doubt themselves and their sense of belonging at their institution. Programs, such as residential learning communities, are designed to help support students in this transition and are essential to helping students be successful.

Terenzini, Pascarella, and Reason's Theories on Retention

In 1978, Terenzini and Pascarella, testing Tinto's model, studied three sets of variables to determine how they affected a student's ability to be successful in persisting: sociodemographic information, academic preparation and performance, and student dispositions (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). All of these traits fell into the categories Tinto outlined as affecting a student's commitment to college which, in turn, affects a student's ability to transition to college.

The researchers also found social and academic integration were statically significant on a student's ability to persist. The relationships students formed with their peers and with their faculty and staff had significant impact on their retention. Terenzini and Pascarella (2005) concluded that "what happens to a student after

matriculation may be more important in subsequent voluntary attrition among freshmen than are attributes the student brings to college" (p.362). While attributes and traits students have prior to entering college are a predictor of retention, the experiences they have once at the institution can greatly impact a student's decision to remain in school. These interactions, relationships, and experiences can mitigate some of the high at-risk predictors students may have upon entering college.

Terenzini and Reason (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) completed a conceptual framework that furthered Tinto's research by showing a further integrated model for studying student outcomes. The model encourages higher education researchers to look more broadly at the multiple forces affecting college student outcomes. The framework is based on the understanding that students enter college with an array of pre-college background characteristics, academic preparation and experiences, and social and personal dispositions and experiences. These attributes affect the likelihood of a student persisting through college.

This framework also recognizes that a student's individual experiences affect the classroom experience, the out-of-class experiences, as well as the curricular experiences. These all work together to create an individualized experience for each student. Even if two students have the same in class experience, because of their individual student backgrounds, the experience may be viewed differently (Reason, 2009). This framework shows persistence and retention is a very personal and individualized experience and must be treated as such by colleges and universities.

Factors Contributing to Retention

There are many reasons why students may not persist from fall to fall. However, research has shown retention is most likely influenced by strong relationships between socioeconomic status, high school GPA, and college assessment entry scores combined with institutional commitment, academic goals, social support, and academic self-confidence (Alarcon & Edwards, 2013; Barclay, Barclay, Mims, Sargent, & Robertson, 2018; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996; Tinto, 1988). Some of these retention predictors are brought with the student as they graduate from high school and come to the institution. However, according to Barefoot (2014), many students are not retained because of experiences that happen on campus once a student arrives. A student's ability to retain is affected by financial instability which is a student's ability to continue to pay for college. It is also affected by the measure of how quickly a student acclimates to the institution. How a student feels about the institution as well as boredom and the lack of academic challenge can also affect student retention (Sweat, 2016).

High School Achievement

Two of the strongest predictors of student retention are high school grade point average and college admission test scores (Reason, 2003; Sweat, 2016; Westrick, Le, Robbins, Radunzel, & Schmidt, 2015). Students having an "A" grade point average are seven times as likely to retain and graduate in four years with a degree than those students earning a "C" average in high school (Reason, 2003; Sweat, 2016; Westrick et

al., 2015). Students having a higher-grade point average are thought to be more academically prepared to enter college.

When looking at retention rates, college admissions test scores also have significance. A student who has SAT/ACT scores in the highest scoring bracket are six times more likely to graduate with a degree in four years that students who scored in the lowest bracket (Reason, 2001). These test scores contribute to the academic readiness and achievement of a student which are directly related to a student's retention rate. Combined with high school grade point average, college admission test scores are the highest predictor of student retention rates.

High Impact Strategies to Help Retention

Exploring how to better engage students in an individualized way is one method colleges and universities are trying in order to improve their retention numbers. The National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) identified a number of high impact practices that affect student engagement and have had positive impacts for students participating (Brownell & Swaner, 2009). Kuh (2008) identifies 10 high impact retention and engagement practices colleges and universities can implement to help students retain at higher rates. These 10 high impact practices are: first-year seminars, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, service learning and community-based learning,

internships, and capstone courses and projects. These high impact practices have been tested and proven successful in colleges and universities around the nation (Kuh, 2008).

High impact practices serving first year students, such as first-year seminars and experiences as well as learning communities, have been proven to add value to the student experience and lead to a range of positive outcomes for all students, and especially for those students in underserved and at-risk populations.

First-generation College Students

First-generation college students have been identified as a unique population of underserved students who are at high risk of dropping out of college before completing their first year. First-generation college students are those students whose parents did not graduate from college (Cho, Hudley, Lee, Barry, & Kelly, 2008; Terenzini et al., 1996). Most colleges and universities are seeing a significant increase in first-generation college students (Irlbeck et al., 2014; Padgett et al., 2012). At Eastern Kentucky University in 2016, 893 students of the 2,300 first-year class were first-generation college students.

Implication of First-Generation College Students on the University Environment

With the number of first-generation college students continuing to rise at higher education institutions, colleges and universities must understand what challenges this unique at-risk population are facing. Abundant research has been conducted pertaining to this group of students. Most of this research can be framed within three categories; precollege expectations, the transition from high school to college, and persistence during college (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). Each of these

categories can be examined to assist an institution gain understanding of what challenges first-generation college students are facing and how to better support this population.

Retention and Graduation Rates

The specific challenges first-generation college students experience often lead to lower retention rates than for those students who are not first-generation college students. According to Demetriou et al. "nearly 90% of first-generation college students enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States fail to graduate within 6 years of enrollment" (Demetriou, Meece, Eaker-Rich, & Powell, 2017)(p 19). Choy (2001) found that first-generation college students were more than twice as likely (23 percent versus 10 percent) to leave a 4-year institution before their second year than students with a parent(s) holding a bachelor's degree.

Graduation rates of first-generation college students, especially those who are considered low-income, are some of the lowest in the nation. Engle & Tinto (2008) found 34% of low-income, first-generation college students earned a four-year degree in six years or less compared to 66% of low-income students who are not first-generation college students.

Specific Needs of First-Generation College Students

Challenges First-Generation College Students Face

First-generation college students have challenges and barriers which pertain specifically to this unique population. First-generation college students are more likely to come from a low socioeconomic status, live in a non-English speaking home, and be a

minority (Cho et Al, 2008). These challenges and barriers make persistence through graduation more difficult for first-generation students than those students who have one or more parent who graduated college ("Finding My Way," 2017; Garcia, 2010; Irlbeck et al., 2014, 2014; McLean, 2013; Padgett et al., 2012; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Peabody, Hutchens, Lewis, & Deffendall, 2011; Terenzini et al., 1996).

Stebleton and Soria (2012) analyzed survey data from 58,000 first-generation college students from six research universities. These results indicated first-generation students had high occurrences of challenges preventing their academic success. These challenges included: poor English and math skills, poor study skills, emotional issues, family issues, and a significant number of work hours.

First-generation college students are typically not as prepared academically as their traditional student counterparts (Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996). Because of the lack of their parents' collegiate experience, they may feel less prepared for the academic rigor they will find in the college classroom (Padgett et all., 2012, Wilson, 2012). They have lower college admission test scores and lower high school GPAs. Some research suggests they have lower critical thinking abilities, less support from their family to attend college, and less interaction with their high school teachers (Ishitani, 2003).

Transition to College

Research has shown that first-generation colleges students have a more difficult time with their transition to college than their traditional peers (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). When a first-generation college student comes to a college or university, it is a completely different cultural experience. They are not just coming to college, they are entering an academic, cultural environment that often has unspoken rules and a variety of cultural norms that are foreign to a first-generation college student (Hopkins, 2011). They often lack important time management and study skills. They also have a more difficult time managing the administrative aspects of academic life, including meeting with professors and advisors, choosing a major, and registering for classes (Irlbeck et al., 2014).

As a first-generation college student transitions to college, they are not only faced with all the anxieties of traditional students, but they are also faced with the struggle of reconciling conflicting family roles and family membership because of the lack of understanding from their childhood support system. Terenzni (Terenzini et al., 1996), stated that, "it is only when we see that mobility involves not just gain but loss….that we can begin to understand the attendant periods of confusion, conflict, isolation, and even anguish that first-generation students report here" (p. 2). Because attending college is a different experience that is unknown to their families, it can be an experience that separates first-generation college students from some of the only support structures they have known.

Campus Involvement

First-generation college students are often less involved in campus life which can cause a lack of connection to the campus. Financial needs may limit involvement on campus which may hinder success (Irlbeck et al., 2014). Many first-generation college students need to work while in school in order to support themselves and in some cases their families back home. *Busy work* schedules limit these students' ability to engage in the full range of campus activities offered and can leave the student less involved (Irlbeck et al., 2014).

Self-Efficacy

Vuong, Brown-Welty, and Tracz (2010) studied the effects of self-efficacy on the academic success of first-generation college students. Five California state universities administered a survey to their students resulting in 1,291 students responding. Of those, 441 were first-generation college sophomores. The study showed self-efficacy in academic coursework was a significant predictor of academic success for first-generation college students. Results showed first-generation college students had lower grade point averages from their previous term and lower overall GPA's when compared to non-first-generation college students.

