HOUSING AND RESIDENTIAL LIFE: DETERMINING
THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THEME COMMUNITIES
AND STUDENTS’ RETENTION RATES

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by

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Date

Graduate and Professional Studies in Education
Abstract

of

HOUSING AND RESIDENTIAL LIFE: DETERMINING
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by

Joan Romara Steele

Brief Literature Review

There are multiple different housing options that colleges and universities use to
house, develop, and retain their student populations. This thesis explores dormitories,
Greek Housing, living-learning communities, and residential-learning communities but
most importantly, closely examines theme communities & residential halls and the effects
on student retention. Historically traditional dorms or dormitories were the go to option
to house students as well as faculty members. This thesis will closely examine the
themed communities and residential halls in order to determine if there is a connection
between these housing techniques and college and university students’ retention rates.
Throughout, the definitions of student development theory and retention are used to
develop the study and to detect any connection between retention and housing.
Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this thesis was to learn if there is a connection between students’ retention rates, theme communities, and residential halls. The reviewed literature identified that students’ who reside in theme communities and residential halls helps students familiarize themselves with the campus and bond with faculty, staff, and peers. The results from the survey questionnaires showed that the students extremely appreciate the theme communities and believe it plays a positive role in their grades. The results also indicated that residential halls assist in students’ decisions to re-enroll at Sacramento State University.

Methodology

The study is both qualitative and quantitative in nature. A survey questionnaire was created using mostly Likert scale questions in addition to other types of questions that provided qualitative data from the student sample population. The residential advisors collected the data manually within the themed communities through the survey questionnaires. After the completed survey questionnaires were gathered, the researcher inputted the responses into Survey Monkey to analyze the data. The analyzed data was then used to create tables to display the results.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The combined findings from the literature review and the survey questionnaire data supports the conclusions of a positive and influential connection between students housing assignments and their retention rates. It is evident from the literature review and
the survey results, habitual and supportive interactions with faculty, staff, and peer residents help themed and learning-community residents connect to their colleges and universities. As a result, the researcher suggests five major recommendations. The first is all housing and residential life administration should transition out of using dorms or traditional dormitories as a student housing resource; the second major recommendation is all housing and residential life administration and affiliated researchers utilize uniform housing terms and labels; the third major recommendation is that residence halls should use a faculty member to staff the halls; the fourth recommendation suggests that all learning communities have affiliated residential support staff, as well as affiliated faculty members offices and apartments inside of the communities. These recommendations will only enhance the student’s residential life on campus and continue to increase retention by building stronger bonds with faculty, staff and peers.

________________________________________, Committee Chair
Francisco Reveles, Ed.D.

________________________________________
Date

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Topic

College and university campuses use multiple kinds of housing to entice students to their institutions as well as to retain them. Labels for student housing are, living-learning communities, residential-learning communities, residential dormitories, residence halls, sorority and fraternity houses, and also theme communities. Eck, Hoyt and Stephenson (2007) used one college campus to prove the usefulness of living-learning communities. “As living-learning communities continue to extend learning beyond the classroom, we anticipate that first-year to second-year retention and six year graduation rates will improve and that Rollins students will experience other benefits during their college experiences and beyond” (p. 8). This study will pay close attention to residential halls and theme communities and how they influence student retention rates.

Statement of the Problem

Annually colleges and universities struggle with student re-enrollment otherwise known as student retention. One of the ways these colleges and universities have chosen to combat fluctuating student retention numbers is by utilizing theme housing to re-attract students. The students that have the highest drop-out rates or instances of switching schools are the first year students. These are students who are in the beginning of their academic career and it is especially important to cement their interest in and connection to their school campus. The existence of campus housing is not the only factor that
connects students to their campus and institution but the type of housing is most certainly a contributing factor. The type of housing such as residence halls and/or sorority or fraternity housing can help to ensure that the student feels as if he or she fits in and has a physical and comfortable place on the campus to call his or her own. These feelings and the ease of students to fit in and connect to their campus increase the likelihood students will return to and re-enroll in their institution of origin.

**Significance of the Study**

The significance and the purpose of this study is to determine the connection between college and university students’ retention and theme communities. The sample population for this thesis will come from sophomore, junior, and senior Sacramento State University Undergraduate Students. The sample will consist of students who are returning to Sacramento State. The data will be compiled by using research and student survey questionnaires. The major intent of this study is to add research and information to assist residential life staff and administration in maintaining and even increasing their college or university’s student retention numbers. This thesis will assist researchers by examining types of on-campus housing like theme communities to attract and re-attract students back to their initial college. This study can be a tool to assist college and university interest in students’ retention. During the course of this study beneficial factors will be highlighted in residential life that contribute to student’s retention and also an examination of counterproductive factors that lessen students’ interest in re-enrolling.
in their original institution will be focused on as well. Specific research questions answered during this thesis study are:

1. What residential halls’ attributes positively influence college or university students’ retention?
2. What residential halls’ attributes negatively influence college or university students’ retention?
3. What factors in theme communities and/or learning communities solidify students’ connection to their college or university?

**Definition of Terms**

*Theme community*

A theme community is one of several different types of housing that colleges and universities offer to their students. A theme community can be a hall, floor, or an entire building structure where students are housed together based on one or more of the students’ similarities. Students are assigned to or sign up for theme communities based on connections like; STEM majors, class level, gender, or even a shared social or community focused interest. Since these are all pre-identified interests and similarities students share, they will often find a quick and personally effortless connection to their campus through theme communities. Rinn (2004) listed some of the ideas that theme dorms are organized around. “Many other universities offer theme dorms based on ethnic interests, substance-free commitments, and various artistic and music interests, among others” (Rinn, 2004, p. 5).
**Honors residence hall**

An honors residence hall is very similar to a theme community because it also unites students based on a common interest or similarity. These terms are also sometimes used interchangeably, meaning that an honors residence hall is sometimes referred to as a theme community. The theme that connects students who live in an honors residence hall is that all the students consistently earn high grade point averages and choose to reside in a hall with other high achieving students. One of the negative aspects of living in an honors hall or theme community is that the students are choosing to separate themselves from other students who are not high achievers or exhibit high grade point averages. Rinn (2004) illustrated the similarities between a theme dorm and an honors residence dorm or hall:

Some argue that theme dorms, or dorms that expand an area of interest beyond the classroom, can promote self-segregation (Hill, 1996). These theme dorms, like honors residence halls, attract highly distinct groups and do not offer much diversity. For example, some theme dorms are academically orientated, and many theme dorms are ethnically based. While this may allow students to build group solidarity and ease the pressures of being a minority, theme dorms also can encourage stereotypes and lessen the opportunities for students to broaden their horizons and develop friendships with other groups. (p. 4-5)

**Sorority and fraternity houses**

For the purpose of this thesis the terms, “Sorority House” and “Fraternity House,” refer to any houses, cottages, or residential buildings that are reserved for students who
are members of Greek organizations. The word, “sorority,” comes from the Latin form for “sister.” The sorority houses or housing are reserved for students who identify as sisters or students that are females. Just as sorority stems from the Latin word for sister, “fraternity” derives from the Latin translation of “brother.” Subsequently the fraternity houses or housing is also reserved for brothers or male students whom are members of their college or university’s Greek organization. Colleges and universities organize and set aside housing structures for students that are pledged to, affiliated, or a member of a Greek organization that the college or university supports and or is affiliated with. Throughout the academic year or during other campus sanctioned times, students reside in these houses, and it also serves as their base for organizing their members’ academic, social, and community services joint endeavors (Boyd et al., 2008; Langley & Lowther, 2005).

**Residential dormitory**

In these current times the existence and use of traditional dormitories are becoming outdated. Nowadays students are increasingly showing a preference for more luxurious, spacious and intimate housing options. Residential dormitories or traditional dorms and dormitories are defined, described, and even imagined as the complete opposite of luxurious, spacious, or intimate. Reeves, La Roche, Flanigan, and Copeland (2010) illustrated that traditional college or university dormitories are now becoming extinct and that students are even rejecting applying for or enrolling in some colleges due to traditional dormitory style housing.
Unlike their “baby-boomer” parents who were used to sharing a bedroom and bathroom, the students of the millennial generation have higher expectations for their student housing. The traditional dormitory with hall bathrooms and gang showers are quickly becoming a thing of the past. (Reeves La Roche, Flanigan & Copeland, 2010, p. 270)

The use of traditional dormitories and even the word dormitory is becoming an antiquated, outdated, or old fashioned practice when describing college or university housing. Currently more popular terms for Institutions of Higher Education’s housing are; residence hall, residence suite, theme community, residential-learning community, and living-learning community. Not only are these words more common, popular and are even newer terms for housing options but it also documents a change in student housing methods. The newer and differently labeled housing options are not solely modes of housing. It is deliberate retention and even recruitment methods that contribute to a multitude of factors affecting students’ college or university satisfaction, experience, involvement and also development. Some of these factors are increased student engagement, students’ retention, and also educating and developing student populations in more atmospheres than just the classroom.

Living-learning community

The title Living-Learning Communities (LLCs) is very illustrative of a LLCs intent and purpose. LLCs are housing situations on college or university campuses that not only house students but also act as a physical setting and arrangement for faculty members to interact with students. This is a setting where the faculty does not just act as
professors but also play a part in the social, cultural, and civic engagement of students in higher education. The other side of this is students residing in LLCs are usually enrolled in one or more classes with other students residing in the same community. Nelson, Johnson and Boes (2012), an LLC or Living-Learning Community, asserted that “what sets residential colleges apart from other types of living-learning communities is that faculty members live, eat, and socialize with students in a college residential setting” (p. 22). Living-Learning Communities therefore are the places where students who are enrolled in one or more classes together also live together. It is where campus faculty, staff, and administration jointly work together within the residences to develop and support students.

**Residential-learning community**

The terms, “Residential Living-Learning Community” and “Living-Learning Community,” are often used interchangeably. They are both used to describe an on-campus housing situation organized by a college or university. Most housing options under this label require students to live in a residence hall with faculty professors who teach at least one or more of the students in the same communities’ classes. Another common denominator of residential-learning communities is that the students that reside in the community or residence hall are all enrolled in one or more of the same classes at the same time. Garrett and Zabriskie (2003) cited theorists Astin (1993) and Schroeder (1994),

Residential living-learning communities (LLCs) are one way to foster such connections; they are designed to produce environments that promote greater
student involvement, improved faculty-student interaction, and a more supportive peer climate. They also are designed to assist students in integrating diverse curricular and co-curricular experiences. (p. 39)

Another aspect of residential-learning communities which is not obvious but due to the label, it is the civic engagement and social aspect that produces environments with more involvement and supportive interaction. Students are not only enrolled in classes together but as part of their shared community experience they also organize and or complete social and community service projects together.

**On-campus housing**

The term on-campus housing is used to collectively refer to college and university housing options for students who are located on the academic institution’s site. Skira (2011) highlighted the identity of on-campus housing and it is simply students boarding on their college or university’s site. Bowman (2010) asserted that living in on-campus housing has the potential to enhance the psychological well-being of first-year students and the receipt of financial aid to assist in paying for room and board can reduce students’ stress levels simply because students know their educational costs have been met (Nora, Barlow & Crisp, 2006, p. 17). Stern, et al. (2007) also illustrated the meaning of on-campus housing.

According to Digest of Education (2005), to facilitate the transition to college and independent living, many students choose to live in university housing during their first year of college. For example, from 1999-2002 in the U.S., an average
of 15% of undergraduates, primarily freshmen, lived in on-campus housing. (p. 53)

This shows that living in on-campus housing does more than just help students transition to the college life, it provides meaningful interaction of fellow classmates that are in the same transitional stage to college. On-campus housing is one way colleges or universities house students and play a role in maturing and protecting student populations away from home. On-campus housing is also one out of two major categories sponsored and controlled by colleges and universities. Off-campus housing is the other major type of housing option that may be sponsored and controlled by colleges or universities but not directly located on the campus.

**Student retention**

In higher education the term student retention refers to a multitude of things; transfer rates, dropping out, higher education prosperity and advancement. De Araujo and Murray (2010) noted some positive attributes of student retention, and also two student retention similes. “It has been suggested that living on campus causes students to be less likely to drop out or transfer, more likely to make academic progress, and more capable of achieving a high level of academic performance” (De Araujo & Murray, 2010, p. 1). A major focus of this study is the dropping out and transferring incidents that De Araujo and Murray mentioned. Student retention is the opposite of these two terms since the intent of institutions of higher education is to not only get students to stay in college and graduate but to also stay in their first or originally enrolled college or university. Dropping out would indicate that the student departed from the college or university of
enrollment and did not return to another college or university to finish school. Transferring would mean that the student departed from the college or university of original enrollment and re-enrolled in another college or university.

