

Proposal Concerning RLCs from the Joint Committee on Residential Learning Communities Presented to the Faculty Senate and Provost Prelock for discussion on December 16th 2019

Introduction: Resolution and Committee Charge

Following the passage of a Senate resolution on Residential Learning Communities in May 2019, a joint Senate/Administration committee was formed.

The Committee charge states:

We direct Senate and administrative bodies responsible for organizing the RLCs to return to the Faculty Senate in Fall 2019 with possible proposals to resolve these inequities before the class of 2024 enter the RLC system.

The committee's charge focuses mostly on the academic courses attached to the RLCs, including:

- *an organizational structure for the model's continued oversight and governance including an assessment plan and academic accountability*
- *a common set of learning outcomes for the academic courses*
- *consideration of the general education requirements that are required for NECHE accreditation and how we might capitalize on an opportunity in the development of the curricular components of the LCS to satisfy some of the Gen Ed requirements*
- *consideration of what is already being done in the First Year Experience (FYE) across colleges*

It also focuses on funding of the RLCs, including:

- *a financially viable model that supports the RLC goals with a full accounting of the model's cost*
- *a model that is both sustainable and equitable*

Section 1: Guiding principles of the committee's proposal

In undertaking its work, the joint committee reached consensus on several guiding principles. These principles reflect both the committee's charge, and conclusions reached after reviewing information from a number of sources. These included information on the current structure of the RLCs, the available Residential Life data on the impact of the RLCs on the first-year experience, and review of both scholarly work on learning communities and work completed by previous UVM committees. The guiding principles are as follows:

- Residential Learning Communities are a "common good" and should be funded from a central resource pool. Individual colleges should neither be financially penalized nor benefit from revenue generated by their faculty teaching in the one-credit RLC's or WE.

- Residential Learning Communities must be a collaboration between faculty and academic administrators on one hand, and Residential Life staff and administrators on another. Therefore, mechanisms for coordination and oversight should be put in place to promote this collaboration.
- Offering students some choice in first-year experience is a form of equity. Evidence from Res Life shows that students do not universally choose a 3-credit experience over a 1-credit, nor do they all want the same themed experience.
- There should be consistent structural elements and a form of academic oversight for the RLCs and for WE. Unlike the HCOL course and LASP courses, these RLC course experiences are not college/school-specific and therefore not subject to oversight from college/school curricular committees. Therefore, we see a need for a body such as an RLC curriculum committee.
- Data collection and assessment of the academic components has been lacking and detailed information on the financial structure of the RLCs has not been made fully available, limiting evaluation of the RLC's efficiency and contribution to retention and student success. An intensive and well-structured curricular assessment and financial accounting of RLCs and the impact of their structure on the first-year experience is needed.

Section 2: Current structure of RLCs/HCOL/LASP

There are ten Residential Learning Communities, nine of which house first-year students. This is the first year with all first-time, first-year students in Residential Learning Communities. UVM has moved to this model quickly. 68% of students were in Residential Learning Communities in 2017/18 and 86% in 2018/2019. Each RLC is unique, some have been around longer than others, and they all have slightly different origin stories. They include the Honors' College, the Liberal Arts Scholars Program (LASP), and Journey to Independence. Admission to the Honors College and LASP is based on academic merit and admission to Journey to Independence is for juniors and seniors.

First-year students not accepted into the Honors College or LASP select their top three preferences from seven RLC's. The perspective of a student selecting from among these seven RLC's, and subsequently residing in one of them, is what the committee has tried to keep at the forefront of our minds as we figure out how to help craft the best possible experience for students and as we think about questions of quality, fairness, and equity.

1. Arts and Creativity (Arts and Sciences)
Students have the opportunity to engage with students, staff, faculty and artists through weekly formal and informal connections, artist workshops, lectures, performances, exhibits and social gatherings.
2. Cultural Crossroads (Arts and Sciences)
Cultural Crossroads is where you can learn through special guest lectures, interactive dialogue, field trips, and more—while connecting with students, faculty, and staff from all over the globe.

3. Innovation and Entrepreneurship (CAL/CESS)
Innovation and Entrepreneurship is where you can (in the birthplace of Burton and Ben & Jerry's) develop the next big idea that could solve a global problem, launch a business, or design the future.
4. Leadership and Social Change (CESS)
Learn to take a lead on issues that matter. Connect with Burlington community partners to find your passions, and enhance your strengths and talents. Learn to lead from anywhere, not just the top. Be a change-maker in a community that cares!
5. Outdoor Experience (Rubenstein)
Outdoor Experience fosters a space for continual development of self, teamwork, and leadership. Residents who seek to become better students and an active part of their community—all while exploring the outdoors—will find a home here.
6. Sustainability (Rubenstein)
Sustainability is a place where students can celebrate a connection to the natural world and seek to deepen and celebrate their sense of place—the built environments that we inhabit, and the natural landscape that surrounds us.
7. Wellness Environment (LCOM)
Wellness Environment (WE) students are committed to keeping their living space a healthy place by focusing on healthy bodies and healthy brains. WE students study neuroscience and receive resources and incentives to live a healthy lifestyle.