Institutional Support

College and university administrators must understand the various challenges first-generation college students face in order to create and implement programs and support services focused on first-generation college student needs (Vuong et al.,2010).

Finding ways to assist and support first-generation college students in persisting through their first year of college is essential for institutions, and they must devote resources to programs and support structures to help first-generation students succeed.

Often, the current support systems colleges and universities have in place fail to meet all the specific needs first-generation college students have when transitioning to college (Folger, Carter, & Chase, 2004, Wilson, 2013). Studies have suggested that additional support programs for first-generation students, especially during their initial adjustment to the university, will help them transition successfully (Stebleton & Soria, 2012).

Administrators must also be mindful of the lack of institutional knowledge first-generation college students experience. Typically, this population does not know about services offered at the institution which can impact their ability to receive assistance with obstacles they are facing. Stebleton & Soria (2012) suggest administrators initiate discussions with first-generation college students about their collegiate experience to provide information about academic support and social opportunities to help with their transition and integration to college.

Being able to identify ways to help first-generation college students work through their specific challenges and barriers will help improve retention and graduation rates. Colleges and universities cannot ignore the specific needs of this population of students if they want them to persist through graduation. Support

structures and high impact practices must be employed if colleges and universities want first-generation college students to succeed.

Learning Communities

Participation in a learning community has been identified as a high impact practice increasing retention rates and student engagement. Because of this, many colleges and universities are implementing learning community programs (Sweat, 2016, Rohli & Rogge, 2012).

Learning communities have taken on many different forms. However, at their most basic form, a learning community is where students are linked together in at least one or more classes (Brownell & Swaner, 2009). Learning communities can link enough courses to make up a student's full schedule or simply a link between an orientation seminar and an additional general education course. They can be combined with advising or first year courses in order to integrate both the academic and social sides of a collegiate experience. Learning communities provide a platform for students to come together in organized and planned ways. This can make it easier for students to integrate socially, succeed academically, and form bonds within their community (Sweat, 2016, Seidman 2013).

Research has shown that effective learning communities are those which create positive classroom environments, have clear connections between linked courses and assignments, and faculty members who have clear and visible communication between the linked courses (Brownell & Swaner, 2009). Activities and assignments in linked

courses are collaborative. Faculty involvement in a student's academic experience can be linked to a student's persistence. Research shows that when faculty and students interact both inside and outside of the classroom it improves persistence (Purdie & Rosser, 2011). Learning communities foster environments where faculty involvement in the student community is not only encouraged but required. This interaction supports intentional relationships between faculty and students which fosters persistence.

History of Learning Communities

Learning communities have a long history in higher education. Alexander Meiklejohn introduced the "Experimental College" in the 1920's at the University of Wisconsin in reaction to the increased disciplinary specialization and fragmentation of the undergraduate curriculum (Smith, 2001). The Experimental College had an integrated curriculum designed to help students explore the values and idea of democracy and was intentionally designed to facilitate faculty-student interaction (Smith, 2001). It was a two-year program during which students and faculty examined classic Greek literature in their first year and compared it to contemporary American literature in their second year (Talburt & Boyles, 2005). The students had summer projects connecting their first and second years.

Higher education systems nearly doubled in size during the 1960's (Smith, 2001). Institutions were experimenting with structure within higher education and cluster colleges were formed. These cluster and sub-colleges were created to break students into smaller communities and promote socialization to university life. Sometimes these

were interdisciplinary, however, Tussman was the first faculty member to fully utilize an integrated curriculum at Evergreen State College (Smith, 2001). The momentum for learning communities greatly increased when the Washington Center for Undergraduate Education at Evergreen State College was created in 1985.

In the early 1990's, Tinto studied learning communities and collaborative learning as a way to combat student dropout rates and increase retention. Tinto's results clearly demonstrated learning community effectiveness (Tinto, 2003). Currently, learning communities have become a staple at many colleges and universities around the country.

Types of Learning Communities

The literature acknowledges many formats of learning communities, but generally learning communities can be divided into five categories. These categories are: linked courses, learning clusters, freshmen interest groups, federated learning communities, and coordinated study programs (Price, 2005, Stassen, 2003). Each of these categories could have a residential component linked to them.

Linked Courses

Learning communities utilize linked courses to connect students in at least two courses which are independent of each other and have their own faculty, but share a common group of students (Stassen, 2003). Linked courses are typically block scheduled, meaning the courses are built together into the schedule. Because of this,

students building a schedule would sign up for the learning community instead of individual courses. Dropping one course would drop the other course as well. This learning community tends to link a content-based course with a skills-based course (Sweat, 2016).

Learning Clusters

Learning clusters are communities in which courses are linked by content. Learning clusters typically have four or five courses scheduled together. Because they are content based, numerous academic colleges use learning clusters (Price, 2005; Sweat, 2016).

Freshmen Interest Groups

Freshmen interest groups are learning communities that link courses by a common theme (Staussen, 2003). The courses typically work with a theme, issue, or historical period. Part of a learning cluster curriculum involves a seminar component, planned social events, or field trips (Sweat, 2016).

Federated Learning Communities

Federated learning communities allow a cohort of students to take part in themed based courses in addition to a three-credit hour seminar taught by a Master Learner. In these learning communities, the faculty serves as the linchpin. The Master Learner is a professor from a different college or area of study who takes the courses along with the students and then facilitates the seminar. This type of learning

community highlights the integration of ideas from the other classes into the seminar (Sweat, 2016).

Coordinated Study Programs

Coordinated studies programs link all course credits for a common group of students associated with an integrated, theme-based, interdisciplinary curriculum (Stassen, 2003). An example of this type of learning community would be a study abroad program for students.

Learning Community Structure

According to Garrison & Vaughan (2008), learning communities must have three main elements in order to affect the educational experience: a social presence, a cognitive presence, and a teaching presence. Although separate elements, when working together these elements provide a structure where student engagement can occur. When students are engaged, retention improves (Astin, 1984).

The first element, social presence, is based a student's sense of belonging. The student needs to feel part of the campus community (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, Sweat, 2016). Social context, interactivity, and privacy all play into social presence. Social context is the perception of the learning community experience by the individual student. Interactivity is when the student becomes involved in the community and their sense of participation. A sense of privacy and trust is crucial to social presence as the group is forming social relationships and there are social expectations involved.

The second element, cognitive presence, refers to the ability to find a solution when students are presented with a problem (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, Sweat, 2016). There are four phases to cognitive presence: triggering event, exploration, synthesis, and resolution. When a problem or question is recognized, it is a triggering event. Exploration occurs when the group expresses ideas, opinions, and brainstorms together for solutions. Synthesis happens when ideas are summarized, and the group identifies a solution. Resolution refers to when the group comes to a consensus about what the solution should be.

The third element, teaching presence, is the process by which students are educated though the facilitation of coursework and faculty direction (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, Sweat, 2016). The "teacher" is an active member of the learning community providing both challenge and support to students. The teacher provides additional support when necessary.

Residential Learning Communities

Studies have shown residential learning communities can be particularly effective at improving retention and persistence because the residential learning community focuses on integrating students with each other as well as with the campus community (Hall & O'Neal, 2016). In this aspect, residential learning communities affect both the social and academic integration of a student.

Residential learning communities further connect learning community students who are taking classes together by having them live together in a residence hall

community (Wilson, Bjerke, & Martin, 2015). This connection provides an added layer of community to participating students. According to Inkelas, Vogt, Longerbeam, Owen, & Johnson (2006), "students in [Living Learning] programs are more likely to persist, exhibit stronger academic achievement, interact with faculty, and engage in a more intellectual residence hall atmosphere than students in traditional residence halls" (p. 41).

Successful residential learning communities need to have clear learning objectives with an academic focus (Brower & Inkelas, 2010). At their best, residential learning communities are designed to create a sense of community that allows for greater faculty and peer interaction, increased opportunities for coordinated activities, and a socially and academically supportive residential living environment (Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007). Strong partnerships between academic and residential or housing programs become critical to a successful residential learning community.

When a residential learning community program is strong, the impacts on its participants can be long-lasting. Bower and Inkelas (2010) found that participants, after only one year in a residential learning community experience, had higher levels of academic self-confidence, were more likely to mentor other students, and remained more committed to civic engagement (Brower & Inkelas, 2010).

National Study of Living-Learning Programs (Residential Learning Communities)

In 2007, the National Study of Living-Learning Programs did a multi-institutional study of living-learning programs. The study included 49 colleges and universities across

the United States. The study outlined seven outcome areas where there were statistically significant results: social and academic transition; intellectual abilities and growth; student's confidence in academic, collegiate, and professional success; experiences with alcohol use; diversity appreciation, civic engagement and sense of belonging; college grade point average; and future plans.