**Organization of the Remainder of the Thesis**

The remainder of this thesis will abide by the following organizational format. Chapter two contains the review of literature. The review of literature will be an exploration of related subtopics to this thesis’ three main foci which are retention, residence halls, and theme communities. The related subtopics are dormitories, residential halls, theme communities as halls or floors, living-learning communities, residential-learning communities, sorority and fraternity houses, and student development theory. Chapter two will end with an explanation for the purpose of this thesis study, and will be followed by a summary of the whole chapter.

Chapter three is the methodology chapter and it will follow the same format as the first chapter of this thesis. The methodology chapter describes a system of methods used to investigate this topic. There is a section describing the setting of this study and a section that will consist of a conclusive summary of chapter three.

Chapter four is dedicated to the data collected and analyzed. This chapter includes an introductory section of what to expect and how the data was collected. There are illustrations of the data collected that further break down the information for better understanding. It will also include the researcher’s interpretations and conclude with a summary of the findings. Chapter five will focus on an overall summary of this thesis in
its entirety, as well as final conclusions and recommendations for the field of Student Housing and Residential Life. At the end of this thesis there is an appendix that contains the letter of consent and the student survey, and at the very end a list of references used to support the researchers findings.
Chapter 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

Throughout this thesis labels like living-learning community, residential-learning community, residential hall, residential floor, and residential suite will be used to refer to college and university students’ on-campus living arrangements. Originally dormitories were built to just house faculty, but now they are being designed to attract and retain college and university students. Cross et al. (2009) illustrated that residential halls’ designs have changed in order to support students and retain them in numbers. Cross et al. (2009) stated “over the past decade, universities began making significant changes in residence hall design to attract and retain students. Universities have moved away from standard halls with community bathrooms to designing apartments, suite halls, or clusters…” (p. 599). This thesis explores the connection between theme communities which are sometimes labeled or referred to as residence halls, residence floors, residential-learning communities, living-learning communities, sorority houses, or fraternity houses, and also college and university students’ retention rates.

Student Development Theory

There are multiple different theories used to describe, illustrate, and even define the transitional processes that human beings experience as a result of living life and completing certain rites of passage. Several of these theories can and have been used and
even developed to illustrate, identify, and explain students’ growth, behaviors, and even their expectations as they move through institutions of higher education. In his development theory for college students, Astin (1999) showed how the residential environment directly affects college and university students’ development and institutional satisfaction. When referring to college students, Astin (1999) said

Residents also show greater gains than commuters in artistic interests, liberalism, and interpersonal self-esteem. Living in a dormitory is positively associated with several other forms of involvement: interaction with faculty, involvement in student government, and participation in social fraternities or sororities. (p. 524-525)

This development theory can be used to assert the connection between students’ housing situations and the positive impact on their retention rates, as well as offering students other positive benefits. When looking at proximity to resources, faculty and staff are the key connecting factors between residential students’ involvement, level of engagement, and retention.

While defining student engagement, Harper and Quaye (2009) also acknowledged the impact that the environment and the availability of campus resources have on students. Harper and Quaye (2009) said that

This operational definition is borrowed from Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, Bridges, and Hayek (2007), who also note: … The second component of student engagement is how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum, other learning opportunities, and support services to induce students
to participate in activities that lead to the experiences and desired outcomes such as persistence, satisfaction, learning, and graduation. (p. 44).

This take on student engagement theory is supportive of how; students’ physical environment helps them develop as scholars, gain a connection to their institution; but most importantly how it keeps them using supportive and critical educational resources by maintaining close proximity. Student involvement and student engagement development theories help to demonstrate how the proximity of higher education resources determines the level of frequency and attention that students will give their available resources.

Other theories can also be used to show the value in making resources easily accessible for students to obtain. In his paper on student involvement and engagement theory, Astin (1999) also indicated that an abundance of multiple types of resources benefits students’ development during their academic journey. Astin (1999) also examined a resource theory that is relevant to student housing and retention rates. Astin (1999) stated that “In effect, the resource theory maintains that if adequate resources are brought together in one place, student learning and development will occur. Many college administrators believe that the acquisition of resources is their most important duty” (p. 520).

The inclusion of resource theory with student involvement and student engagement theories supports that created environments inside campus housing have positive developmental factors for students. Evans et al. (2010) used a campus ecology theory to show how a created environment shapes students actions, academic success,
and campus integration. Evans et al. (2010) utilized a working definition of campus ecology, “campus ecology, the study of the relationship between the student and the campus environment,…incorporates the influence of environments on students and students on environments,” as well as focusing on “the transactional relationship between students and their environment” (p. 168). This supports individuals; but, in this instance, students are influenced and supported by their created environment which is their housing situations and college or university campus settings. The proximity of faculty, staff, and resources determines the ease and the amount of times students use these resources and consequently how well or how much they will be influenced and developed by using these resources. This also supports why faculty, staff and campus administrators must work together to create seamless environments with resources and activities that are productive, positive, and engaging so that students’ development will be thorough and well balanced.

Student development theories seek to make sense of students’ physical environments, their level of engagement or involvement, academic persistence, and even factors impacting students before college admission. Student development theory that is of particular interest to this thesis focuses on students’ environments as on-campus housing and students’ support systems with peers, faculty, staff, and resources. Grice-Longwell and Grice-Longwell (2007-2008) reported that

According to Tinto, students must be sufficiently involved on the college campus if an institution is to have a successful retention program….His theories of retention maintain that successful retention programs make a conscious effort to
reach out and make contact with students in order to establish personal bonds among students and faculty. Particularly important is faculty-student contact in a variety of settings outside the formal classroom setting. (p. 408)

This illustration of student retention theory shows why student developmental stages during the college experience determine their needs and relationships with campus faculty, staff, and peers. Positive student development consequently increases retention when students know and feel like they have knowledgeable and caring peers, faculty and staff who are there to assist them in reaching their academic and interpersonal goals.

Student development theories also indicate that in order to increase students’ connection to their manufactured campus community that serves as their substitute home environment student affairs and student services professionals must play an active, knowledgeable, and supportive role in students’ involvement, engagement, and developmental stages. LaNasa, Alleman and Olson (2005) noted there is a multitude of theories that indicates manufactured environments that exists within on-campus housing positively supports students’ engagement, development, and therefore assists in positive student retention rates. LaNasa, et al. (2005) stated “a substantial body of research supports the connection that residence halls and on-campus living have a positive effect on student growth and development” (p. 2). Another way to look at the importance and benefits of on-campus housing in relation to student development can be noted by purposeful housing programs that offer different kinds of housing to meet different kinds of students’ needs as they traverse the developmental stages.
After students have gotten older, went further along in their studies, or become more acclimated to the college atmosphere and routines they will require different types of connections, resources, and housing. Fingerhut, Grills, Machon and Thadani (2012) stated

...human development is viewed as growth and connections with and toward others. Healthy connection with others (rather than autonomous disconnection) is the means toward and the goal of psychological development. It is also the foundation for growth, intellectual development, and achievement in life. (p. 44)

Student development theories and student engagement or involvement theories exist as knowledge and procedural tools for faculty, staff, and campus administration to create, run, and maintain programs and services that assist students through their developmental processes. The assistance through these developmental processes helps students gain feelings of connection to their campus so they will be retained in their college or university. The student will pursue college or be retained because involvement refers to or identifies the time and incidents that students participate in clubs, campus organizations, and leadership opportunities or even participate in class or what is otherwise known as purely academic pursuits. Student engagement theory exists and seeks to monitor students’ involvement effort and frequency in order to replicate programs and also keep programs and services that students have a need for and will help aid in students’ positive development.
Dormitories

The term, use, and construction of dormitories are not only the traditional form but also an outdated practice. More recently colleges and universities are remodeling traditional dorms and labeling the residence differently to better suit their student populations on campus. Nowadays students want more than just a place to sleep and a small closet to hang a sparse amount of clothing items. Now students are identifying what they want and even prefer en-suite bathrooms that are either shared by one or no other roommates or hall mates. The prevalence is access to small kitchenettes’ and private connected living rooms for socializing or studying. Reeves La Roche, Flanigan and Copeland (2010) stated

of the survey respondents, 27.1% indicated that they share a bedroom and live in a traditional dormitory and share a bathroom and when asked about next year, only 17.3% said that they were going to live in a traditional dormitory. When asked about their preferred form of housing only 3.2% said that they preferred traditional dormitory living. (p. 271-272)

These authors highlighted the modern trend that currently the majority of students aren’t being housed in what is known as or referred to as dorms, dormitories, traditional dorms or traditional dormitories. These students’ preferences and expectations have changed from students of past decades and generations. Currently very few students reportedly prefer, expect, or even desire dormitories that are small in size and offer sparse storage space. Another distasteful factor that dormitories offer are shared bathrooms with very little or no privacy. The current preferences of today’s student is larger spaces,
which include kitchenettes’ and greater privacy. These preferences also include rooms with attached bathrooms otherwise known in real estate as en-suite bathrooms. The rooms would have showers and restrooms that are connected to the bedroom and only shared by a single student or a roommate.

Let it be noted that other current preferences of students involves the outside appearances of student housing structures. Students anticipate that the outside of these buildings or structures are also aesthetically appealing as well. Students reportedly desire or expect that the inside hallways are configured differently to offer more privacy to the rooms but are also more open or offer common space for gatherings and social interaction. Needless to say when prospective students’ tour campuses that still utilize traditional dormitory configurations it plays a detrimental factor in students’ choice to enroll and possibly later on to re-enroll.

These prevalent student preferences show and illustrate a generational taste and desire change. Herman Miller (2007) asserted

that picture is changing, however, as schools compete for students and respond to a new level of student expectations. Institutions are asking questions about what their dormitories should be. Are they places to sleep? Socialize? Eat? Attend class? Meet with advisors? Are they dormitories, residence halls, apartments, or living–learning communities? (p. 1)

The students’ generation shift is prompting higher education administration to not only rethink the term and usage of dormitories but it also brings into question the very meaning of dormitories. In past generations dormitories were only places for students to
sleep in between classes or go home at the end of their school day. Now dormitories if they exist at all must contain spaces for students to sleep, eat, socialize, study, and also offer lounging rooms. The design, construction, or styles of dorms is impactful to students’ satisfaction and retention rates. Construction designs that spark or initiate the students into mingling and socializing with each other increases students’ connections to each other and ultimately their campus connection. A negative contributing factor unfortunately associated with dorms is that the halls are long, narrow, and angular. Therefore, traditional dorms are not equipped with the best construction to encourage or even induce spontaneous chatting, or social gatherings where students can meet and bond more openly and frequently.

In contrast to other reports about dormitories, De Araujo and Murray (2010) shared other researchers’ conclusions in some instances dormitories do help retain students, and offer other positive factors as well. They explained that in some of these cases the research does not offer analysis and data of current housing and residential life models. They note “Flowers (2004) focuses exclusively on African American students and finds that living in dormitories positively influenced measures of personal and social development that he suggests are essential for successful academic achievement” (p. 2). De Araujo and Murray also explained that although this study commends dormitories for factors connected to students’ academic success and retention the data and conclusions are outmoded. The research by Flowers (2004), although dated in this century, does not show a currently prevailing example of a student housing option. The connection between students’ retention and other attributable factors are not as comparable, have
increased limitations and may become even more irrelevant to future research if dormitories become extinct. So not only is the term, construction, usage, and student preference for dormitories outdated but so is dormitory-specific research.

Voyles (2004) wrote

…but don’t call them dorms. The “scary part” for any university choosing to build housing, says Bronstein, is that students today want many more amenities than they did in the past. They simply won’t accept the kind of old-style showers-down-the-hall dorms that used to be a fixture of most colleges. (p. 37)

This adds to the idea and impression that housing options labeled or called dorms or dormitories are the traditional and outdated ways to house students. This label and backlash from it shows that dormitories are not a preference but that students are repulsed by dorms or dormitories. Students are not enticed by dorms or dormitories lack of amenities or the construction, style, or layout of the dormitories. Although dormitory designs offer little privacy at the same time it creates some barriers against residential advisors’ view and therefore hinders proper supervision of students. The small and closed in quarters does not allow adequate space for students to gather and interact with each other creating difficulties to bonding. This leads to increased feelings of isolation if the inherent makeup or designs of the students’ living quarters are not conducive to students’ interaction and consequential peer bonding. A high number of walls and small rooms not only makes it harder for resident advisors to monitor students but it makes it more difficult for students to find, meet, and interact with each-other in their new home
environments. The amount of walls and small rooms may make students feel as if the walls are closing in on them or make them feel isolated.