Of these seven RLCs, six have a required one-credit course. The Wellness Environment has a required three-credit course. This is the second year where the six RLC's have one-credit courses. These courses have their roots in years of discussions about the first-year experience as well as what had already been happening in some of the existing learning communities. The approach to these courses has been refined and improved from year one to year two. Their current structure includes four common elements: a first-year read; a series of plenary lectures; the Growth Mindset for College Students Program; and Handshake (Career Center jobs and internships platform). Staffing of the academic component varies, but generally involves Faculty Associates, a Program Director, and Undergraduate Course Facilitators

A new element has been the appointment this past spring of Lisa Schnell as a Faculty Fellow for Learning Community Courses. Prof. Schnell has been working closely with faculty and staff in six of the seven RLC communities and with Residential Life staff to better coordinate the academic component of these experiences. The role supports the faculty and staff doing this work and provides some level of accountability and oversight for these courses.

The Wellness Environment is different from the six one-credit courses in several key ways:

- It is a three-credit course.

- The class is structured differently. It works on a lecture model and not the plenary/discussion model that the one-credit courses use.
- In addition to the SCH revenue and ResLife funding that are part of the funding model for the 1-credit courses, WE is also supported by external grant and gift funding.
- There is funded research tied to WE and the WE course.
- Residential Life staff are less involved in the organization and running of the WE course than they are with the 1-credit RLCs.

Section 3: Joint committee concerns

The joint committee considered many elements that contribute to inequities across the RLCs, as well as barriers to resolving these inequities. After reaching a fuller understanding of the current structure of the RLCs, the committee reached consensus on the following significant concerns:

- There are inequities in the structuring of faculty appointments, curricula, and funding models for RLCs that lead to inequities in student experiences.
- The current model for funding the 1-credit RLCs is not sustainable, as the SCH revenue from the 1-credit courses does not fully cover implementation costs for the courses.
- Consistent structural elements across RLCs, including common academic learning goals that help to create more equitable student outcomes across learning communities have been partially, but not completely implemented. All RLCs should be required to contain common structural elements that promote key outcomes such as developing a sense of belonging in an academic community, connecting academic and residential spheres of students' lives, and exploring academic and career trajectories.
- There is currently no academic oversight of the RLC courses as a group, although the Provost's Faculty Fellow for RLCs has provided a structure on which this could be built. This lack of oversight means that RLC courses may not have received review by fellow faculty through a course review process, and there is no established process for continued review and oversight of the academic components of the RLCs.
- Due to the rapid implementation and growth of RLCs, there has been no consistent and rigorous assessment of either the courses or their impact on the student experience, retention, and academic success.

Section 4: Recommendations of the joint committee

The committee has the following recommendations, comprising a proposal to extend the current model for one more year, with the expectation that rigorous assessment of the current model will allow the Provost's office to conduct a full evaluation of the contributions of the RLC model to student success. The points below also outline a proposal for a more equitable model for funding the RLC courses.

- Lack of previous assessment of the academic components of the RLCs does not allow for a full assessment of their quality or impact. The committee recommends an extension of the current system for one year to allow for data-gathering and analysis with the goal of offering an assessment of RLC impact, academic quality, and a recommendation of whether to continue the current model or move to a different model.
- As a key element of student success, first-year learning communities are a “common good” that should benefit all schools and colleges. To that end, the committee proposes that SCH revenue from the 1-credit courses and WE be set aside to create a “common good” funding pool that will cover reasonable costs of the RLC courses. This will mean that the tuition revenue from these courses will stay in the undergraduate pool.
- The committee also proposes the creation of a curriculum committee comprised of the faculty associates running the RLCs (including WE), run by a faculty RLC coordinator, with additional members ex officio members from the Faculty Senate, the Center for Teaching and Learning, and Residential Life. This committee will meet regularly to consider the development of the RLC model, discuss implementation of common course elements, and in the spring will review and approve RLC course syllabi.
- The committee recommends continuing an academic RLC coordinator position (currently occupied by a Provost’s Faculty Fellow). This role provides much-needed coordination for academic components of the RLCs, as well as a point person who collaborates with Residential life on the implementation of the RLCs.
- A new committee appointed by the Provost should be charged with reviewing assessment data for the RLCs and recommending whether to continue the current model, move to a new model, or discontinue the RLCs. Appropriate review of the financial structure of all RLCs would also ensure that these recommendations address the inequities outlined in section 3 of this proposal.

Report submitted by the Joint Committee on Residential Learning Communities

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