Results of this study indicated students who participated in residential learning communities:

- Indicated social and academic transition to college easier than their sample peers.
- Reported significantly more growth in their critical thinking/analysis abilities and their ability to apply knowledge gained in one arena to another than their sample peers.
- Reported better confidence in college success than their sample peers.
- Were less likely to drink alcohol than their sample peers.
- Were more civically engaged than their sample peers.
- Had a stronger overall sense of belonging than their sample peers.
- Represented the greatest proportion of students in the grade point average category of 3.5-4.0.
- Were more likely to participate in community service, volunteer work, and service learning; research with a professor; a leadership position; study

abroad; independent research; a self-designed major; or a culminating senior experience than their sample peers.

("ACUHO-I Library—View Catalog Record," 2017)

This study showed that adding a residential component to learning communities positively impacted students in many ways including gains in retention numbers.

Residential Learning Communities Aimed at At-Risk Student Success

While there have been studies on the effect residential learning communities have on student success, the research has been broad and has not explored the influence residential learning communities can have on special at-risk populations such as first-generation students.

Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, and Leonard (2007) studied the effect of residential learning communities on the academic and social transition of first-generation college students. Their findings provided evidence that participation in a residential learning community is beneficial for first-generation college students. Students had a statistically significant higher estimate of ease with academic and social transition than their first-generation peers who did not participate in a residential learning program. However, this study did not measure whether, and how, residential learning communities affect retention numbers and grade point averages.

Even less is known about the efficacy of residential learning communities on the retention of first-generation college students. However, Hall and O'Neal (2016) did a study at Indiana University Southeast where they found that all students thought their

residential learning community experience was a positive one. Living together helped them form bonds as a community and led to them being able to have real conversations. The students also noted that the residential learning community helped in their transition from high school to college (Hall & O'Neal 2016). The same study identified that the students in the residential learning community performed better academically and retained at a higher rate. However, the limitations of this study narrow the validity and generalizability of the research findings.

Eastern Kentucky University Residential Learning Communities

Residential learning communities at Eastern Kentucky University have evolved over the years. When first started in the early 2000's, residential learning communities were purely a programmatic way to connect students in the residence halls. Students participating in residential learning communities had to complete specific programmatic elements to remain as an active participant in the community. These elements mainly revolved around the social and community aspects of living in a residence hall and meeting with staff in order to remain in good standing within the community. Although communities had faculty and staff learning partners who helped to plan programs within the residence halls, the relationship was informal and voluntary. This led to decreased involvement and buy-in from students, staff, and academic learning partners.

Although the residential learning community concept has been through many iterations, since the beginning, the basis of academic and social integration has been at the heart. Academic partners have been essential to the development and

implementation of the residential learning communities. Historically, however, there has been difficulty finding committed partners in this endeavor.

Starting in 2016, faculty and staff participating in residential learning communities must commit to the community and are given a Memorandum of Understanding. The Memoranda of Understanding is a facilitated agreement between Eastern Kentucky University Housing and Residence Life and the academic partners who work to support residential learning communities. Academic partners dedicate two to four hours per month supporting the programmatic efforts of the community. This includes participation in at least one program per month, attending monthly residential learning community meetings, planning and implementing a kickoff event, and helping in the recruitment and marketing of the program. With the creation of the Memorandums of Understanding, these partnerships have grown into a full collaboration where academic partners are invested, involved, and committed to the residential learning community's success.

Eastern Kentucky University Housing and Residence Life also has responsibilities communicated in the Memorandum of Understanding. EKU Housing and Residence Life assigns students into residential learning communities and is responsible for the upkeep of the properties. A live-in paraprofessional staff member is assigned to provide daily support and guidance for student participants. Housing also assigns a full-time professional staff member to each residential learning community. This staff member

lives in the residence hall and is there to manage the day-to-day operation of the community as well as to promote the holistic well-being of the participants.

Residential learning communities at Eastern Kentucky University help students create communities that foster social integration. Combined with academic support given by academic partners, and life skills being taught by staff, the residential learning community provides a support network for participants. This is crucial for first-generation college students. Belonging to such a group can help enhance and quicken their transition to college while providing the support necessary to succeed.

Each residential learning community at Eastern Kentucky University has student learning outcomes around which curriculum and programming are designed. These learning outcomes guide the program and give all faculty and staff direction.

Table 2.1 lists Eastern Kentucky University's residential learning communities and the learning outcomes for each community.

Table 2.1

Residential Learning Communities at Eastern Kentucky University with Learning Outcomes 2016

Residential Learning Community	Learning Outcomes
American Sign Language	• Identify and connect with at least four faculty/staff members from the ASLIE department • Locate four campus resources that will contribute to their student success • Identify a supportive network of peers with similar personal interests

Table 2.1 (continued)

Residential Learning Community	Learning Outcomes
	• Engage with the larger deaf community through community outreach and better ASL communication skills • Analyze professional and personal goals as it relates to the ASL experience
Colonel's Barracks	• Identify and connect with at least four faculty/staff/alumni of the ROTC Program at EKU • Locate four campus or community resources that will contribute to their student success • Summarize the ideals of the ROTC program and how it contributes to their future goals • Explain how the ROTC experience will affect their collegiate career and beyond
Colonel Fan	• Identify and connect with at least four faculty/staff/alumni at EKU • Locate four campus and/or community resources that will contribute to their student success • Develop a strong network of peers with similar personal and career interests • Attend at least four EKU athletic events
Colonel's First	• Identify and connect with at least six faculty/staff/peer mentor at EKU • Engage in at least four campus and/or community resources that will contribute to their student success • Appreciate the perspective of people from backgrounds different from your own • Develop a comprehensive action plan for their academic success during college
ConneXtions	• Identify and connect with at least four faculty/staff/alumni at EKU

Table 2.1 (continued)

Residential Learning Community	Learning Outcomes
	• Locate four campus and/or community resources that will contribute to their student success • Develop a strong network of peers with similar personal and career interests • Describe their leadership style and how it relates to their collegiate experience
Education	• Identify and connect with at least four faculty/staff/alumni from the Education department • Locate four campus resources that will contribute to their student success • Analyze professional and personal goals as it relates to the Education LLC experience • Recognize the perspective of people with backgrounds different from your own
Fine and Creative Arts	• Identify and connect with at least four faculty/staff/alumni from fine and creative arts • Locate four campus resources that will contribute to their student success • Analyze professional and personal goals as it relates to the Fine and Creative Arts LLC experience • Recognize the perspective of people with backgrounds different from your own
Flight Deck	• Identify at least four faculty or staff members from the College of Justice and Safety • Locate four campus resources that will contribute to their student success • Research at least two potential careers in the Justice and Safety field • Recognize the perspective of people with backgrounds different from your own

Table 2.1 (continued)

Residential Learning Community	Learning Outcomes
Forensic Science	• Identify and connect with at least three alumni and/or professionals • Identify and connect with at least three faculty/professional lecturers from the Forensic Science program • Research at least two potential careers in the Forensic Science field • Analyze professional and personal goals as it relates to the forensic science experience • Identify a supportive network of peers
Global Village	• Identify and connect with at least five faculty/staff/alumni at EKU • Appreciate the perspective of people from backgrounds different from your own • Facilitate great campus and community engagement in global issues • Describe their engagement in international perspectives and how it relates to their collegiate experience
Honors	• Develop positive relationships at least four faculty or staff members from the Honors program • Locate four campus and/or community resources that will contribute to their student success • Demonstrate how the Honors Program will affect their college experience • Examine how the perspectives of others are different from their own
Justice & Safety	• Identify at least four faculty or staff members from the College of Justice and Safety • Locate four campus resources that will contribute to their student success

Table 2.1 (continued)

Residential Learning Community	Learning Outcomes
	• Research at least two potential careers in the Justice and Safety field • Recognize the perspective of people with backgrounds different from your own
NOVA	• Identify and connect with at least four faculty/staff members from Eastern Kentucky University • Locate four campus or community resources that will contribute to their student success • Demonstrate how their NOVA experience will affect their collegiate career • Develop community bonds and EKU pride with fellow residents, Housing staff and NOVA staff
Outdoor Pursuits	• Identify and connect with at least four faculty/staff members from Eastern Kentucky University • Locate four campus or community resources that will contribute to their student success • Engage with five outdoor resources in the Richmond/Lexington/Central Kentucky communities • Design and implement an outdoor recreation program for peers
Professional Golf Management	• Identify and connect with at least three alumni and/or professionals • Develop positive relationships with at least four faculty members from Professional Golf Management • Research at least two potential careers in the Professional Golf Management field • Locate four campus resources, including one outside of Professional Golf Management that will contribute to their student success

Table 2.1 (continued)

Residential Learning Community	Learning Outcomes
Sophomore Overdrive	• Identify and connect with at least four faculty/staff/alumni at EKU • Locate four campus resources that will contribute to their success as a second-year student • Research, identify, and justify at least two different career paths associated with their academic/personal passions • Discuss how leadership and service affects their collegiate career
Weekend Warriors	• Identify and connect with at least four faculty/staff/alumni at EKU • Locate four campus resources that will contribute to their success as a second-year student • Develop a strong network of peers with similar personal and career interests • Attend at least four weekend programs at EKU

Chapter Three: Methodology

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine whether first generation, first-year college students who participate in residential learning communities at Eastern Kentucky University retain at a higher rate than comparable first generation, first-year college students who do not participate in residential learning communities. The study also examines the efficacy of residential learning communities on first generation, first-year college students at Eastern Kentucky University by comparing grade point averages from first generation, first-year college students participating in residential learning communities to grade point averages from comparable first generation, first-year college students who do not participate in residential learning communities.