In a study that focuses on residence halls and dormitories one researcher concurs that student to student connections and bonding are vital to students’ retention rates. This research also adds credence to the point that there is actually a connection or positive link between students’ retention rates and forms of student housing. Rinn (2004) stated that

Some argue that theme dorms, or dorms that expand an area of interest beyond the classroom, can promote self-segregation (Hill, 1996). These theme dorms, like honors residence halls, attract highly distinct groups and do not offer much diversity. For example, some theme dorms are academically orientated, and many theme dorms are ethnically based. While this may allow students to build group solidarity and ease the pressures of being a minority, theme dorms can also encourage stereotypes and lessen the opportunities for students to broaden their horizons and develop friendships with other groups. (p. 4-5)

Rinn (2004) asserted that theme dormitories foster or aid in students segregating or isolating themselves but also acknowledges the value in the instantaneous community or unity aspect. The ready-made or instantaneous connection students get from dorms especially theme dormitories and other theme housing options enhance bonding. Later after they have developed or become more connected to the institution it allows them to become more connected and involved with the greater college or university campus. The instantaneous community and the connections that dormitories foster are like training wheels for the students until they are ready to venture out into the broader campus
environment. Rinn described this type of housing as isolating and segregating but other more favorably descriptive words are cocoon, insulate, or incubate.

De Araujo and Murray (2010) stated this implies that students who live on campus spend more time studying in their residences than students that live off campus, which is likely an indication that dormitory facilities foster an environment conducive to learning, providing a channel for improved student performance. (p. 60)

The authors provided a rather recent illustration that dormitories do offer some positive attributes to students. Their conclusions linked elevations in students’ grades or grade point averages. The difference here is that their study used off-campus housing as a contrast. This thesis study does not include off-campus housing as a contrasting factor but explores multiple on-campus student housing options with emphasis on theme communities. This study pays particular attention to theme communities in residence halls and other housing options are explored to give supporting evidence since there is little research that specifically names theme communities as the sole topic of focus.

Dormitories are not a type of theme community but actually are the opposite since students in dormitories are housed without specific or intentional regard for shared classes, major, or interests. Dormitories do take into consideration gender and compatibility issues when determining roommate situations. In the same study De Araujo and Murray (2010) also concluded that students that live in on-campus dormitories also drink less alcohol and study more with their schoolmates and also their roommates. Dormitories have been shown to be the least effective or desirable when
compared to other more current and popular housing options however there are still some similarities. One similar attribute or environmental factor dormitories and other housing options have are all have been noted to inspire students to connect with other students.

This environmental factor may be less prevalent or persistent in traditional dormitories but it is still noteworthy and holds a similarity or recurring theme found in other housing options like residence halls and living-learning communities. Other housing options illustrate or project an increase in students’ studying, working together, bonding and therefore decreases isolation. There are multiple attributes of dorms and one important factor of its success is how it provides peer, resource, and developmental connections for students that reside in them. Dorms provide students with areas and opportunities to interact outside of the classroom but still provide student development and interpersonal developmental opportunities for students. These opportunities and connections first occur in student to student roommate and dorm mates’ interactions since these are the first peers students spend a significant amount of time with. These first peer interactions and connections also serve as a link and safety net for students to open up and explore the larger campus as they go through their college years. Dormitories provide this link by existing as a physical space that contains a multitude of different students since students are not housed based on similar attributes.

This major positive attribute that dorms offer is also a default of dorms structure. Dorms do not house students based on common attributes, similarities, or majors like theme communities or residential-learning communities. Therefore, students in dormitories are more randomly assigned to rooms, floors, or halls in the dormitory
structures than they are in theme communities and residential-learning communities. This allows students the benefit of meeting other students they otherwise would not have bonded with or met. Students housed in dorm, dormitories, and traditional dormitories are able to bond over simply being assigned to the same living space and later bond over their own discovered similarities and attributes. Fingerhut, Machon and Thadani (2012) cited other researchers,

…in other words, the typical college experience for many students is a solitary one, with each student selecting and taking separate, often disconnected courses; living in dormitories with peers who may or may not share career or intellectual interests; and engaging in extracurricular activities that are likewise disconnected from what is occurring in the classroom and in the dorm. (p. 43)

A great transition from literature on dorms, dormitories, and traditional dormitories, Paine’s (2007) doctoral dissertation included comparisons and historical information on the transformation from dorms into residence halls or residential halls. She described the United States version of dormitories by explaining dormitory usage is actually adopted from England. Other scholarly works indicated the historical borrowing of dormitories from England’s educational system. In England’s educational system as well as the United States’ use of the dormitories is solely for the purpose of housing and feeding students but in some cases they are used to house and feed faculty and or staff as well. Currently housing situations that were once labeled or identified as dormitories are now being renamed and even reconfigured through new design or reconstruction as residence halls. Paine (2007) included that the concept of the “residence hall” where
students lived and learned together replaced the notion of the “dormitory” more commonly defined as a place where students were simply housed for the purposes of sleeping and eating. It was at this point research began regarding the nature of the residence hall environment and its impact on students (Frederiksen, 1993).

Fingerhut, Grills, Machon and Thadani (2012) explored one of the main reasons residential-learning communities and living-learning communities are more successful at retaining students than traditional dormitories. They proclaimed as well as other researchers focusing specifically on learning communities, that the main factor of success is that students are grouped together based on multiple things they have in common. The other contributing successful factor is that learning communities extend the students’ studies beyond the classroom. The dormitories structurally and thematically do not specifically extend the classroom or student to professor and staff relationship. Fingerhut, Grills, Machon and Thadani, (2012) included, in other words, the typical college experience for many students is a solitary one, with each student selecting and taking separate, often disconnected courses; living in dormitories with peers who may not share career or intellectual interests; and engaging in extracurricular activities that are likewise disconnected from what is occurring in the classroom and in the dorm. Within higher education, learning communities allow for integration of students’ academic (or intellectual) and social experiences –with the idea that ultimately such an integration enhances academic performance, engagement, and retention (Li, McCoy, Shelley & Whalen, 2005).
This comparison adds further credence to reports that although dormitories house students together and encourage bonding, socializing, and connectedness to the campus they are not as beneficial as other forms of student housing options. Housing options other than dormitories offer more structure and house students based on selective factors or common attributes and therefore contribute to a higher level of students’ retention and commitment to their college or university. Dormitories whether labeled traditional or simply referred to as dorms or dormitories structure and construction design don’t inspire the same heightened level of bonding or closeness to campus resources.

**Residential Halls**

Students who live in residential halls on their college or university campuses reportedly have higher retention rate levels. Reports show living in residence halls also have a positive impact on students’ grades, social development, and attainment of post bachelor’s degrees. The multitude of positive factors attributed to residence halls is illustrated as a result of the structure, style and construction of residence halls. The configuration of residence halls aids in the socialization of students. The configuration not only extends students’ learning experience into their living environment and sleeping quarters but it also puts students in a cyclically intimate contact with their professors, classmates, roommates, and hall mates. The intimate contact that is fostered unites or endears students to this smaller community and later on in the students’ developmental process to the campus as a whole. Gasser (2008) stated that:
Decades of studies show the answer to be “yes”. Researchers consistently have found that living on campus, and more specifically living in residence halls, positively impacts students in a variety of ways including higher GPAs, higher retention rates, and higher matriculation rates (Anderson, 1981; Astin, 1977, 1982; Blimling, 1993, 1999; Nicpon et al., 2006; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Thompson, Samiratedu, & Rafter, 1993; Tinto, 1987; Velez, 1985). Considering that between 30-40 percent of college students drop out without obtaining a college degree (Consolvo, 2002), higher education officials are increasingly being asked why these figures are acceptable. The greatest period of retention risk for students is during the first year. In fact, almost 57 percent of all dropouts from four-year institutions leave before the start of their second year (Tinto, 1996). This makes the first year experience critically important to institutional retention and graduation rates. With increasing pressure on colleges to increase these rates educators need to explore all options that influence student success. Living environment is one of these variables. (p. 1-2)

College and university residential or residence halls influence on students’ retention rates are determined by their physical design. The construction offers more structure for students than that of dorms, dormitories, or traditional dorms due to offering more intentional and purposefully invasive staff and programming.

Paine (2007) included that recent research on residential halls also acknowledges or makes the connection that residence halls help students’ retention. She went on to summarize that current research notes or identifies the helpful factor as creating a sense
of belonging for the students. This means the increased number of students being retained have a quicker sense of community than if they were not living in a residence hall. It is also noted that the sense of community gives the students a sense of belonging, duty, and also connection. By staying in the residence halls students are always close to or surrounded by the campus’ social activities, academic activities, and also campus resources and networks.

The students are more easily able to find or form study groups, connect with a professor or campus staff, or even more quickly find parties and extracurricular events just because they reside in the residence halls. This nearness makes it quicker and therefore easier for the students to reach any needed resource or campus social activity. This nearness factor takes some of the work or difficulty out of locating and utilizing these resources and activities and thus increases the likelihood they will be used. Thus the student will successfully be integrated into the new environment of his or her new college or university campus. This allows or makes the students feel as if they are more than a student on campus and that they are contributing members and have important roles and responsibilities.

This sense of community, roles and responsibilities anchors the student to the residence hall and then ultimately to the college or university campus. Paine (2007) stated “these studies reveal that the interaction with peers and development of community experienced by students living in residence halls contributes to their satisfaction with and commitment the university leading to enhanced levels of social integration” (p.16). By noting that residence halls gives students a sense of community, Paine (2007) repeated
and or concurred with other researchers noted in this thesis that the creation of community is a strong factor that connects students to their institution.

Another positive contributing factor of living in the residence halls is the increase of students’ satisfaction with their institution. Paine’s (2007) dissertation findings and stated connection add to the evidence that there is a connection between residence halls and students’ retention rates. The connection noted by this researcher is that residence halls positively aids students’ retention rates by making them more content, more fulfilled, more responsible for and even more united with their fellow residence hall mates and essentially their college or university campus.

Banning and Kuk (2011) also agreed that residence halls offer students some positive and influential factors. They list as an example living in a residence hall promotes openness to diversity (Pike, 2003) and helps establish a sense of community and belonging (Berger, 1997). Students living in residence halls report more extensive engagement in campus life and greater satisfaction with their college experience than do their non-residential counterparts (Blimling, 1993). Living in a residence hall has been consistently shown to support student support and degree completion (Astin, 1993; Cannabal, 1995; King, 2002; Pascarella, Terenzini, & Blimling, 1994). (p. 91)

Their research also states that the connection with students’ retention rates is a positive and strong factor and that this connection also contributes the students gaining higher degrees. Banning and Kuk’s (2011) work in summary, adds credence to and also compiles the most prevalent and repeated positive attributes of residence or residential
halls. These two researchers’ list reasserted the positive factors that residence halls offer. Some of these factors are to keep students in close proximity to campus and institutional resources, faculty and staff availability, bonding with fellow class and school mates and attendance at social and cultural activities. The habitual closeness to these resources and connections support students intellectual and social development and also their engagement therefore creating a more engaged, connected and persistent student.

Although this thesis is not a competition between students’ housing options as related to their retention rates but a comparison between residence halls and residential-learning communities or living-learning communities. As stated earlier, residence halls do provide higher retention rates than dormitories or traditional dormitories. Likewise it has been noted that learning communities whether they are labeled as living-learning communities or residential-learning communities are attributed to provide higher retention rates than residence halls or residential halls.

Similar to the discussion in the article, *First-Year Housing: Should We Give Students What They Want, or What They Need?* (2006), researchers Fingerhut, Grills, Machon and Thadani (2012) included examinations of how residence halls compare to learning communities. These researchers agreed that learning communities offer more benefits or are connected to more positive student factors than residence halls. Some of the illustrated factors are higher grades, and closer bonds between student peers residing in the learning communities. Another noteworthy factor to be considered is students are gaining a closer bond or at least dealing with less anxiety about approaching their faculty members. This might be attributed to some of the learning communities’ requiring that
faculty members are assigned or affiliated with the learning communities, have an office inside the living community or hold on-site office hours. In addition, the fact that in some learning communities faculty members sometimes also have their own residential room or apartment located inside the community that their students also reside in makes it easier to form a viable relationship. As a benefit students feel less anxious and better about approaching their professors and asking questions and in turn earn better grades on assignments, tests, and exams. This leads to demystifying professors to students and the student is more likely to take this positive experience and apply it to approaching other faculty and staff in future interactions.