Colleges and universities are making greater efforts to increase fall to fall retention rates. In that pursuit, they utilize numerous resources and fund countless programs to help support student success. Residential learning communities can impact both academic and social integration in a positive way leading to greater retention rates and overall student success (Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Inkelas et al., 2007; Soria & Mitchell, 2015).

The following questions will be explored.

1. What is the effect on the fall-to-fall retention rates of first generation, first-year college students participating in residential learning communities compared to

the fall-to-fall retention rates of first generation, first-year college students who do not participate in residential learning communities?

2. What is the effect of residential learning communities on the fall-to-fall grade point averages of first generation, first-year college students participating in residential learning communities compared to the fall-to-fall grade point averages of first generation, first-year college students who do not participate in residential learning communities?

Context of the Study

This study took place at Eastern Kentucky University, a rural, mid-sized, regional, comprehensive university located in Richmond, Kentucky. According to EKU's Office of Institutional Research, enrollment during the fall of 2016 hit an all-time high for a total of 16,881 students, ("Factbook 2016-2017 | Office Of Institutional Research | Eastern Kentucky University," n.d.) . Of the 16,881 enrolled students, 14,454 students were from the state of Kentucky and 6,353 of those students came from within the 22 counties of EKU's service region. The undergraduate population in the fall of 2016 was 14,293 students. Of those, 2,243 were first-year students and of those, 893 were first generation, first-year college students.

Similar to most colleges and universities around the country, Eastern Kentucky University struggles to retain students. Over the last seven years EKU's retention rate for first year students has hovered around 73 percent. This means that over 25 percent of first-year students drop out of EKU and are not retained to their second year. The

statistics are even more sobering for some of our at-risk populations. Minority retention rates for first-year students at Eastern Kentucky University drop from the average of 73 percent to 62 percent.

Having a 73 percent retention rate from fall to fall of a student's first year equates to over 600 students from the first-year class leaving Eastern Kentucky University each year. Based on just tuition loss from those 600 students, the impact is over $2.7 million of lost revenue annually. Adding the total cost of attendance, the loss impact grows to over $10.5 million annually. This number grows exponentially when calculated out over four years. Additionally, the $10.5 million annually does not factor in the extra time, energy, and fiscal resources Eastern Kentucky University spends in recruitment to try to recover for the turnover.

Just as the University is losing money, students who leave the University often leave with student debt. The total cost of attendance at Eastern Kentucky University (tuition, room, and board) is $17,642.00 a year (*Tuition_and_fees_18-19_a.pdf*, n.d.). Adding in books and personal expenses, the total cost of attendance to a student for one year could be well above $20,000.00. Often students have taken out loans to pay for college so the student will have to pay back this money with interest over the lifetime of the loan. As discussed earlier, the earning compacity of a person without a college degree is greatly diminished. This truly puts financial burden on students who are not retained.

Finding ways to increase retention is important both to colleges and universities and to the students. If colleges and universities can improve their retention rates, they will be able to slow the hemorrhage of revenue, while also helping students be successful and obtain a college degree.

Eastern Kentucky Residential Learning Communities

Eastern Kentucky University Housing and Residence Life has 11 residence halls and 1 apartment complex within its housing stock. They have a total bed operation of 5,100. There is a variety of housing stock ranging from the traditional double-loaded corridor floor plan, where students share a double room with traditional community bathrooms, to simple and super suites where students share a double room as well as a bathroom conjoining with the room next to them. EKU Housing and Residence Life also has apartment housing stock where students have their own room and bathroom but share a living space with their apartment-mates.

Eastern Kentucky University Housing and Residence Life is an auxiliary department which means they are not funded through University allocations. The department is entirely funded through student housing fees. While retention rates have financial implications for the University, retention rates also directly impact auxiliary units. Other non-auxiliary departments have the security of University funding; however, auxiliaries must be able to fund themselves. If students are not retained, it has a direct impact on Eastern Kentucky University Housing and Residence Life's budget. Calculating with the least expensive room price point, a 600-student loss could lead to

over $1.5 million of lost revenue. When calculated over the two-year residency requirement EKU Housing and Residence Life has, the lost revenue reaches nearly $5 million. Clearly, retaining students is a huge concern for auxiliary departments such as EKU Housing and Residence Life.

Eastern Kentucky University Housing and Residence Life has 17 residential learning communities housed in 9 of their 11 residence halls across campus. Residential learning communities are an essential part of the mission of EKU Housing and Residence Life. It is their mission to foster the development, engagement, and success of the residential community by providing an inclusive home that enhances the collegiate experience. Residential learning communities engage students and help foster their development and success.

Each residential learning community has learning outcomes associated with the curriculum. Academic partners, as well as paraprofessional and professional housing staff members, are assigned to the community to help support students and encourage growth. The academic partners and housing staff members create a curriculum for the residential learning community that is designed to enhance the collegiate experience.

Students request placement in residential learning communities when applying for university housing and must complete an additional portion of the housing application specifically for residential learning communities. Some communities have specific requirements such as being a specific major or belonging to a specific academic

program within the halls. Once verified that a student meets requirements, they are placed by the housing assignment's staff in their community of choice.

Sample

This study includes all first generation, first-year college students enrolled at Eastern Kentucky University in the fall of 2016. It compares the first generation, first-year college students who participated in residential learning communities to those who did not. The data concerning residential learning community students was provided by EKU Housing and Residence Life. The first generation, first-year college student data will be run with a report from the institutional database by the Senior Director of Student Success with permission from university administrative personnel.

The two data lists were Microsoft Excel files that were combined into one spreadsheet utilizing Microsoft Access. Once combined, the information was transferred back into Microsoft Excel where the data was cleaned and labeled in zeros and ones. This Microsoft Excel file was then uploaded into SPSS to be analyzed.

As displayed in Table 3.1, there were 893 first generation, first-year college students enrolled at Eastern Kentucky University in the fall of 2016. Of those, 135 first generation, first-year college students participated in residential learning communities while 758 did not.

Table 3.1

First generation, first-year Students in Residential Learning Communities

		Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	No	758	84.9
	Yes	135	15.1
	Total	893	100.0

The gender breakdown of the first generation, first-year students is displayed in Table 3.2. There were 350 male first generation, first-year students in the fall of 2016 and 543 female students in the study.

Table 3.2

Gender Breakdown of First generation, first-year Students

	Gender	Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	Male	350	39.2
	Female	543	60.8
	Total	893	100.0

Table 3.3 displays the minority status of the first generation, first-year students. Of the 893 first generation, first-year students, 764 were white, while 120 were non-white.

Table 3.3

Minority Students

		Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	White	764	85.6
	Non-white	129	14.4
	Total	893	100.0

As shown in Table 3.4, 595 of the first generation, first-year students were eligible for a Pell Grant and 298 first generation, first-year students were not.

Table 3.4

Pell Grant Eligible

		Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	No	298	33.4
	Yes	595	66.6
	Total	893	100.0

Research Design and Analysis

SPSS was used to perform analyses for both research questions. The researcher conducted two Analysis of Covariances (ANCOVAs). According to the SPSS Survival Manual (4th Edition), an ANCOVA is an extension of an ANOVA that allows you to explore differences between groups while statistically controlling for an additional continuous variable. Basically, it blends an ANOVA and regression to determine whether the means

of your DV are the same across your categorical IV. Analysis of covariance is used in causal-comparative studies (Gay, Mills, & Arasian, 2009). In order to interpret the statistical significance of the ANCOVAs, the alpha will be set at .05.

Variables

There are two dependent variables in this study. The dependent variables are fall 2016 to fall 2017 retention rates of first generation, first-year college students (0=Not retained, 1=Retained) as well as cumulative grade point average (GPA) after the first year on a 4.0 scale. The independent variable was participation in residential learning communities (0=No, 1=Yes). Covariates included the following variables: Gender (0=male, 1=female), Race (0=White, 1=Non-white), Pell Grant Eligible (0=No, 1=Yes), high school grade point average, and composite ACT score.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations to this study should be recognized. This study was performed on one cohort of students. The residential living communities studied fell under one housing and residence life program at one regional, public institution of higher education in central Kentucky serving a specific region. These limitations may affect generalizability of findings to other types of institutions. Residential learning community programs vary from institution to institution which may also limit the generalizability of findings to other types of residential learning communities.