The created environment of residential halls has a developmental effect on students’ behavior and acquired habits. Residential halls are constructed as a housing arrangement that is positive and supportive, but do not always strategically house students with similar interests, majors, or attributes. The versions of residential halls that do strategically house students are those designed and built within the construction of a Residential-Learning Community, Theme Community, or a Living-Learning Community. The University of Cincinnati created one example out of many residence halls that are constructed within the confines of a theme community, and also selects students based on shared attributes. Oguntoyinbo (2011) stated the “…University of Cincinnati officials opened a new residence hall aimed specifically at first-generation, Pell-eligible students. The hall, known simply as the Gen-1 Theme House, has fewer than 50 students, most of whom are freshmen and sophomores” (p. 3). When residence halls exist on their own and are not physically and purposefully attached to Residential-Learning Communities,
Theme Communities, or a Living-Learning Communities their student assignment structure then bears more similarities to dorm, dormitories, and traditional dormitories.

Residence halls that are attached to or inside of other housing forms maintain more structure and are newer facilities and design than traditional dorms or dormitories, but they too have a negative aspect. This supportive but higher education manufactured environment has been noted to start and or increase students’ drinking alcohol in college and in turn students earn lower grades (Cross, 2009). One saving factor for residence halls that can help dissuade students from other negative actions that lower their grade point averages and their school satisfaction is the manipulation of students’ peer behaviors. Mattern and Neighbors (2004) completed a study in which the beliefs of peer drinking, partying and socializing were lowered by campus wide marketing techniques. Mattern and Neighbors found that students drink more and take on more negative behaviors when they believe their social group or peers consume high levels of alcohol, or higher levels of alcohol than themselves. The increased structure, multitude of planned activities and the strong presence of faculty and staff working and living in residential-learning communities, theme communities, and living-learning communities act as a deterrent to underage drinking, and non-supervised socializing where other negative student actions and behaviors may occur. Housing structures that are solely residence halls offer less; structure, faculty and staff supervision, and interaction and therefore also offer a weaker sense of the built-in and instantaneous community that residential-learning communities, theme communities, and living-learning communities offer.
Residence or residential halls offer more structure than dormitories but residence halls still have some negative issues. Shushok and Sriram (2010) showed that students have some dissatisfaction with how some residence halls are organized. Residence halls do not offer students as much privacy, amenities, or luxurious furnishings as some students expect from sponsored housing. Shushok and Sriram (2010) stated that the most frequent student complaints presented to the dean reflected concerns about the learning environment in the residence halls, the lack of community among engineering and computer science students, and the need for additional faculty student interaction outside of the classroom. (p.70)

The structure of residence halls keep students in contact with their peers and staff but do not connect them as well or as often as living-learning or residential-learning communities. In this way residence halls are also becoming extinct since faculty connections are weaker and the students are not selected or assigned as often based on similar attributes or majors. The article, First-Year Housing: Should We Give Students What They Want, or What They Need? (2006) supported residential halls do not have as much organization as other housing options. It stated that “…80 percent of institutions have at least some of their freshmen living in multiple-occupancy traditional residence hall rooms” (p. 3). This indicates that in many of the older forms of residence halls students are bunched together in rooms just based on their class year rather than other or multiple factors.

Roommate and housing situations impacts students’ institutional satisfaction, interpersonal and academic development. The article, Amenities Matter to Some-But Not
All-Prospective Students (2005) stated “still, the pressure of changing student expectations over the past decade has been enough to prompt most campuses to revamp older residence halls” (p. 4). Students’ facility and resource satisfaction impacts colleges and universities since their campus satisfaction has an impact on their resource usage and developmental progress. Older residence halls and even some current residence halls built to only house students are not equipped to manage privacy, or aesthetics’ preferences, as well house the multitude of activities, in addition staff and faculty.

When residential halls are at its best and the most beneficial, it offers a multitude of benefits for the students. The most effective residential halls habitually influence students by keeping them in consistent contact with resources, peers, faculty and staff. According to Brooks (2010), one of the best ways residence halls can contribute to the education of the whole student is by collaborating with academic departments in the production of learning communities within the residence halls.

The creation of these learning communities within residence halls help students to become acquainted to a smaller and less overwhelming community before the student reaches out to the larger campus. Connections and community are the themes here and how they are connected to the environment and behavior. This research shows that a positive and supportive environment plays a positive developmental and retention centered role in discouraging negative behaviors and nurturing positive ones, attributes, and activities. Students’ living environments matter whether they are created by the student and when they choose which college to attend and housing assignment or when the student is placed in a small and intimate manufactured living environment
encapsulated within another by the college or university housing and residential life administrators.

Theme Communities/Halls/Floors

Theme communities are created and supported by campus faculty, staff, and administration in a variety of different forms. There are many different variations of and contributing elements when united create theme communities on or within halls, floors, buildings, and houses. Minor (1997) stated “hence, the University of Missouri FIGs program combines the best elements of co-enrollment and academic theme housing to create a new program that surpasses the sum of its parts” (p. 21). Theme communities are housing situations on college and university campuses that house students based on staff assigned or student selected common ideals or themes. Another criterion that most theme communities also use is housing students who are also enrolled in one or more of the same classes or enrolled in school during the same year or academic semester. Due to the intertwining of academic or interpersonal shared interests and shared housing arrangements the foundation of theme communities closely resemble residential-learning communities, and living-learning communities.

Much like theme dorms or honors’ residence halls, a theme community, also consists of students housed together due to a common interest or attribute. A theme community, theme floor, or theme hall can also be a type of an on-campus residence hall. The term or label theme community is a label used to describe and include college or university sponsored student residences. For this thesis residential-learning communities
or living-learning communities as well as sorority houses and fraternity houses will also be discussed since they are also students’ residences on campus sponsored and monitored by the college or university and are a very specific type of theme community. A theme community is not just a theme community by the strict name, but a type of on-campus student housing with a theme. Theme communities are not the old fashioned faculty or student dormitories, they are a new and evolved entity. In this study, faculty or student dormitories will not be analyzed or discussed further since institutions are moving away from this type of on-campus housing.

Although not all are specifically labeled as such, single sex residence halls and residence floors are a form of a theme community. In student housing and residential life theme communities can be any hall, floor, building, or a combination of buildings that house students based on one or more of the students’ attributes or interests. Schmidt (2011) wrote

> the researchers concluded that women who were less socially active used isolation as a time to study. As is true with females, socially active males within the residence halls had lower GPA’s than less active males. The study also concluded that men who lived in an all-male hall had higher academic achievement. (p. 10)

The built in seclusion aspect of theme communities benefits students by arranging more physical space conducive to homework and studying. In this instance seclusion, isolation, or intentional segregation is beneficial due to the time alone allowing students to concentrate on their studies and maintain a clear balance. These instances of personal seclusion can benefit grade point averages, and instill time management and prioritization
skills in students that utilize their time in this manner. In this way the built in structure of
residential halls or floors that house students based on a theme contribute to students’
retention by playing a role in grade academic excellence, and interpersonal skills growth.

Most theme communities’ focus in on or labels race, gender/single sex
assignments, or social justice/community service inspired and specific. Three colleges
that have websites that display this trend really well are Occidental College, Fullerton
College as well as Reed College. Occidental College labels their student housing options
as Themed Living Communities and currently has multiple residence halls and residence
houses. Occidental’s housing arrangements are also very similar to other themed housing
options of other colleges and universities. Occidental does not have a race focused hall
but it does have a multicultural hall (Pauley Hall) that supports and encourages
awareness, celebration, and understanding of diverse cultures and how to live more
knowledgeably in an increasingly diverse world and diverse economy. E. Norris house is
a housing option for students interested in studying or getting to know different
languages so they may have a chance to practice these languages with roommates or hall
or house mates who already know or are also studying the same language.

Occidental’s community that focuses on gender is named The Berkus House. The
Berkus House is an all-female residence designed to inspire, develop and motivate female
students in a very close knit residential environment. Gender-Neutral house is a housing
option assignment for students that are not or do not identify as either a male or a female.
SAE is a housing option for students who are extremely focused on career development,
community service, social justice, and is somewhat similar to the Pauley Hall or Eileen
Norris Hall since it also has a cultural awareness and leadership underlining. Food Justice House is also similar to SAE house, Pauley hall, and Eileen Norris hall since they all have a cultural awareness and social responsibility and an understanding aspect. Food Justice House is a housing option that teaches and nurtures within the students sustainable food practices. Sustainable food practices means different things to different people but in sum it means to seek balance between the environment and food production by growing food without harmful outside influences, treat those in the food chain better and make money for further investments (Environment Practice at Work Publishing, 2014.)

As said before, most theme communities’ focus in on or labels race, gender/single sex assignments, or social justice/community service motivated/inspired. Fullerton is another example of a college that follows this race, gender, and social justice focused theme communities. The Multicultural Perspectives Floor in one of Fullerton’s race based theme communities. The Women’s Floor is the gender base themed community and The Leadership Floor and the Sustainability Floor are the themed communities for social justice. Fullerton also has an example of another common focus themed community such as the academic and or subject based community. Fullerton’s version of this academic trend is the Honors and Scholars Floors. These types of floors pay tribute to the overachievers and provide space specifically related to academics. Although Fullerton does not offer this another example of this academic focused housing option is a STEM floor, hall, or community (Fullerton, n.d.).
Reed College is another institution that focuses in on and or uses labels of race, gender, community service, or an academic focused theme to create and label its student housing options. Reed’s examples of a race specific or inspired community are called the Japanese Culture Community and the Arabic Culture community. An example of the gender specific or a single sex option is the simply titled Women’s floor. The housing options that are motivated or dedicated to social justice, or community service are The Co-Op, the Substance Free floor, and the Quiet Minds (Naito III-Southside) community. Reed College, Fullerton College, and Occidental are just a few out of many colleges and universities in the United States that offer students housing options that focus on labeled student housing. These are labels used to organize and inspire housing options that will not only attract and recruit students to the institution but once there will provide them with an easy and instantaneous connection to the campus that will ultimately retain year after year until they graduate with a high grade point average as well as a degree (Reed, n.d.).

Theme communities are colleges’ and universities’ answer to retention and student adjustment or campus assimilation issues. These communities are assembled to gently usher students into a manufactured environment on campus that they already know and are comfortable with. Campuses are creating more and more of these communities in order to attract their students to the institution and bond with them by quickly and seamlessly making them feel appreciated and at home on the campus. Peterkin (2013) explored the versatility and difficulty of theme communities by adding that “another common model, a thematic living-learning community, often linked with courses, can be
hard to take to scale…” (p. 3). Peterkin included that theme communities and housing options like this are very resourceful and financially expensive. Theme communities are indeed a resource for employees, time, and can be financially taxing due to there being so many factors and variations of these theme communities and the reserved housing structures that are required. Theme communities, as well as living-learning communities and residential-learning communities are all housing options that are very complicated and expensive due to the variety and complexity of their structure and design.

**Living-Learning Communities**

Living-learning communities (LLC) are manufactured communities or residential neighborhoods on college and university campuses that utilize multiple criteria. Kraska (2008) defined living-learning communities by writing “the term “learning community” is defined in different ways, all of which may be appropriate for a given situation. The term “cohort” appears in many of the definitions and in some cases used synonymously (p.1). LLC’s or living-learning communities offer students a more intimate portrait of their academic campus. For what could be a very overwhelming experience living-learning communities fight students’ initial feelings of loneliness and isolation by creating a very specific and unique community for the student.

In a learning community staff and faculty who are affiliated with the community have habitual and strong connections to and experience with students in their particular communities. So much so that the residing students gain more intimate relationships with their faculty and staff and the instances of increased contact and accessibility makes the
campus and the college experience less traumatic and overwhelming for students. These instances of increased availability by faculty and staff and the fact they are in closer contact to social, academic, and developmental resources reassures the students that high grades, faculty support, and college completion is achievable.

All of these aforementioned things also help the students realize that the faculty and staff are their allies, and work to support and develop them along their academic journey. Living-learning communities’ structure brings the community to the students by encapsulating faculty, staff, and other students that they otherwise might only have had a cursory relationship with. Garrett and Zabriskie (2003) cited researchers stating that living in an LLC is associated with gains in critical thinking, intellectual development, and aesthetic appreciation (Kuh et al., 1994). Research indicates that students in LLCs report substantially greater interactions with faculty and peers and greater gains in learning than students living in traditional residence hall environments (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). (p. 39)

Living-learning communities are a manufactured physical space for students and they exist to make students’ transition from home to the college atmosphere easier and less daunting. They are especially helpful for freshman and sophomore students since they are usually the youngest students on the campus and often away from home for the first time. These higher education manufactured communities exist to cement students to their campus by quickly providing them with a comforting space and even leadership roles so they will not be tempted to transfer or drop out. Garrett and Zabriskie (2003) citing Astin and Schroeder, stated
residential living-learning communities (LLCs) are one way to foster such connections; they are designed to produce environments that promote greater student involvement, improved faculty-student interaction, and a more supportive peer climate. They also are designed to assist students in integrating diverse curricular and co-curricular experiences (Astin, 1993; Schroeder, 1994). (p. 39)

Living-learning communities are justly titled and labeled as communities. The labels are just since they are colleges’ and universities’ purposefully manufactured communities for the academic and social development of the students they enroll and house. These communities allow the students to jump right into a synthetically created community but the students’ continued involvement and engagement transforms the community into something more authentic and individualized based on each student’s experience and involvement.

Living-learning communities are designed as a concentrated area of student resources, a multitude of faculty and staff, and both social and academic opportunities. Not all living-learning communities have faculty members directly connected with or live on campus within the learning community. Nevertheless when students live in these communities they are still habitually close to their institution’s faculty members. This persistent closeness allows residing students to have easier and constant access to faculty, staff, and all the developmental, academic, social and leadership opportunities that their campus has to offer.

When defining living-learning communities, Nelson, Johnson and Boes (2012) described living-learning communities as residential system that exist …
to educate the ‘whole’ student; to scale the larger university down to a more manageable size, where college services are readily accessible to students; to create smaller, inclusive communities where peers of differing backgrounds can interact; to provide social and academic support networks; to allow for the informal interaction of undergraduates with faculty and other scholars and professionals; and to provide an enriching residential community (p. 22).

In order to solidify these communities there is more than a multitude of faculty, staff and opportunities and resources for the students. Living-learning communities select students based on most or a combination of similarities like their; social interest, academic interest, major, cultural interests or identity, or even school year. Some examples of these shared attributes would respectively be: Fine Arts Lovers Community, (STEM) Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics majors, an ethnic, diversity or even gender based community, and lastly a school year community might consist of a living learning community comprised of all either freshmen, sophomores, juniors, or senior students. All of these shared common interests or attributes the students have in combination with all the resources and networks that these campuses offer allows the students to capture a sense of a neighborhood, village, home setting, or community.

Researchers have stated and found there is more of a direct connection between students’ retention rates and their residence in living-learning communities and residential-learning communities. Schmidt (2011) included research from others stating “Stassen (2003) showed that students who are enrolled in living-learning community program had more positive outcomes in the areas of first year academic achievement and
retention” (p. 12). There is more of a direct connection between students’ residence and participation in living-learning communities and their retention rates than in most other campus housing options. Not only is there a connection between college students’ retention rates and living-learning communities but it is a positive factor on making sure that students stay in school.

Some living-learning communities have students take one or more classes together. This part of the living-learning communities’ design help students create attachments and stronger bonds to their classmates who also happen to share their living environment so the bond is reinforced in the community rooms, halls, or common areas when the students have the opportunities to interact again. They are able or even almost forced to gain attachments with each other by constantly seeing each other and doing activities together whether they are class related or purely social. Living-learning communities are helpful to the students that reside and participate in them as well as students outside of the living-learning community. Also Schmidt’s (2011) research found that retention rates are high for the sophomore year indicating that the living-learning community’s program was beneficial since the majority of students from a previous year decided to return the following year.

Like the simply named theme communities living-learning communities can also exist as a hall, floor, building, or even be a union of multiple buildings. A living-learning community can even be created and maintained inside of a residence floor or a residence hall. Brooks (2010) added credence to this by including that there is recently an increase in the creation and usage of intentionally made living-learning communities inside of
residence halls. There is also an increase in the manufacturing of living-learning communities inside of residence halls or residence floors since they are beneficial as well as resourcefully and financially exhausting. Nelson, Johnson and Boes (2012) found that “while a residential tutorial system has much strength, there are also shortcomings. First, it is expensive, as Tutors and Proctors receive room and board in exchange for their work” (p. 25). Most living-learning communities have their faculty live onsite inside of the community and or offer them office space onsite so they can be readily available for the students that the community serves. Staff also may reside inside of the learning communities they oversee and are affiliated with. The college or university provides this housing to their learning community affiliated faculty and staff as part of their salary and benefits package. Although their presence in these apartments and offices inside the learning communities are reassuring and helpful to the students they are also a monetary cost to the college or university.

Another negative factor associated with living-learning communities involves students and faculty members. This negative factor is also one of the most positive attributes the living-learning communities’ offers students. The negative aspect occurs when students do not get along with or have a very negative encounter with their community’s affiliated faculty members. Schmidt (2011) stated “the living environment can have an impact on how the student perceives the classroom. Lichtenstein (2005) stated that students who had a negative experience in the learning community focused more on the teaching style of the professor, and had disagreements with the syllabus and assignment style. Other researchers agree that the relationship students have with their
faculty members can either solidify their connection to the institution as well as destroy the relationship. Fingerhut, Grills, Machon and Thadani (2012) stated

   furthermore, consistent with the relational model of development, students’ self-reports suggested the development of relationships with peers and faculty was the glue underlying many of the programs successes (Covington & Surrey, 1997; Gilligan, 1982; Jordan et al., 1991). Finally, the higher retention rates that we observed suggest that our decision to target first-year students, who face potentially challenging transitions on entering college, was a sound one. (p. 52)

Without a positive and strong bond with the student community, affiliated faculty members and staff are less effective since students will less often turn to them for future assistance or guidance. The downfall of or negative result of weak bonds and students’ bad experiences with faculty, staff, and peers is these experiences strongly impact students’ satisfaction rates and consequently their development and retention. When students have a negative experience in their learning community it affects how they view the classroom and behave in the classroom as well as the whole campus. Since the living-learning community is the students’ substitute home for the academic year the atmosphere, successes, and also the failures of the learning community still has an impact on how the students view their professors, staff, peers, and even the campus as a whole.

Living-learning communities are just one strategy out of multiple housing strategies to orientate students to college life, and entice them to stay enrolled. These communities are also one out of many retention and student development techniques used to help students bond with their campus and prosper as future scholars and leaders.
When students feel they have a place and become duty bound to an organization or group, they now feel more compelled to stay since now they feel like stakeholders in their higher educational institution. Brooks (2010) also said that as both Astin (1984) and Tinto (1994) discovered, the more connected students are to their institution, the higher the likelihood that they will be retained at that institution (p. 18). Living-learning communities also help create a balance between students’ classroom work and their social lives on their campus and beyond. While in their rooms that are inside of their communities they do homework, have study groups, if their professor has an office or apartment on-site then they attend their office hours, or have classes inside of their communities. This set up ensures that the students have a continuous and intertwined academic and interpersonal learning experience. The social and developmental aspect comes into play when students take part in activities or leadership opportunities their residential advisors or residential life coordinators have arranged for students to participate in.

Living-learning communities on college and university campuses intentionally provide faculty and staff affiliates for their students as well as staff organized and supervised group activities for their students. Brooks (2010) included that “research has also included a strong correlation between student retention and the connection that students have with their institution (Bean, 1980, 2005; Tinto, 1975, 1994)” (p. 13). Living-learning communities are used by housing and residential life staff as well as the faculty that are affiliated with the communities to assist in the adjustment of their enrolled students. These communities have also been a tool in the recruitment of students.
especially when one of the themes or major foci of the communities is of particular interest to the student. Living-learning communities initially give students a place within the larger more daunting campus they can see as their own and claim. This idea allows the student to visualize himself at the college and later assume a role in the community and campus increases the probability that he will be retained.

**Residential-Learning Communities**

Residential-learning communities are defined as a community that is very similar and even interchangeably labeled as a living learning community. When describing the historical context behind and creation of residential learning communities, Bonner (2009) reported

the basic concept goes to the roots of Oxford and Cambridge; when they were founded in the 16\(^{th}\) century they had faculty that lived with the students,” said W. Robert Midden, a Bowling Green State University chemistry professor who helped found the first residential learning community on the Ohio campus in 1997. (p. 17)

Hanley (2011) included more detail to the initial meaning behind residential learning communities, saying

…residential learning communities, or living-learning communities, are historically described as groups of individuals who share common values and beliefs and are constantly and actively involved in sharing in each other’s experience and learning together from each other…In its most basic sense, a
living-learning community is the floor on which a student lives in their residence hall. They have received this title because students are believed to be learning from each other by living with each other in such close quarters. Through everyday interaction, life experience, academic experience, college experience, and social and personal experience all merge to create a community in which residents are continually learning from each other over the course of their time together on the same floor. (p. 5-6)

Hanley’s research also indicated that residential living learning communities are also one type of housing arrangement that fosters a strong sense of community, student networking also gives students a string anchor to their college campus as their substitute or new found community base. This researcher also indicates and concurs with other researchers’ that community and the connection that a student develops towards his school’s community is a leading factor in what anchors him or her to the campus and keeps him retained at the initial institution.

Residential-learning communities make colleges’ and universities’ smaller, by transforming a floor, hall, or designated building or select few buildings into a more intimate community. This smaller community in turn gives the students that reside in it a greater sense of belonging and ownership of the community by allowing them to first get to know the people on their floor, hall, or building and later get acquainted with the larger campus. This intensified sense of connection and intimacy with and between students their peers and assigned college personnel and faculty anchors them to the college or university. This sense of connection with and between their peers, faculty and staff
breaks down the barriers of being in a new place. It also quickly provides students with a sense of obligation to their new community and this in turns builds a more enhanced and quicker sense of belonging to their college or university.

There are similarities between the design and structure of residence halls, residential-learning communities and living-learning communities, and also a shared purpose. Fingerhut, Grills, Machon and Thadani (2012) showed the connection or similarity between residence halls, residential-learning communities, and living-learning communities. “When these efforts attempt to extend these connections beyond the classroom and into the residence halls, they are referred to as living-learning communities or as residential learning communities…” (p. 44). This asserts that residential learning communities and living-learning communities are still a type or form of a residence hall. The difference is that although they are a type or form of residence hall residential-learning communities and living-learning communities are also a special and advanced form of a residence hall. Residential-learning communities are emerging as the new, popular, and advanced form of student housing. Another thing to note is that residential and living communities can also exist or be manufactured within a residence hall and vice versa. Depending on the acreage and facilities of each college or university halls, floors, and communities can have multiple and interchangeable meanings from campus to campus.

Fingerhut, Grills, Machon and Thadani (2012) described their residential-learning community program and go on to illustrate how their PEAP retention success even has lasting effects after the first year. Their research boasts exemplary results concluding that
their program had perfect results of a 100 percent or perfect student retention rates (p. 50). They describe and define their program as well as other residential-living learning programs as not something that can be described as a cookie cutter mold. They described their PEAP program as well as the other hundreds of residential learning communities designed in the United States higher educational system.

It is important to note that residential learning communities are not monolithic. For example, though some residence-based programs are managed by administrators in student affairs or housing, others are managed by academic affairs or faculty from a particular department. In addition, whereas some programs require that students enroll in shared classes, others do not. In an analysis of over 600 different residential learning communities, Brower and Inkelas (2010) identified more than a dozen categories of such communities. Examples include residence-based programs focused on a shared political interest; programs aimed at female students, first-year students, or second-year students; and programs targeting social, cultural, or civic interests. (p. 45)

Within the field of housing and residential life there are multiple different types of housing options and residential learning communities is one that is offered in many different variations on many campus across the United States.

Fingerhut, Grills, Machon and Thadani (2012) highlighted a negative factor of maintaining residential-learning communities. These communities take up a lot of colleges’ and universities’ resources which include faculty and staff involvement,
facilities’ space, as well as financial resources. Fingerhut, Grills, Machon and Thadani (2012) stated

a residential learning community necessarily requires dedicating valuable and limited resources to a small group of individuals. Some have questioned whether this is fair and whether it puts our other students at a disadvantage. Recognizing that this is a real issue, we are intentionally finding ways to have PEAP students give back to the “life” of the department as a way to maximize our “investment” (both financially and in terms of human resources). (p. 53)

Stassen (2003) also found that learning communities are very expensive to develop and maintain. Stassen admitted that “although, ideally, the coordinated model may be preferred, the financial reality on many campuses is that this model is difficult to support, and institutions have instead developed more modest LC attempts” (p. 586). The benefits of residential learning communities are bountiful however these benefits are concentrated to the few students that live in these learning communities. Students that do not live in these residential-learning communities only get the residual positive effects of the; social, curricular, interpersonal support, student development, and leadership opportunities of the residential-learning communities. Meaning that the students that do reside in these residential learning communities are able to bond with their classmates’ deeper and quicker, experience more complex networks with their staff and faculty, and are more socially, emotionally, and psychologically developed than their non- residential-learning community residing peers.
Although separation or seclusion may be used as a technique to concentrate on academics it may also appear as a detriment to students. Residential-learning communities manufacture communities inside of expansive and daunting campuses but the residential-learning community may also aid in students segregating themselves or fail to give students a sense of unity. While also intertwining labels residential learning community with living learning community Hanley (2011) wrote “the purpose of the present study was to examine Psychological Sense of Community (PSOC) within residential living-learning communities (LLCs) at a midsized, mid-western, public university” (p. 54-55). Hanley’s assertion documented that faculty, staff, and higher education administration must work at creating as well as maintaining learning communities’ unity and student development programs and activities.