Students participating in residential learning communities at Eastern Kentucky University in some ways self-select into their preferred community. This may show a

more active engagement than those students who did not choose to live in a residential learning community.

The use of grade point averages as a data point is not an exact science. There are many variations of classes that prohibit a standardization of grade point averages across the institution.

The sample size is relatively small, especially of those first generation, first-year students who are participating in residential learning communities. This may limit the statistical power when finding differences that exist.

Chapter Four: Results

Overview

Using the theoretical framework of Tinto's Conceptual Schema (1975), which emphasized academic and social integration as being important to a student's decision to stay at an institution, this study looked at the social integration factors of living in a residential learning community. The academic side focused on grade performance and intellectual development, while the social side focused on peer-group interactions and faculty interactions. As demonstrated through Tinto's Conceptual Schema, students enter an institution of higher education with individual attributes and past experiences. Once at the institution, the Schema acknowledges there are academic factors or integration that occur as well as social factors or integration that also affect retention.

This study looks at both the academic integration through a student's GPA and the social integration through participation in a residential learning community via peer and faculty interactions. In this, the researcher can see whether participation in residential learning communities has a positive effect on a first generation, first-year college student retention. Using Tinto, we can also see whether participation in residential learning communities has a positive effect on a first generation, first-year students' college GPAs.

Chapter four is dedicated to reporting the findings of this study. The purpose of this chapter is to report whether first time, first-generation college students participating in residential living learning communities during the fall 2016 semester

were retained at higher rates than those first-generation college students who did not participate in residential living learning communities.

Additionally, chapter four reports whether first generation college students participating in residential living learning communities had higher grade point averages than first generation college students who did not participate in residential living learning communities.

Descriptive statistics and ANCOVAs are included in the findings. The first section of chapter four discusses the Crosstabulations, Chi Square results, and Means ran on the sample in order to determine the critical covariates. The second section of the chapter explores the differences in retention rates between first generation, first-year students participating in residential learning communities and first generation, first-year students who did not participate. The third section of the chapter discusses the differences in first-generation college students' GPAs between students participating in residential learning communities (N=135) and first-generation college students who did not participate (N=758).

Crosstabulation of Gender by Residential Learning Community

In order to examine the significance of gender on first generation, first-year students participating in residential learning communities, and those not participating in learning communities, a crosstabulation was created. The crosstabulation in Table 4.1 shows 13.1% of all male first generation, first-year students participated in residential

learning communities and 16.4% of all female first generation, first-year students participated in the residential learning communities.

Table 4.1

Gender Residential Learning Community Crosstabulation

			Residential Learning Community		
			No	Yes	Total
Gender	Male	Count	304	46	350
		% within Gender	86.9%	13.1%	100.0%
		% within Residential Learning Community	40.1%	34.1%	39.2%
	Female	Count	454	89	543
		% within Gender	83.6%	16.4%	100.0%
		% within Residential Learning Community	59.9%	65.9%	60.8%
Total		Count	758	135	893
		% within Gender	84.9%	15.1%	100.0%
		% within Residential Learning Community	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The results of the Chi-Square analysis ran in Table 4.2 establishes that the p-value (p=.186) is greater than the chosen significance level of (a=0.05), therefore we do not reject the null hypothesis. There is not sufficient evidence to suggest an association between gender and participation in a residential learning community.

Table 4.2

Chi-Square Tests-Gender

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1.749[a]	1	.186

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 52.91.

Crosstabulation of Racial Minority by Residential Learning Community

Another crosstabulation was created in order to determine the significance of race (white and non-white) on first generation, first-year students participating in residential learning communities, and those not participating in learning communities. The crosstabulation in Table 4.3 shows 15.7% of all white first generation, first-year students participated in residential learning communities and 11.6% of all non-white first generation, first-year students participated in residential learning communities.

Table 4.3

Minority Residential Learning Community Crosstabulation

			Residential Learning Community		
			No	Yes	Total
Minority	White	Count	644	120	764
		% within Minority	84.3%	15.7%	100.0%
		% within Residential Learning Community	85.0%	88.9%	85.6%
	Non-white	Count	114	15	129
		% within Minority	88.4%	11.6%	100.0%
		% within Residential Learning Community	15.0%	11.1%	14.4%
Total		Count	758	135	893
		% within Minority	84.9%	15.1%	100.0%
		% within Residential Learning Community	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The results of the Chi-Square analysis in Table 4.4 establishes that the p-value (p=.232) is greater than the chosen significance level of (a=0.05), therefore we do not reject the null hypothesis. There is not sufficient evidence to suggest an association between race and participation in a residential learning community.

Table 4.4

Chi-Square Tests-Race

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1.431[a]	1	.232

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 19.50.

Crosstabulation of Pell Grant Eligibility by Residential Learning Community

A crosstabulation was also created to determine the significance Pell Grant eligibility had on first generation, first-year students who participated in residential learning communities and those who did not. As shown in Table 4.5, 21.1% of all first generation, first-year students participating in residential learning communities were not Pell Grant eligible. 12.1% of all first generation, first-year students who were Pell Grant eligible participated in residential learning communities.

Table 4.5

Pell Eligible Residential Learning Community Crosstabulation

			Residential Learning Community		
			No	Yes	Total
Pell Eligible	No	Count	235	63	298
		% within Pell Eligible	78.9%	21.1%	100.0%
		% within Residential Learning Community	31.0%	46.7%	33.4%
	Yes	Count	523	72	595
		% within Pell Eligible	87.9%	12.1%	100.0%
		% within Residential Learning Community	69.0%	53.3%	66.6%
Total		Count	758	135	893
		% within Pell Eligible	84.9%	15.1%	100.0%
		% within Residential Learning Community	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The results of the Chi-Square analysis in Table 4.6 establishes that the p-value (p=.000) is less than the chosen significance level of (a=0.05), therefore we reject the null hypothesis. There is a statistically significant association between Pell Grant eligibility and participation in a residential learning community. Pell Grant eligible first generation, first-year students are less likely to live in residential learning communities.

Table 4.6

Chi-Square Tests-Pell Eligible

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	12.645[a]	1	.000

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 45.05.

Means High School GPA by Residential Learning Community

A comparison of the high school GPA of first generation, first-year college students participating in residential learning communities and first generation, first-year college students not participating in residential learning communities was performed to determine whether there were differences in academic performance of participants in this study prior to college. As shown in table 4.7, the mean high school GPA of first generation, first-year college students participating in residential learning communities (M=3.4179, SD= .49963) was slightly higher than the high school GPA of first generation, first-year college students who did not participate in residential learning communities (M=3.2236, SD= .53056).

Table 4.7

Means High School GPA by Residential Learning Community

Residential Learning Community	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
No	3.2236	755	.53056
Yes	3.4179	135	.49963
Total	3.2531	890	.53032

Means ACT Composite Score by Residential Learning Community

In order to compare the ACT composite scores of first generation, first-year students participating in a residential learning community and those first generation, first-year students who did not participate in a residential learning community, a comparison was calculated to determine whether there were differences in the composite scores. The mean ACT composite scores of first generation, first-year students participating in residential learning communities (M=23.39, SD=4.505) were slightly higher than the first generation, first-year students who did not participate in residential learning communities (M=21.60, SD=3.667) as displayed in Table 4.8.

Table 4.8

Means ACT Composite Score by Residential Learning Community

Residential Learning Community	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
No	21.60	742	3.667
Yes	23.39	135	4.505
Total	21.88	877	3.860

Crosstabulation of Gender by Retention

In order to determine the significance of gender on the retention of first generation, first-year students, a crosstabulation was created. The crosstabulation in Table 4.9 shows 57.4% of all male first generation, first-year students were retained from the fall of their first year to the fall of their second year and 66.3% of all female first generation, first-year students were retained from the fall of their first year to the fall of their second year.

Table 4.9

Gender Retained Crosstabulation

			Retained		
			No	**Yes**	**Total**
Gender	Male	Count	149	201	350
		% within Gender	42.6%	57.4%	100.0%
		% within Retained	44.9%	35.8%	39.2%
	Female	Count	183	360	543
		% within Gender	33.7%	66.3%	100.0%
		% within Retained	55.1%	64.2%	60.8%
Total		Count	332	561	893
		% within Gender	37.2%	62.8%	100.0%
		% within Retained	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The results of the Chi-Square analysis in Table 4.10 establishes that the p-value (p=.007) is less than the chosen significance level of (a=0.05), therefore we reject the

null hypothesis. There is a statistically significant association between gender and fall-to-fall retention. Female first generation, first-year students retain at a statistically significant higher rate than male first generation, first-year students.

Table 4.10

Chi-Square Tests-Gender Retained

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	7.169[a]	1	.007

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 130.12.

Crosstabulation of Racial Minority by Retention

A crosstabulation was created in order to examine significance of race on the retention rates for first generation, first-year students. The crosstabulation in Table 4.11 shows that 64.5% of all white first generation, first-year students retained from the fall of their first year to the fall of their second year and that 52.7% of all non-white first generation, first-year students retained from the fall of their first year to the fall of their second year.