Students have openly complained and acknowledged living in learning communities is isolating when residence staff and the learning community do not directly facilitate the interaction of resident students with non-resident students. Everett and Zobel (2012) stated “there was a common sentiment that the Engineering Living and Learning Community program did not support, aid, or assist the students in making connections with peers outside of the ELC” (p. 14). Rinn (2004) added to the segregation idea by stating that “residential communities are inclusive because they impart a sense of belonging among group members and exclusive because only certain group members can belong to the community, those who live in the residence hall (p. 3). A smoke-free residential community has its health and lifestyle benefits for nonsmoking students but it is formed as a result of excluding students that do smoke. Allard and Gomberg’s (2005)
research also indicated exclusionary aspects within residential communities and reported that “OSU and URI both reported that it is more difficult to match smokers with roommates. At URI, matching smokers with roommates has become especially challenging now that rooms are increasingly becoming ‘tripled’ (3 students to a room)” (p. 163). Acknowledging these negative exclusionary aspects of residential communities is important since these factors may compel residing students to completely self-segregate themselves, or non-residing students to experience unrealized developmental phases, networks, and academic gains.

**Sorority & Fraternity Houses**

Greek organizations on college and university campuses provide housing options reserved for just their Greek organization members. These houses are commonly called sorority houses and fraternity houses. Although Greek housing is one type of college and university sponsored housing this thesis will not go in depth on Greek housing or membership. Studies do show that sorority and fraternity houses have a positive impact on retention, although it has been noted as having the opposite effect on students’ grade point averages. Boyd et al. (2008) explored one reason why the sorority and fraternity students’ grades suffer. They summarized other authors as saying “students living in fraternity or sorority houses consistently report heavier levels of alcohol use, higher levels of intoxication and more alcohol-involved social activities while students residing in college sponsored, living-learning communities tend to drink less (Brower, Golde & Allen, 2003; McCabe et al., 2007)” (p. 988). Gasser (2008) cited other authors and
concluded that fraternity and sorority house students have lower retention rates and even
grade point averages than students that do not live in Greek housing. The author stated

Debard, Lake and Binder (2006) studied first-year Greek membership and found
that while Greeks performed poorer than non-Greek students in terms of GPA and
retention rate, these rates climbed significantly for members who joined in their
second semester and second year of college. (p. 4)

Although the retention rates for students in fraternity and sorority houses are lower than
students that reside in residence halls the retention connection is still identifiable.

Lowther and Langley (2005) research acknowledged the connection between
Greek housing and college and university students’ retention rates. They asserted that
though that it is a combination of sorority and fraternity membership with students on-
campus housing choices or designations that keeps the students retained. They state
since Greek affiliation appears to have so much stronger an impact on first-year
retention, this suggests that it is not housing choice alone, but the sense of
affiliation and involvement that helps the student to attain academically and want
to remain in attendance. (p. 10)

This strong sense of involvement is the equivalent of the peer, faculty, and staff
connections as well as the personal development opportunities that are structured into
learning communities and theme communities. Li, Sheely and Whalen (2005) agreed that
“residence halls, like Greek housing, afford more opportunities for this interpersonal
interaction and for the development of communities than do other off-campus living
options” (Blimling, 1993, p. 34). Greek membership housing helps to retain students and
instances increase when it is the only housing option or the predominant residence option for students. Greek membership is earned through students picking a fraternity or sorority and later pledging or compete for their Greek membership. The pledging, competition, and traditions’ process serves as a pre-bonding experience even before the students assume residence in the Greek houses. It is also noteworthy to insert that students housed in sorority and fraternity houses retention rates are at their highest when the college or university campus’ main housing source are Greek houses.

Sorority houses and fraternity houses are similar to theme communities because both organize students based on common interests. Both types of housing are for college or university students but they house the students together based on social or non-academic interests. The common interests that Greek students share is that they all have been admitted to the same college or university, pledged the same sorority or fraternity and gained admission into the same sorority or fraternity. Living-learning communities house students together based on similar academic interests, shared classes, or shared majors. Rinn (2004) cited other researchers to show some of the ways in which fraternity and sorority housing helps to alleviate feelings of separation anxiety, or isolation that students may feel on a college or university campus. Rinn (2004) wrote “students involved in social organizations, including Greek organizations, report fewer feelings of loneliness and isolation than students not involved in social organizations” (Lane & Daugherty, 1999, p. 3). Students are able to forge faster and stronger bonds when some social barriers have already been broken down. The process of gaining Greek membership allows students to connect by already initially knowing that they have been
through several milestones together and then living together in the sorority or fraternity house cements students' bonds even more.

Greek houses as well as other student housing options also experience negative issues. Social connections and entertaining activities are both benefits of residence in sorority and fraternity houses but they can also inspire negative behaviors and excessive drinking. Cross, Zimmerman and O’Grady (2009) stated that “college students’ living arrangements have been deemed important in college alcohol use. For example, students living in fraternity or sorority houses consume alcohol more frequently and drink more than other students (Capone, Wood, Borsari & Laird, 2007; Page & O’Hegarty, 2006; Wechsler, Kuo, Lee & Dowdall, 2000)” (p. 584). During social activities that inspire peer connections and a balance between academics and entertainment instances of excessive drinking and bad behavior also occur. Hanley (2011) added that “…PSOC for students in the following groups was found to be generally higher than students who were not: fraternity or sorority members, private school undergraduates, students living on campus, out-of-state residents, seniors and females, extroverted students, those attending smaller institutions (less than 10,000), and students with optimal levels of campus participation (DeNeui, 2003; Lounsbury & DeNeui, 1995; Lounsbury & DeNeui 1996)” (p. 16).

Although there are negative issues and situations that stem from some of the social activities that Greeks students are involved these activities, services and organizations also offer a variety of social engagement, community service, and leadership opportunities for their student members. Rinn (2004) included “students
involved in social organizations, including Greek organizations, report fewer feelings of loneliness and isolation than students not involved in social organizations (Lane & Daugherty, 1999)” (p. 3). These instances of negative behaviors during social activities further show how important it is to have a balance between faculty and staff interactions with socializing and peer interactions in order to sustain positive student development.

**Student Retention**

For the purposes of this thesis the term student retention refers to students returning to their college or university of origin and re-enrolling in an additional year or semester of studies. De Araujo and Murray (2010) provided a great working definition of student retention in the same way that this thesis is using and also shows a connection between student retention and housing. “It has been suggested that living on campus causes students to be less likely to drop out or transfer, more likely to make academic progress, and more capable of achieving a high level of academic performance” (p.1). Thompson et al., (2007) also showed that the meaning of student retention means that the student re-enrolls in an institution year after year until graduation. They also make the connection that student retention also means the student has an uninterrupted path in education by continuing to advance to higher levels of higher education. Thompson et al., (2007) stated “furthermore, it has been shown that students living on campus tend to earn better grades and have retention rates at their institutions which are higher than their off campus peers. “These students are timelier in their graduation and more often go on to graduate school and earn advanced degrees” (p. 1). One of the many uses of retention
and applicable to this thesis is that retention refers to continuous and uninterrupted enrollment in college or university.

In higher education the term student retention is defined and measured in a variety of ways; transfer rates, dropping out, higher education prosperity/advancement. Berge and Huang, (2004) noted some ways that college and university student retention has been explained and measured. “Retention is continued student participation in a learning event to completion, which in higher education could be a course, program, institution, or system” (p. 3). This thesis highlights the occurrences of non-completion, dropping out, and transferring rates that colleges and universities experience. These three terms are the opposite of what it means to retain students, and colleges and universities aspire to maintain students’ continuous enrollment numbers until they complete their programs and graduate. Loss of retention would mean that the student did not re-enroll in their initial college or university. Dropping out, non-completion, and transferring are all the opposite of retention, and would therefore negatively impact colleges’ and universities’ retention numbers. Transferring which is the opposite of retention and means that the student left one college or university but enrolled into a different college or university.

The feelings of a community or the campus climate of the college or university that the student attends is an ultimate student satisfaction and retention dictator. Students’ satisfaction with their campus and educational experience is a vital student development and student retention indicator. At the start of their academic journey and continuously throughout their journey students are faced with multiple retention hurdles, but supportive housing situations provide students with a safe and supportive haven away
from home. Springer (n.d.) stated that “in addition, while the evidence indicates that the educational experience has a large effect size upon retention, the findings presented also indicate that a student’s sense of community has a visibly noticeable effect upon retention” (p. 12). The use of housing situations as a tool to maintain and increase retention helps because it humanizes faculty, staff and administration for the students. It allows students to see these professional individuals on a more personal level and illustrate them as mentors, role models, or just more approachable campus employees. Housing situations breaks down emotional and traumatic barriers for students that may be first time college students, or students that are away from home for the very first time. At the very least these campus sponsored housing situations help students quickly locate and attach to mentor and advocates, visualize peers as friends, and have one less stressful situation to worry about during their academic journey.

The sense of comfort, support, acceptance and familiarity contributes to students’ institutional satisfaction and makes these retention elements. Student retention simply means keeping the students enrolled until program completion or graduation and environments whether they are selected by students or created by administration contribute to retention. Students that are consistently and purposefully stimulated and supported build solid and lasting bonds to their fellow schoolmates, staff and the campus as a whole. Simonet (2008) came to the conclusion that “this study showed how social systems are unequivocally linked to academic success” (p.7). Maintaining students’ retention numbers is a shared triumph for the students as well as the students’ college or university. When students remain continuously enrolled and pursue on towards their
degrees and or program completion they provide the ultimate meaning of retention in higher education. Colleges and universities do not want to keep students forever but instead want to see and assist students in academic excellence, interpersonal growth and degree attainment.

**Rationale for the Study**

The rationale for this study as well as the purpose is to determine if there is a connection between on-campus student housing options and college and university students’ retention rates. Since there is a lack of literature that specifically focuses on residential halls and theme communities this study will also explore a multitude of other college and university housing options. Other housing options like dormitories, residential learning communities, living learning communities, as well as sorority and fraternity houses have been explored since these are all housing options that are similar in organizational format and purpose to theme communities and residential halls. The actual study and research information for this thesis will be from one of California State University at Sacramento’s theme communities inside their residential halls. Between the literature and the research information after it has been determined if there is a connection there will also be a discussion exploring the connection in the review of literature in chapter four otherwise known as the data analysis chapter. Retention and especially a drop in retention are important to every college and university since it is the number of student departures and intimately connected to institutions success.
These student housing options are methods utilized to increase retention, student satisfaction, as well as student development. Nutt (2012) stated that…beginning the 1970’s the research began to focus on what were the reasons students remained enrolled and how colleges and universities could make changes or develop programs which would increase the retention of their students. (p. 1)

Students will be more likely retained when they feel that there is a reason to stay. Students obtain more of a connection with their peers, campus, and housing situation when they feel that they are not just another student on a campus, but that they are an integral, important, and contributing member of their campus community. All faculty, staff, and administration must work together with purpose in order to develop and integrate students into their higher education institutions.

Retention efforts must be done efficiently and promptly to maximize resources and bond students to their college or university before they transfer or drop out and thus lower the number of students retained. Nutt (2012) summarized that “residence life is another area where essential collaborations are needed with advising services in order to enhance student retention and persistence…” (p. 2). Although theme communities are just one housing option out of many for students and campus administration to choose from they are also one method used in a combination of many to keep students enrolled and thus retained.

As previously noted throughout this chapter the base meaning of retention in higher education means that the student continues to reenroll until academic completion.
Therefore, retention is an indicator of success and accomplishment for all concerned stakeholders like students, faculty, staff, and higher education administration.

Gabriel, et al. (2001) stated that high levels of attrition can have a large, negative impact upon a college’s funding, facilities, planning, and long-term curriculum planning. Learning more about the factors that affect retention and about ways and means of improving retention can help institutions avoid the high costs of high attrition rates. (p.4)

Campus faculty and staff play an important role in the development of students by creating and maintaining programs and activities that excite, educate, and mature students enrolled in their colleges and universities. Cleave (1996) stated that obviously, for students who live on-campus, one of the critical factors in the quality of student life is their level of satisfaction with their residence experience. Furthermore, living in residence has been found to have positive effects on students, including increased levels of persistence, more involvement in campus activities, and enhanced interaction with faculty and peers (e.g., Aitken, 1982; Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). (p. 1)

Theme communities and residence halls implement programs and activities geared and even somewhat individualized to student populations in order to create feelings of comfort and acceptance so that students will prosper academically and want to stay. In this effort these programs and activities not only help students flourish but also help to make them want to return to their college or university semester after semester.
Summary

Provided in this chapter is an inclusion and analysis of campus housing as it relates to theme communities as well as other student housing options. Besides theme communities, halls, floors and the various other housing options that were discussed are; dormitories, residential halls, living-learning communities, residential-learning communities, sorority houses and fraternity houses. These other housing options have been included due to there not being enough information or literature solely and specifically on theme communities. This chapter gave an introduction to and application of campus housing options that are related to theme communities. Although there are multiple different terms used to describe college and university organized housing for students they are all one method used to sustain and even increase students’ retention rates. The various literature sources detailed in this review illustrate that college and university on-campus housing exudes factors that contribute to the maintenance and increase of students’ satisfaction, development and also their retention rates. The repetitive factor that shows up in all of these student housing options is the manufacturing of a community for the students. This manufactured community within the larger college or university campus gives students a quicker sense of connection or belonging than they might otherwise obtain outside of these theme communities and other housing options.
Chapter 3
METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The major purpose of this chapter is to explain the survey questionnaire and how it was handed out. Following this paragraph there will be section to describe the university site that was utilized to obtain a sample population. There will also be a section to describe the population that was used in order to gather sample data for this thesis study. This study utilized a survey questionnaire that was designed by this researcher. The survey questionnaire used some Likert scale questions, and extra questions to gather information to understand the sample population. This chapter will end with a section that details the limitations of this thesis study, and will conclude with a summary section.

Setting of the Study

The purpose of this research was to identify the correlation between theme communities in residential halls on college/university campuses and students’ retention rates. The setting of this research study was California State University, Sacramento (CSUS). CSUS has six residential halls and the names are: Sutter Hall, Sierra Hall, Draper Hall, Jenkins Hall, Desmond Hall, and one off-campus housing structure named American River Courtyard. The sample population for this thesis study will only come from Sutter Hall. Sutter Residential Hall houses the three theme communities called
Wellness and Healthy Lifestyles Community, Leadership and Service Community, and the Global Awareness Community. The sample population will consist of sophomore, junior, and senior CSUS students that currently live in the CSUS theme communities in Sutter Residential Hall. Particular attention will be paid to the survey questionnaire responses that indicate that a student is not only a current theme community resident but was also a resident during the last school year as well.

**Sample Size**

The sample population for this thesis study will be taken from Sutter Residential Hall’s theme communities. Sutter Residential Hall is a co-ed hall and can house up to 208 students at one time, and the three theme communities are located within the even side of Sutter Residential Hall. The other side of Sutter Hall houses students who are not a part of the three theme communities. The maximum occupancy for the theme communities is 104 students, but this academic year there are a total of 93 students residing in the three theme communities. The intent of this study is to use a sample population of only sophomore, junior, and senior CSUS students that currently live in the CSUS theme communities in Sutter Residential Hall.

**Design of the Study**

**Data Collection Procedures**

For this thesis the data was collected manually by the theme communities’ residential advisors during the students’ floor meetings. The completed survey questionnaires were gathered by the residential advisors between the dates of May 9 and
May 19, 2013. Students were also given and used the option of putting their completed survey questionnaires in the Housing Coordinator’s mailbox in a closed envelope. At the end of the ten day time frame all the completed survey questionnaires that were submitted to the residential advisors and Housing Coordinator were turned in to the researcher. The survey questionnaires and responses were later entered into Survey Monkey©. A small number of students included their names or email and were entered into a raffle drawing held by the residential advisor and housing coordinator. The researcher did not offer any incentives to the students or choose the raffle winner. The prize for the raffle winner was a package of CSUS memorabilia and merchandise including a Sacramento State water bottle, key chain flash light, USB car charger, two pencils with the CSUS logo written on it, highlighter, multicolor ink pen, note pad, lanyard, key chain, and also a refrigerator magnate.

Instrumentation

For this thesis, a survey questionnaire will be used to collect data from the students. The survey questionnaire has a total of thirteen questions about being a resident in the CSUS residence halls. Out of the thirteen responses seven of the questions use Likert scales, and six of the questions ask the students to circle one of the listed responses. The survey questionnaires will be distributed to the students by the theme communities’ hall staff in a paper format during two of their weekly Tuesday night hall meetings. The researcher and author of this survey will not be offering the students any inducements to fill out the survey questionnaires. There will be raffle prizes offered and provided to the students by the theme communities’ hall staff. If there is a need for
clarification or a follow up, it will be done by the researcher. The researcher will contact the students for clarification or follow up purposes if the students give an email address. At the end of the survey questionnaire there is a line for the students to write in their email address. Before this line there is a special note to the students explaining that giving their email address is completely optional. It also informs the students that their email may be used by the researcher for follow up or for clarification purposes.

The researcher has also included an informed letter of consent for the students. The letter tells the students that completion of the survey questionnaire is completely optional and that they may stop at any time. It also states that their answers along with information from articles, journals, and books will be compiled to write and complete this thesis. In addition, the letter informs the students that the thesis is being conducted as part of the requirements for this researcher to complete a Master’s at CSUS in Higher Education and Leadership. Since the majority of the questions on the survey questionnaire will use Likert scaling and the data is quantitative. Quantitative research methods involve using surveys, questionnaires, and statistical data rather than personal accounts or interviews to explain the problem being researched. Cowan (2007) stated that “research comes in two essential forms. Quantitative research has to do with quantifying data and analyzing it, using statistical procedures” (p. 37).

**Data Analysis Procedure**

The questions and responses from this study will be inserted into Survey Monkey©. This website will be used to calculate the responses into percentages so that they may be rationalized and analyzed. Only the most prevalent responses will be put
into chart or graph format but special attention will be paid to responses from question numbers seven and nine. Questions number seven and nine will be specifically used to highlight the connection between theme communities and student retention. Both of these questions ask students to rate the impact that their theme community has had in their decision to remain in college, and their decision to re-enroll at CSUS. This is especially important since this research defines student retention as a student re-enrolling in their college or university of origin.

**Limitations of the Study**

There are multiple potential limitations to this thesis study. The first thing that limits this thesis is the sample population will only consist of CSUS students. The second limitation is that the sample population for this thesis study will only be taken from a state university. Therefore the collected data may not be as easily applicable to private colleges or universities. Another limitation to this thesis is that CSUS has only three theme communities in one residence hall and that they are very specific themes. Thus the uniqueness of the Wellness and Healthy Lifestyles Community, Leadership and Service Community, and the Global Awareness Community makes it harder to generalize or compare them to other theme communities on other university and college campuses. The research including articles from journals, similar theses and dissertations, and also published books are used in this thesis to compile information on theme communities and other related student housing options from colleges and universities. For this thesis study the sample population was restricted to the three theme communities within California
State University at Sacramento’s residence halls. This small sample size limits this thesis study’s comparison ability.

**Summary**

California State University in Sacramento has three theme communities and they are called; Wellness and Healthy Lifestyle Community, Leadership and Service Community, and the Global Awareness Community. An integral part of this thesis is students’ retention so much of the emphasis will be put on sophomore, junior, and senior respondents in the following chapter on data analysis. In order to gather data this study used a survey questionnaire and asked students to rate a total of seven of their responses and the other questions were list options. The questions and students’ answers from the returned survey questionnaires will be entered into Survey Monkey© to calculate the responses into percentages. A major limitation for this thesis study is that data will only be from a state university, and thus will be less comparable to other higher education institutions.
Chapter 4
DATA AND DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

The initial intent of the researcher and this study was to use survey questionnaires from returning sophomores, juniors, and seniors. The survey questionnaires were given to all students in the theme communities willing to participate, but the responses from freshmen students were to be discounted. Despite this intent a grand majority of the respondents were freshmen students, and only a small few were sophomores, juniors, or seniors. Only 44 completed survey questionnaires, out of a possible 108 current students in the theme communities were returned. As a result the analysis will focus on questions to determine retention. What strengthens this approach is that the survey questionnaires were passed out at the end of the school year in the month of May. So their intent to re-enroll can/will be useful to this study’s data and results.

Presentation of Data

The demographic information from the data collection is in the first three questions of survey questionnaire. The numbered questions from the survey questionnaire follow after the demographic gathering questions.
Table 1
Age Range

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-20</td>
<td>97.67%</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-23</td>
<td>2.33%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24-26</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27+</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Almost all of the students reported they were between the ages of 18-20 years old. Only 2.33 percent responded that they were between 12 and 23 years old. None of the students reported that they were between 24 and 26 years old, or 27 years old or over. There were forty three responses and one student skipped this question.

Table 2
Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There was an even mix of students identifying as male or female. Fifty percent of the responder indicated male, fifty percent indicated female and zero marked the third category of other. All forty four students responded to this question.
Table 3
Undergraduate level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freshmen</td>
<td>79.55%</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>15.91%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>4.55%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of the students reported they were freshmen with a total of 79.55 percent. The second highest response rate was for the sophomore category, with a total of 15.91. No students responded they were juniors but 4.55 percent responded that they were seniors. All forty four students responded to this question.

Table 4
Which theme community do you live in?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wellness and Healthy Lifestyle Community</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership and Service Community</td>
<td>79.07%</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global Awareness Community</td>
<td>18.60%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2.33%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most students responded that they currently live in the Leadership and Service Community, with a total of 79.07 percent. The next highest percent was 18.60 percent for the Global Awareness Community. The lowest response rate was for the Wellness
and Healthy Lifestyle Community with a response rate of 0 percent, and 2.33 percent of the students chose other as the theme community that they live in.

Table 5

Were you in a residential hall last year?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>20.45%</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>79.55%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most of the students responded that they weren’t in a residential hall last year with a percent of 79.55. There was a response rate of 20.45 of students that responded that they were in a residential hall last year.

Table 6

Which residential hall were you in last year?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sutter Hall</td>
<td>94.12%</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Hall</td>
<td>5.88%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draper Hall</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenkins Hall</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Out of the forty four survey questionnaires that were returned 17 answered this question and 27 students skipped it. The majority or 94.12 percent of the students responded that they resided in Sutter hall last year. Only 5.88 percent of the students
responded that they were in Sierra hall last year. None of the students responded they were in either Draper hall or Jenkins hall last year.

Table 7

How much of a factor were theme communities in your decision to enroll in Sacramento State University?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>25.58%</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>18.60%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>27.91%</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>13.95%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>13.95</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One out of the forty four respondents skipped this question, and 25.58 percent of the students marked a five. Students that marked number four were 18.60, and 27.91 marked a three. Students that marked number two were 13.95 percent and 13.95 percent also marked a number as their response.
Table 8

How much do you like Sacramento State University’s theme communities?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>43.18%</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>29.55%</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>15.91%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.82%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.55%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A majority of the students or 43.18 percent marked the 5, and 29.55 marked a four indicating that they like the theme communities a lot. Only 15.91 indicated that they were undecided or neutral by marking a 3. No students skipped this question, 6.82 marked a two, and 4.55 marked a one indicating that they don’t like the theme communities.

Table 9

Rate the positive impact that living in a theme community has played in your grades?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>40.91%</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>31.82%</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>13.64%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.82%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.82%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When asked to rate the positive impact the theme communities have on their grades none of the students skipped this question. With a response rate of 40.91 most of the students marked number five, and 31.82 marked number four. The number of students that marked; number three were 13.64, 6.82 marked number two, and 6.82 also marked number one.

Table 10
Rate the impact that living in a theme community has played in your decision to remain in college?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>45.45%</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>18.18%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>18.18%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>9.09%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>9.09%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

None of the students skipped this question. Out of the forty four responses 45.45 marked number five, and 18.18 marked both number four or number three. Number three earned a percent of 18.18, and 9.09 marked number two or number one.
Table 11

How much of a factor did your past residential hall play in your decision to return to Sacramento State University this school year?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>29.55%</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>36.36%</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>18.18%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.82%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>9.09%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The percentage of respondents that marked number 5 were 29.55 and 36.36 marked number four. Out of the forty four respondents 18.18 marked number three, and 9.09 marked number one. The lowest answer choice was 6.82 for number two.

Table 12

How much of a factor was the existence of the theme communities in your decision to return to Sacramento State University this school year?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>36.36%</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>25.00%</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>20.45%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>9.09%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>9.09%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
All forty four of the respondents answered this question, and the highest marked number was five with a percentage of 36.36. The percentage of students that marked number four were 25.00 percent and 20.45 marked number three. Number two earned a percent of 9.09, and number one also received the same percentage of 9.09.