Table 4.11

Minority Retained Crosstabulation

			Retained		
			No	Yes	Total
Minority	White	Count	271	493	764
		% within Minority	35.5%	64.5%	100.0%
		% within Retained	81.6%	87.9%	85.6%
	Non-white	Count	61	68	129
		% within Minority	47.3%	52.7%	100.0%
		% within Retained	18.4%	12.1%	14.4%
Total		Count	332	561	893
		% within Minority	37.2%	62.8%	100.0%
		% within Retained	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The results of the Chi-Square analysis in Table 4.12 establishes that the p-value (p=.010) is less than the chosen significance level of (a=0.05), therefore we reject the null hypothesis. There is a statistically significant association between minority status and retention. White first-year students retain at a statistically significant higher rate than non-white first generation, first-year students.

Table 4.12

Chi-Square Tests-Minority

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	6.597[a]	1	.010

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 47.96.

Crosstabulation of Pell Grant Eligibility by Retention

A crosstabulation was created to examine the significance of Pell Grant eligibility on the retention of first generation, first-year students. As shown in Table 4.13, 66.8% of all first generation, first-year students who were not eligible for Pell Grants were retained from the fall of their first year to the fall of their second year and 60.8% of all first generation, first-year students who were Pell Grant eligible retained from the fall of their first year to the fall of their second year.

Table 4.13

Pell Eligible Retained Crosstabulation

			Retained		
			No	Yes	Total
Pell Eligible	No	Count	99	199	298
		% within Pell Eligible	33.2%	66.8%	100.0%
		% within Retained	29.8%	35.5%	33.4%
	Yes	Count	233	362	595
		% within Pell Eligible	39.2%	60.8%	100.0%
		% within Retained	70.2%	64.5%	66.6%
Total		Count	332	561	893
		% within Pell Eligible	37.2%	62.8%	100.0%
		% within Retained	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The results of the Chi-Square analysis ran in Table 4.14 establishes that the p-value (p=.083) is greater than the chosen significance level of (a=0.05), therefore we do not reject the null hypothesis. There is not sufficient evidence to suggest an association between Pell Grant eligibility and retention in first generation first-year students.

Table 4.14

Chi-Square Tests-Pell Grant Eligibility

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	2.998[a]	1	.083

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 110.79.

Means High School GPA by Retention

A comparison of the high school GPA of first generation, first-year college students who retained from the fall of their first year to the fall of their second year and first generation, first-year college students who did not retain from the fall of their first year to the fall of their second year was performed to determine whether there were differences in academic performance of participants in this study prior to college. As shown in table 4.15, the mean high school GPA of first generation, first-year college students who retained from the fall of their first year to the fall of their second year (M=3.4180, SD= .47015) was higher than the high school GPA of first generation, first-year college students did not retain from the fall of their first year to the fall of their second year (M=2.9746, SD= .50993).

Table 4.15

Means High School GPA by Retention

Retained	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
No	2.9746	331	.50993
Yes	3.4180	559	.47015
Total	3.2531	890	.53032

Means ACT Composite Score by Residential Learning Community

In order to compare the ACT composite scores of first generation, first-year students who retained from the fall of their first year to the fall of their second year to first generation, first-year students who did not retain from the fall of their first year to the fall of their second year a comparison was ran to discover the mean scores of both groups. The mean composite scores of first generation, first-year who retained from the fall of their first year to the fall of their second year (M=22.83, SD=3.916) were higher than the first generation, first-year students who did not retain from the fall of their first year to the fall of their second year (M=20.25, SD 3.158) as displayed in Table 4.16.

Table 4.16

Means ACT Composite Score by Retention

Retained	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
No	20.25	323	3.158
Yes	22.83	554	3.916
Total	21.88	877	3.860

Differences in Retention between First generation, first-year College Students Participating in Residential Learning Communities and First-Generation College Students Not Participating in Residential Learning Communities

The first research question focused on determining whether the retention rates of first generation, first-year college students participating in residential learning communities were higher than the retention rates of first generation, first-year college students not participating in residential learning communities. An Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) compared the fall-to-fall retention rates of first generation, first-year college students participating in residential learning communities to those first generation, first-year college students not participating in residential learning communities while controlling for gender, race, Pell Grant eligibility, ACT composite score, and high school GPA.

As shown in the descriptive statistics of Table 4.17, the fall-to-fall retention rate of the first generation, first-year college students participating in residential learning

communities was 74%. The fall-to fall retention rate of first generation, first-year students not participating in residential learning communities was 61%. Based solely off those percentages, it appears that first generation, first-year college students participating in residential learning communities were retained at a higher rate.

Table 4.17

Group Statistics: Fall-to-Fall Retention

Residential Learning Community	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
No	.61	.488	740
Yes	.74	.440	135
Total	.63	.483	875

When controlling for gender, race, Pell Grant eligibility, ACT composite score, and high school GPA retention being the dependent variable, all the variables account for a 17.2% variance in the overall fall-to-fall retention rate. The only covariates to have a statistically significant effect on retention were high school GPA (p=.000) and ACT Composite scores (p=.000) as shown in Table 4.18.

Table 4.18

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects: Dependent Variable: Retention

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	36.154[a]	6	6.026	31.254	.000	.178
Intercept	7.672	1	7.672	39.791	.000	.044
GENDER	.005	1	.005	.027	.869	.000
MINORITY	.071	1	.071	.368	.544	.000
PELL_ELIGIBLE	.069	1	.069	.358	.550	.000
HS_GPA	13.859	1	13.859	71.881	.000	.076
ACTCOMP	2.506	1	2.506	12.996	.000	.015
ResidLearnComm	.242	1	.242	1.254	.263	.001
Error	167.350	868	.193			
Total	553.000	875				
Corrected Total	203.504	874				

a. R Squared = .178 (Adjusted R Squared = .172)

Table 4.19 shows the estimated marginal means in the fall-to-fall retention rates of first generation, first-year students participating in residential learning communities and first generation, first-year students not participating in residential learning communities. While it reveals the fall-to-fall retention rates of first generation, first-year students participating in residential learning communities had a higher adjusted mean retention (Adj. M=.672) compared to the adjusted mean for fall-to-fall retention

rates of first generation, first-year students not participating in residential learning communities (Adj. M=.625), it was not statistically significant.

Table 4.19

Estimated Marginal Means

Residential Learning Community	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
No	.625[a]	.016	.593	.657
Yes	.672[a]	.038	.596	.747

a. Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values: Gender = .61, Minority = .14, Pell Eligible = .67, High School GPA = 3.2642, ACT Composite = 21.87.

Means EKU GPA by Gender

A comparison of the EKU GPA of first generation, first-year college students by gender was performed to determine whether there were differences in the academic performance of participants. As shown in table 4.20, the mean EKU GPA of female, first generation, first-year college students (M=2.8439, SD= 1.00760) was higher than the mean EKU GPA of male, first generation, first-year college students (M=2.4175, SD= 1.05196).

Table 4.20

Means EKU GPA by Gender

Gender	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Male	2.4175	318	1.05196
Female	2.8439	508	1.00760
Total	2.6798	826	1.04509

Means EKU GPA by Minority

A comparison was run to compare the EKU GPA of first generation, first-year students by race. The mean EKU GPAs of white first generation, first-year students (M=2.71, SD=1.01952) were higher than non-white first generation, first-year students EKU GPA (M=2.4443, SD 1.16864) as displayed in Table 4.21.

Table 4.21

Means EKU GPA by Minority

Minority	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
White	2.7178	711	1.01952
Non-white	2.4443	115	1.16864
Total	2.6798	826	1.04509

Means EKU GPA by Pell Eligibility

A comparison was performed compare the EKU GPA of first generation, first-year students who were eligible for Pell Grants to those first generation, first-year students

who were not eligible for Pell Grants. The EKU GPA of first generation, first-year who were not Pell Grant eligible (M=2.8905, SD=1.00545) were higher than the EKU GPA of first generation, first-year students who were Pell Grant eligible (M=2.5740, SD=1.04947) as displayed in Table 4.22.

Table 4.22

Means EKU GPA by Pell Eligible

Pell Eligible	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
No	2.8905	276	1.00545
Yes	2.5740	550	1.04947
Total	2.6798	826	1.04509

Correlations EKU GPA with High School Achievement

A bivariate correlation was created between EKU GPA, high school GPA, and ACT composite scores. Table 4.23 shows both high school GPA (p=.000) and ACT composite scores (p=.000) were statistically significant. There is a medium positive correlation. As high school GPA rises, so does the EKU GPA. As the ACT composite scores increase so does the EKU GPA.