Table 13
How much of a factor will theme communities be in your decision to return to Sacramento State University in the next school year?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>38.64%</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>22.73%</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>11.36%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>13.64%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>13.64%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All forty four of the respondents answered this question, and the highest marked number was five with a percentage of 8.64. The percentage of students that marked number four were 22.73 percent and 11.36 marked number three. Number two earned a percent of 13.64, and number one also received the same percentage of 13.64.

**Findings and Interpretation of the Data**

The survey questionnaire is aimed to determine if there is connection between theme communities and students’ retention rates. This part of the thesis will explain the findings and also interpret the data received from the survey questionnaires. Each of the
numbers from the survey questionnaires are included to indicate which part of the survey is being interpreted. After the questions and answer options there will be an explanation of the responses given. Directly after this introduction all thirteen of the questions are combined and examined.

The first part of the survey questionnaire included three questions to gain demographic information. These were three questions to find out the ages, identified genders, and college level of the student respondents. The results of the returned data show that a grand majority (97.67%) or 42 out of the 44 respondents were between the ages of 18 to 20 years old. There was one returned survey that left this question blank, but (2.33%) or one of the students reported to be between the ages of 21 to 23 years old. There were (50%) or 22 students that self-identified as male and (50%) or 22 of the student respondents identified as female. Another large majority result is that (79.55%) or 35 respondents identified as freshmen. Only (15.91%) or seven out of the 44 respondents were sophomores. The smallest portions of students that responded were juniors (0.00%) and only (4.55%) or two students were seniors.

Questions numbers one, two, and three aren’t demographic question but were used to solidify the respondent population. The data indicates that at the time of this survey questionnaire was passed out most of the respondents (79.07%) or 34 respondents lived in Leadership and Service Community. Although not a majority but almost twenty percent (18.60%) or eight respondents reported currently residing in the Global Awareness Community. One student skipped this question and one student also reported that at the time he or she lived in a theme community that wasn’t mentioned on this
Out of the three listed theme communities none or (0%) of the students indicated that they lived in the Wellness and Healthy Lifestyle Community. The results from question number two does not assist with determining a theme community or residential hall and retention connection. Most of the students (79.55%) or 35 respondents indicated that they were not even in a residential hall last year. This number coincides with most or (79.55%) or 35 of the students also reporting that they were freshmen at the time of this survey questionnaire. The results from question number three are indeterminate due to over (25%) or 27 students skipping or refusing to answer this question. Out of the seventeen that did answer (94.12%) circled Sutter hall and one circled Sierra hall.

Questions numbers five and six were used to identify theme communities’ impact on students’ initial enrollment. Number five supports that students feel a sense of satisfaction or like the Sacramento State’s theme communities with a combined majority of (72.73%) or 32 of the respondents circling the five and four answer choices. Out of the forty four respondents only two circled or (4.55%) circled number one to tell that they like the theme communities “Not at all.” Question number six on the survey questionnaire shows that a combined total (72.73%) or 32 respondents feel that living in a theme community has had a positive impact on their grades. Only a combined total of six respondents circled ones or twos to indicate that they thought the theme communities had a low positive or influential impact on their grades.

Numbers four, seven, eight, nine, and ten were used to identify if there is a retention connection. Question number four was inconclusive since the largest responses were (27.91%) or 12 respondents circled number three indicating a neutral response.
Only slightly more than a quarter (25.58%) circled theme communities’ existence played a part in their decision to attend Sacramento State University. Number seven from the survey questionnaire provides the strongest link between theme communities and students’ retention rates. Out of the forty four respondents almost half (45.45%) or 20 respondents circled number five for their answer. Another noteworthy thing to mention is that none of the students skipped this question and (18.18%) or eight students circled number fours indicating that theme communities have played a role in their decision to remain in college. This means that there is a combined total of (63.63%) or 28 respondents that assert theme communities played a part in their decision to be retained at Sacramento State University.

The last part of the survey questionnaire or questions numbers eight, nine, and ten were also used to answer whether there is a retention connection. Data from question number eight supports that residential halls helped retain Sacramento State University students with a combined percentage total of (65.91%) circling fours and fives. The breakdown of this is that the highest marked number was four with a percentage of (36.36%) or 16 students, and (29.55%) or 13 respondents circling fives. Of the forty four respondents (18.18%) or eight circled marked number three indicating that they were undecided about whether their last residential hall assisted in their decision to re-enroll at Sacramento State University. Question number nine also received a majority response rate in favor of theme communities’ assistance in students’ retention rates. A combined total of (61.36%) or 27 students out of forty four circled fours and fives. Answers from question number ten also support an influential connection between theme communities
and retention rates at Sacramento State University. The highest marked number was five with a percentage of (38.64\%) followed by number four with a (22.73\%) or ten students circling number fours.

**Summary**

The combined findings from the data illustrate that most of the respondent students were freshmen between the ages of 18 to 20 years old at the time of this survey. Unfortunately not even the combined total of sophomore, juniors, and seniors responded to this survey questionnaire. Evidence from the third demographic question does not help to identify whether there is a retention connection since the majority of respondents were new and not returning students. This may indicate that the majority of students in campus organized housing and residential life are lower classmen. The survey also indicated that there is an even mix of students who identified as male or female and most reside in the Leadership and Service Community. The students also indicated that they really like Sacramento State University’s theme communities, and thus illustrate that there is an identifiable and positive relationship between theme communities, residential halls, and students’ retention rates.
Chapter 5
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The purpose of this thesis study was to learn if there is a connection between students’ retention rates, theme communities, and residential halls. To determine if there is a connection multiple residential and students’ housing options were researched and a survey questionnaire was utilized. This study paid a lot of attention to residential halls, theme communities and retention since that is where the sample student population came from. The reviewed literature identified that the repeated closeness and consequential forged bond between students and faculty, staff, and their peers is a factor that aids in students’ retention. The literature also found that the closeness develops supportive and nurturing communities for the students and that it is a factor that aids in students’ retention. The results from the survey questionnaires showed that the students extremely appreciate the theme communities and think that they play a positive role in their grades. The results also indicated that residential halls helped students decide to return to Sacramento State University.

Conclusions

The combined findings from the literature review and the survey questionnaires’ data support the conclusions that there is a positive and influential connection between students’ housing assignments and their retention rates. Results from the questions and
the literature show that residential halls’ attributes positively impact students’ retention. Some of these attributes like proximity to campus resources and live-in staff are also attributes that are utilized in other student housing options. Specifically residential-learning communities and living-learning communities also have all of these factors. This study has found that although there are several different variations of theme communities in literature and even on a single campus that these communities do influence students’ retention. This retention connection has been found due to the communities captivating the students in multiple ways. In these communities the students usually sign up for or apply for residence in these communities rather than be assigned to the communities so their interest is already captured and magnified. Another aspect that continuously captivates and aids in quickly bonding students to their institution is that the pre-identified themes focused communal activities with peers, faculty and staff, and shared living space breaks downs barriers for students and builds the connections for them.

The formation of theme and learning communities unites students with individuals that they already know either have the similar background, interests, or major aspirations. This introductory aspect is especially beneficial for freshmen and transfer students to help them not feel lost in a sea of unknown individuals. The data and compiled literature indicate that the negative aspects of residential halls are that the housing structures are not as up to date or do not offer as many faculty affiliations as housing arrangements like residential and living learning communities or theme communities. The combined information from the survey results and the literature
review illustrate that habitual and supportive interactions with faculty and staff in residence and theme communities is a strong and repetitive factor that positively influences students’ retention, development and satisfaction.

**Recommendations for Further Study**

The combined findings from the literature review and the survey questionnaires’ data support the conclusions that there is a positive and influential connection between students’ housing assignments and their retention rates. The results from the questions and the literature show that residential halls’ attributes positively impact students’ retention. Students’ proximity to campus resources and live in staff are both influential factors that assist students’ satisfaction, development, and also their retention. The combined information from the survey results and the literature review illustrate habitual and supportive interactions with faculty, staff, and peer residents help theme community and learning community residents connect to their colleges and universities. This researcher has several interconnected recommendations for colleges’ and universities’ housing and residential life faculty, staff and administration.

1. The first major recommendation is that all housing and residential life administration transition out of using dorms or traditional dormitories as a student housing source. The second part of this traditional dormitory phase out would entail replacing residence or residential halls for theme or learning communities. This researcher suggests that eventually all forms of student housing be equipped with more amenities, community themes, and an affiliated live in faculty member.
2. The second major recommendation is that housing and residential life administration and affiliated researchers utilize uniform housing terms and labels.

3. A third recommendation is housing and residential life administration and affiliated researchers consistently use the term residential hall or residence hall.

4. A fourth recommendation is housing and residential life administration and affiliated researchers pick one label to refer to learning communities either residential-learning community or living-learning community.

5. The fifth major recommendation is that residence halls should also use a faculty member to staff their halls. This researcher anticipates an eventual phasing out of residential or residence halls. Adding a faculty person to the residential or residence halls would transform them more into theme or learning communities. An example would be to add a Gender and Feminist studies professor to a women’s/single sex focused hall, or a Chemistry professor to a hall with a high concentration of aspiring STEM majors.

6. The sixth recommendation is that residence or residential halls would also be phased out similar to the way dorms and dormitories are currently out of date. This researcher anticipates that residence and residential halls will be replaced by theme communities and learning communities.

7. The seventh recommendation is a suggestion that all learning communities and eventually residential halls have residential support staff, as well as affiliated faculty members’ offices and apartments inside of the communities.
As for a follow up study, a longitudinal study is appealing. This longitudinal study would track students’ satisfaction throughout their college years and identify whether students still appreciate or see theme communities and residential halls as positively impacting their decision to remain in school. This researcher would survey the students at both the beginning and the middle or end of the academic school year. This impact study or satisfaction survey would be done to determine if there is a difference between their answers at the different time points.
APPENDIX A

Student Informed Consent and Participation Letter

Dear CSUS Student,

My name is Joan R. Steele, and I’m currently a graduate student at Sacramento State University. I’m working on my Master’s in Higher Education in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies. I am asking you to take part in the research for my thesis so that I can fulfill the last of the requirements for my Master’s degree. This research will assist me in finishing my degree and allow me to gain more insight into Residential Life on a university campus. My student survey is a questionnaire that will be used to determine the relationship between students’ retention and their residence in residential halls. I am asking you to fill out my survey because you are a Sacramento State University student and because you live in one of the theme communities on campus.

Your decision to participate in this study is completely voluntary, and there are no risks involved with this survey. I won’t be offering any incentives to you, but your hall staff will be providing incentives. The data collected from your responses will be combined with my article, journal, and book research to illustrate the connection between theme communities and college students’ retention rates. No identifying information will be recorded other than your email, and I will only use that for follow up with you.
You may choose to stop completing this survey at any time and you may also refuse to answer any question on this survey. If you choose to fill out this survey please understand that you are giving your consent for your answers to be used to compile the data needed for my thesis. Also note that your responses will only be used for educational purposes and the responses will be destroyed after this thesis is completed. Please keep this consent letter for your own personal records. Thank you so much for your time and your cooperation. Below I have included my email in case you have any questions for me.

Thank you so much,

Joan R. Steele
joansteele@saclink.csus.edu
APPENDIX B

Student Retention & Theme Communities Student Survey

Age Range (Please circle one): 18-20  21-23  24-26  27+

Gender (Please circle one): Male    Female    Other

Undergraduate level (Please circle one): Freshman    Sophomore    Junior    Senior

1. Which theme community do you live in? (Please circle one):
   Wellness and Healthy Lifestyle Community    Leadership and Service Community
   Global Awareness Community    Other

2. Were you in a residential hall last year? (Please circle one): Yes
   No

3. Which residential hall were you in last school year? (Please circle one):
   Sutter Hall    Sierra Hall    Draper Hall    Jenkins Hall

4. How much of a factor were theme communities in your decision to enroll in Sacramento State University?
   Strong    5    4    3    2    1    Weak

5. How much do you like Sacramento State University’s theme communities?
   Very Much    5    4    3    2    1    Not at All
6. Rate the positive impact that living in a theme community has played in your grades?
   Strong  5  4  3  2  1  Weak

7. Rate the impact that living in a theme community has played in your decision to remain in college?
   Strong  5  4  3  2  1  Weak

8. How much of factor did your past residential hall play in your decision to return to Sacramento State University this school year?
   Strong  5  4  3  2  1  Weak

9. How much of a factor was the existence of the theme communities in your decision to return to Sacramento State University this school year?
   Strong  5  4  3  2  1  Weak

10. How much of a factor will theme communities be in your decision to return to Sacramento State University in the next school year?
    Strong  5  4  3  2  1  Weak

Dear student you are welcome to include your email address on the line below. Your email address will only be used if the researcher needs clarification or a follow up with you. Providing your email is completely optional. Thank you for your responses and your time.

Email address:
REFERENCES