Table 4.23

Correlations EKU GPA with High School Achievement

		EKU_GPA	High School GPA	ACT Composite
EKU_GPA	Pearson Correlation	1	.567**	.422**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000
	N	826	823	811
High School GPA	Pearson Correlation	.567**	1	.560**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000
	N	823	890	875
ACT Composite	Pearson Correlation	.422**	.560**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	811	875	877

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Differences in EKU GPA between First generation, first-year College Students Participating in Residential Learning Communities and First-Generation College Students Not Participating in Residential Learning Communities

The second research question focused on determining whether first generation, first-year college students participating in residential learning communities had higher EKU GPA's at the end of their first year than the first generation, first-year college students who did not participate in residential learning communities. An Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) compared the first-year GPAs of first generation, first-year students participating in residential learning communities and first generation, first-year

students not participating in residential learning communities while controlling for gender, race, Pell Grant eligibility, ACT composite score, and high school GPA. As shown in Table 4.24, the first generation, first-year students participating in residential learning communities have a higher non-adjusted mean GPA (M=2.85) compared to the first generation, first-year students not participating in residential learning communities (M=2.65).

Table 4.24

Descriptive Statistics: Dependent Variable: EKU GPA

Residential Learning Community	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
No	2.6539	1.03721	677
Yes	2.8586	1.04279	132
Total	2.6873	1.04023	809

In the ANCOVA, all the variables account for 34.8% of the variance in cumulative GPA for the first generation, first-year students participating in the study. Table 4.25 shows three covariates have statistical significance in relation to EKU GPA. Gender (p=.018), high school GPA (p=.000), and ACT composite scores (p=.000) are all statistically significant covariates which affected a student's EKU GPA.

Table 4.25

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	308.095[a]	6	51.349	72.730	.000	.352
Intercept	28.598	1	28.598	40.506	.000	.048
GENDER	3.957	1	3.957	5.605	.018	.007
MINORITY	1.501	1	1.501	2.126	.145	.003
PELL_ELIGIBLE	1.739	1	1.739	2.463	.117	.003
HS_GPA	125.049	1	125.049	177.117	.000	.181
ACTCOMP	13.088	1	13.088	18.537	.000	.023
ResidLearnComm	.101	1	.101	.143	.705	.000
Error	566.233	802	.706			
Total	6716.556	809				
Corrected Total	874.328	808				

a. R Squared = .352 (Adjusted R Squared = .348)

Table 4.26 shows the estimated marginal means regarding the EKU GPA of first generation, first-year students participating in residential learning communities and first generation, first-year students not participating in residential learning communities. While it reveals that first generation, first-year students participating in residential learning communities had a lower adjusted mean EKU GPA (Adj. M=2.662) comparted to the adjusted mean EKU GPA of first generation, first-year students not participating in

residential learning communities (Adj. M=2.692), the findings were not statistically significant.

Table 4.26

Estimated Marginal Means

Residential Learning Community	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
No	2.692[a]	.032	2.629	2.756
Yes	2.662[a]	.074	2.516	2.807

a. Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values: Gender = .62, Minority = .14, Pell Eligible = .67, High School GPA = 3.3094, ACT Composite = 22.06.

Chapter Five: Discussion, Future Research, and Conclusion

Overview

This chapter will discuss the findings of this study regarding the efficacy of participation in residential learning communities on the fall-to-fall retention rates of first generation, first-year students as well the effect on their EKU GPA. A summary and interpretation of the results will be provided. Inconsistencies with previous research will be explored as well as implications for policy and practice. Recommendations for future research will be made. A conclusion will end the chapter.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine whether participation in a residential learning community influenced the fall-to-fall retention rates and GPA of first generation, first-year students. First-generation college students are an at-risk population who have unique needs compared to their peers. Typically, they retain at a lesser rate than their peers who are not first-generation students (Garcia, 2010; Irlbeck et al., 2014; McLean, 2013; Padgett et al., 2012; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Peabody et al., 2011; Terenzini et al., 1996). Retention at institutions of higher education has become increasingly important because of the loss of revenue and state funding (Irlbeck et al., 2014). The importance of student retention is compounded when institutions have a high population of first-generation students due to the lower rate at which they retain.

This study used Tinto's Conceptual Schema (1975) which identified social and academic integration both factoring into the retention of students. Building upon the foundation Tinto laid, it was theorized that because residential learning communities combined both the academic and social integration, they would have a positive effect on the fall-to-fall retention as well as the GPA of first generation, first-year students.

This study included all 893 first generation, first-year students enrolled at Eastern Kentucky University in the fall of 2016, of which 135 participated in residential learning communities.

Interpretation of Results.

When looking at participation in residential learning communities, crosstabulations of covariates showed gender and race were not statistically significant in determining participation. However, Pell Grant eligibility did bear significance. First generation, first-year college students who were Pell Grant eligible were less likely to participate in residential learning communities.

Gender, race, and Pell Grant eligibility were also examined in relation to retention of first generation, first-year students through a crosstabulation. The results showed that gender and race were both statistically significant in the retention of first generation, first-year students. Female first generation, first-year students retained at higher rates than their male counterparts. White first generation, first-year students also retained at higher rates than non-white first generation, first-year students. Pell

Grant eligibility did not have a statistically significance bearing on the retention of first generation, first-year students.

The results showed first generation, first-year students who participated in residential learning communities were more likely to have a higher high school GPA than first generation, first-year students who did not participate in residential learning communities. First generation, first-year students participating in residential learning communities were also more likely to have a higher ACT composite score.

The study examined the difference in retention rates in comparison to high school GPA and ACT composite scores. The results showed that both high school GPA and ACT composite scores are statistically significant when looking at first generation, first-year student retention.

Results showed the differences in EKU GPA in comparison to gender, race, and Pell Grant eligibility. The means showed female first generation, first-year students had higher EKU GPAs than male first generation, first-year students. White first generation, first-year students also had higher EKU GPAs than non-white first generation, first-year students. Pell Grant eligible first generation, first-year students had lower EKU GPAs than the first generation, first-year students who were not Pell Grant eligible.

Based on these findings a bivariate correlation was conducted between the EKU GPA, high school GPA, and ACT composite scores of first generation, first-year students. The results showed there was a medium positive correlation in that if high school GPA

increased, so did EKU GPA. The same was true with the ACT composite scores. When ACT composite scores increased, so did the EKU GPA.

Two ANCOVA's were conducted to determine the effect residential learning community participation had on the fall-to-fall retention rates and GPA of first generation, first-year students. The dependent variables were fall 2016 to fall 2017 retention rates of first generation, first-year students as well as cumulative grade point average. The independent variable was participation in residential learning communities. Covariates in the ANCOVA were gender, race, Pell Grant eligibility, high school GPA and composite ACT scores.

Research Question One

When looking just at the descriptive statistics it seemed that participation in residential learning communities had a statistically significant effect on the fall-to-fall retention rates of first generation, first-year students, however, after controlling for gender, race, Pell Grant eligibility, high school GPA, and ACT composite score, the results showed participation in residential learning communities did not have a statistically significant effect on fall-to-fall retention rates of first generation, first-year students. The adjusted means still showed the fall-to-fall retention rates of first generation, first-year students participating in residential learning communities had a higher adjusted mean retention (Adj. M=.672) compared to the adjusted mean fall-to-fall retention rates of first generation, first-year students not participating in residential learning communities (Adj. M=.625), however it was not statistically significant. The ANCOVA did

show high school GPA and ACT composite scores were statistically significant covariates in relation to first generation, first-year fall-to-fall retention rates.

Research Question Two

The findings for the second research question were similar to those of the first research question. When looking just at the descriptive statistics, the EKU GPA of first generation, first-year students participating in residential learning communities was higher than those first generation, first-year students who did not participate in residential earning communities. However, after controlling for gender, race Pell Grant eligibility, high school GPA, and ACT composite scores the adjusted means showed that first generation, first-year students who did not participate in residential learning communities had a higher EKU GPA although there was no statistical significance. The ANCOVA did show that gender, high school GPA, and ACT composite scores were all statistically significant covariates when looking at first generation, first-year student EKU GPA.

Inconsistency with Previous Research

Some results in this study were consistent with previous research, while other results were inconsistent with existing literature. High school GPA and ACT composite scores have been identified as significant variables in a student's ability to retain at an institution of higher education (Alarcon & Edwards, 2013; Barclay et al., 2018; Padgett et al., 2012; Reason, 2009; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1978; Westrick et al., 2015). This proved consistent in the study. Also consistent with previous research, females tend to

retain at higher rates than male students and Pell Grant eligibility often plays a role in a student's retention and GPA.

Studies have shown that participation in high impact practices such as learning communities often have a positive effect on retention and GPA. These kinds of communities provide the social interaction that is critical to a student's desire to stay at an institution (Rohli & Rogge, 2012; Seidman, 2005; Sweat, 2016). Based on this research, participation in the learning community environment should have increased the retention rate and GPA of the first generation, first-year students.

Other studies show that higher facilitated interactions with faculty impacted a student's ability to retain and excel academically at an institution (Brownell & Swaner, 2009; Purdie & Rosser, 2011). These interactions help to create impactful relationships between faculty and first generation, first-year students participating in residential learning communities. The interaction between the first generation, first-year students participating in residential learning communities and the faculty learning partners should have had a positive impact on their success based on this research.

Studies have shown the social integration which happens outside of the classroom in a community environment should have a positive effect on a student's success (Hall & O'Neal, 2016). Residential learning communities intentionally create a community environment where peer-to-peer interactions hare happening (Wilson et al., 2015). This connection should provide another layer of connection to help students form the social integration necessary for persistence (Inkelas et al., 2006).

There have been some studies which found residential learning communities aimed towards at-risk populations such as first generation, first-year students proved beneficial to those students helping them with the ease of academic and social integration (Inkelas et al., 2007). Working with an at-risk population, this study should have seen similar results.

Why Are Residential Learning Communities Not Making a Difference?

Many factors may have contributed to the findings of this study. There are a variety of residential learning communities at Eastern Kentucky University each with different learning objectives and goals. These communities can be thematic or academic in nature. While all residential learning communities have Memorandums of Understanding, not all are connected to faculty in the same way, nor do they have the same kinds of programming. Because of this, some residential learning communities may be helping first generation, first-year students persist while other may not. From this study, there is not a way to isolate a specific residential learning community to identify the impact of each community individually.

Not all residential learning communities at Eastern Kentucky University are specifically connected to a core curriculum. Although students have intentional interactions with faculty learning partners, not all students participating in residential learning communities have shared courses they take together. This could be limiting the positive impact participation in a residential learning community has on a student's success.

Residential learning communities that are connected via a core curriculum may have different professors teaching the various classes. Each professor may grade differently which could affect the participant's overall success in the classroom and the resulting EKU GPA.

Other residential learning communities do not connect with a core curriculum and may only have one class in common. All their other courses are not linked which creates a wide variation in the classes being taken. Some courses may be more difficult than others which could contribute to a student's success as well as their EKU GPA.

Residential learning communities at Eastern Kentucky University could also be ineffective. They are not specifically organized to help at-risk students. There are not any residential learning communities aimed specifically at first generation, first-year students. The learning objectives and goals may not be targeting the necessary social integrations necessary to help students be successful.

There are many factors that contribute to the success of a first generation, first-year student and their persistence (Terenzini et al., 1996). Family issues as well as financial difficulties also play a role into student retention and GPA. While residential learning communities may not be showing as effective in this study, it may be these other factors which are actually inhibiting the success of first generation, first-year students.

Other involvements for first generation, first-year residential learning community participants may also be contributing to the lack of success and persistence.

There are a lot of opportunities for students to get involved across campus. Residential learning community students may not be engaged in the community if they are engaged elsewhere. The full effect of residential learning communities on the success of a student may not be seen if they are not participating in all the events and activities provided in the residential learning community.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Although this study shows first generation, first-year student participation in residential learning communities had no statistically significant impact on their success or their persistence, there are still implications for policy and practice.

Residential Learning Communities

Eastern Kentucky University Housing and Residence Life can improve their residential learning community practices in order to improve their effectiveness. All residential learning communities should implement a more academically focused curriculum to their learning objectives and goals. This should be interwoven with a core curriculum of linked courses for their students. A more focused and integrated approach should increase participants' abilities to be academically successful.

Eastern Kentucky Housing and Residence Life should also look at the structure of their residential learning communities to determine whether they should create communities for at-risk populations designed with specific attention to the specific needs of each unique group. Being able to concentrate on a specific group's needs may help the effectiveness of the residential learning community. This would involve

commitment from Eastern Kentucky University Housing and Residence Life to examine and change the assignment process especially for incoming first year students.

While there are Memorandums of Understanding, Eastern Kentucky University should revisit each one and identify further ways to incorporate academic and social integration. There may be further opportunities to engage faculty in the communities as well as to identify additional learning objectives which could increase student success. Each learning objective should have goals associated with it; and each goal should have a pathway identified for completion; each goal should have established metrics for how the goal is to be measured and assessed. There should be additional research to identify best practices for residential learning communities and those practices should be interwoven into the communities.

Admissions

This study showed high school GPA and ACT composite scores had a statistically significant impact on the retention of first generation, first-year students as well as on their EKU GPA. The biggest predictor of success was a student's high school GPA. Currently, Admissions considers high school GPA in the acceptance process, but acceptance depends heavily on ACT composite scores. It is understandable as standardized tests such as the ACT are a common and consistent measurement for all students regardless of the high school they attend (Westrick et al., 2015). High school GPAs are much more subjective. Curriculum and courses vary from high school to high school as do grading practices.

Even with the inconsistencies high school GPAs hold, high school GPA has been identified as a statistically significant indicator for retention and EKU GPA of first generation, first-year students. Knowing this, Admissions should consider weighing high school GPA more heavily when considering admittance to the institution. Admitting students with higher high school GPAs, even when their composite ACT score may not be as high, could improve overall retention and success, especially when considering admitting first generation, first-year students.

Future Research

This study indicates first generation, first-year participation in residential learning communities does not impact the success and retention of first generation, first-year students. Research indicates at-risk student participation in learning communities and residential learning communities have positive effects on student success and retention. Based on the findings of this study, the researcher recommends further research regarding on first generation, first-year students participation in residential learning communities at Eastern Kentucky University, as well as future research on the types of residential learning communities at Eastern Kentucky University.

Only the data from one cohort of students over one year was used in this study. Studies should be done to look at the success and retention of first generation, first-year students participating in residential learning communities over multiple years in order to show the trends and develop a broader perspective of how residential learning

communities may contribute to the success and retention of first generation, first-year students.

This study also examined residential learning communities at one regional institution. Further studies should incorporate multiple institutions, including Eastern Kentucky University's benchmark institutions. Using the same type of analysis and combining the results from multiple higher education institutions would increase the sample size. The statistical power to establish differences would also increase because of the larger sample size.

Because this study combined all residential learning communities into one group, the researcher would recommend further exploring and breaking down the data by type of residential learning community to determine whether there are differences in academically based residential learning communities compared to thematically based residential learning communities. Different types of residential learning communities may effect student success and retention in different ways. These studies could show that some residential learning communities may prove more effective in increasing a student's success than others which is critical for institutions to know when considering which programs to implement.

Another future study that should be considered is a qualitative study to further explore what ways residential learning communities may be contributing to the student success and retention of first generation, first-year students. This study examined and utilized quantitative data which was limiting. Qualitative studies could identify themes

and areas of success that quantitative data cannot identify. Instead of utilizing data collected by the university, a qualitative study would gather information directly from the students which would provide the researcher more flexibility to explore themes that may be identified in the study.

The researcher also recommends utilizing other metrics to help identify ways residential learning communities may be affecting the success of students and their retention. There have been metrics created to measure the sense of belonging of students as well as thriving metrics. Utilizing metrics such as these may give further insight into the validity of residential learning communities. It also provides the researcher the opportunity to survey the students directly.

This study looked at residential learning communities at one regional institution. The program was specific to Eastern Kentucky University Housing and Residence Life. Because there is such variation in residential learning communities, future research should consider trying to identify like programs at a variety of institutions across the nation. Being able to identify similar programs would increase the sample size and give a better picture of the effectiveness of the residential learning community program.

Another consideration for future study would be to expand the study and not limit the population to first-year students. Looking at upperclassmen as well as transfer students could give the institution a better understanding of how residential learning communities are impacting the first-generation student population as whole.

While this study looked specifically at first generation, first-year students, further research could expand the study to all first-year students participating in residential learning communities. This would help to identify the efficacy of residential learning communities at Eastern Kentucky University.

Conclusion

This study used Tinto's Conceptual Schema (1975) which indicated both social and academic integration factors into a student's retention. Building upon the foundation Tinto laid, the study theorized that because residential learning communities combined both the academic and social integration, the residential learning community would have a positive effect on the fall-to-fall retention of first generation, first-year students. This study examined the efficacy of Tinto's model on retention of first generation, first-year college students who participated in residential learning communities compared to those first generation, first-year college students who did not participate in residential learning communities.

Results of the study indicated that participation in a residential learning community was not statistically significant to the fall-to-fall retention of first generation, first-year students. While there are many factors that may have contributed to these results, residential learning communities have been shown to increase retention of participants at other institutions.

Based upon Tinto's research, Eastern Kentucky University understood the importance of integrating social and academic integration through programs such as

residential learning communities. This study examined the efficacy of Tinto's model on college GPA of first generation, first-year college students who participated in residential learning communities compared to those first generation, first-year college students who did not participate in residential learning communities. The results of the study indicated participation in residential learning communities held no statistical significance on EKU GPA for first generation, first-year students.

Universities such as Eastern Kentucky University work hard to provide opportunities to students with hopes to increase their success and persistence. Residential learning communities are an investment in the student population, including students who are at-risk such as first generation, first-year students. Research shows that when programs help students with both academic and social integration, persistence increases. Universities must continue identifying programs that help students persist and succeed. While this study did not show statistical significance with participation, programs such as residential learning communities should be explored and adjusted to provide the best support for all students.

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