Addendum A

WHITE PAPER:
Educational and Retention Benefits of Residence Hall Living

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Residence halls have served as an essential aspect of collegiate life since the early colonial colleges. Closely associated with the learning environment, early dorms housed faculty in the facilities to serve in the roles of counselors, supervisors, and educators. As colleges and universities grew to open-access institutions, in the 1950’s, live-in Faculty were largely replaced by student affairs professionals. One constant that spans time is that residence halls continue to be seen as a venue for learning. Today, student affairs practitioners show that residence halls provide a seamless learning environment for students and work to encourage faculty engagement (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Today’s students live-in options at institutions have increased to include Greek houses, co-ops, off-campus apartments or condominiums, privatized housing (either via purchase or rent), or commuting from home. The question remains, is a student’s academic success influenced by where he/she lives?

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, Huser, Blanks, Sollenberger, Befort, & Kurpius, 2006; Pascarella and Chapman, 1983; Thompson, Samiratedu, & Rafter, 1993; Tinto, 1987; and 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.

The results of the research are so significant that higher education institutions are striving to identify what it means to be a residential campus. At Ohio State University, President E. Gordon Gee has put forward a plan to mandate both first-year and sophomore year students live in on-campus residence halls. In comparison to the University of Idaho’s peer institutions, eight of the seventeen have mandatory residence hall live-on requirements. In fact many of the nearest peers including the University of Wyoming, Colorado State University, Montana State University and Washington State University require at least first-year students to live in campus housing. Officials at these institutions repeatedly cite the academic gains of living on campus and the ability to create “a more intellectual academic community for students” (Clare, April 2, 2008).

Review of the Literature

The body of research on the effects of living on campus points to four distinct benefits for students who live in residence halls. First, students living in residence halls are more likely to persist in college than those who do not live on campus (Galicki & McEwen, 1989; Herndon, 1984; Thompson, Samiratedu, & Rafter, 1993). Second, students who live on campus are more likely to develop a sense of personal accomplishment and other social skills (Chickering & Kuper, 1971; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Pascarella, Terenzini, & Blimling, 1993; Pike, 2002). Third, residence hall students are more likely to be involved in campus programs and to take part in extra-curricular activities (Blimling, 1993; Chickering, 1974; Pascarella, 1985). Finally, research also suggests that students who live on campus achieve higher grade point averages and scores on standardized achievement tests (Kanoy & Bruhn, 1996; Nowack & Hanson, 1985; Pascarella, Bohr, Nora, Zusman, Inman, & Desler, 1993).

Research has consistently demonstrated that students living in residence halls are more involved and/or integrated into the various cultural, social, and extracurricular activities on campus. Further, residential students have significantly more social interaction with peers and faculty (Pascarella, 1984; Billson and Terry, 1982, Enochs and Roland, 2006). Even when controlling for pre-college characteristics including socioeconomic status, aptitude, and high school involvement, students living in residence halls show greater social interaction and integration on campus regardless of school size, institution selectivity, and private/public affiliation (Pascarella, 1985). Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini (2004) found that first-generation students benefitted more from extracurricular activities and engagement with peers. Peers can serve as a source of support and encouragement for first-generation college students who might need more affirmation about their place in college, obviously on-campus housing options helps to facilitate peer networking (Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2006).

Student involvement becomes an important element for student success in higher education. Alexander
Astin posited a widely acknowledged theory regarding student involvement. In extensive research, Astin found that involvement had a strong relationship with student retention and social and intellectual development. Astin (1985) provided five postulates that comprise student involvement theory:

1. Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects that might be quite general or very specific.
2. Involvement occurs along a continuum.
3. Involvement has both qualitative and quantitative features.
4. The amount of student learning is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement.
5. The educational practice of instructors is directly related to the capacity of that practice to increase student involvement (pp. 135-136).

Vincent Tinto’s model of student integration (1975, 1987, 1993) further studied student persistence and looked at both the academic and social factors as to student’s decision to leave the institution. In general, Tinto stated that the more involved students became with the institution and community, the more likely they were to overcome any obstacles they faced coming into or during college. In a study on social networks and academic persistence, feeling connected and having a sense of belonging was determined to be a strong deterrent to non-persistence (Nicpon, Huser, Blanks, Sollenberger, Befort, & Kurpius, 2006). Based on the architectural design of residence halls and programmatic goals of residence life programs, encouraging student involvement is easier to attain than most other living options.

The work of Astin (1985) and Tinto (1993) along with other research shows that social integration is a significant determinant of both student retention and matriculation. Research further shows that students who live in residence halls consistently persist and graduate at significantly higher rates than students who have not lived in a residence hall (Astin, 1975, 1977, 1982; Pascarella and Chapman, 1983; Velez, 1985) even when controlling for student characteristics. Utilizing national longitudinal data collected by the Higher Education Research Institution at the University of California, Los Angeles, Astin (1977) estimated that living in a residence hall adds about a 12 percent net advantage to first year students’ chance of persisting and graduating. In fact, residence hall communities have been shown to have a significant effect on student academic performance and retention (Stassen, 2003; Derby & Smith, 2004; Potts, Schultz, & Foust, 2003). Potts & Schultz (2008) identified the most significant negative impact on first-year retention was students with a low high school rank and, most importantly, living off-campus during the first semester.

Considering that students living in residence halls are more likely to persist and graduate, it is relatively intuitive to figure that they would also have higher GPAs than students living in other living situations. While there is some varied research results regarding this question, many researchers have shown students living in residence halls perform better academically (Nowack and Hanson, 1985; Simono, Wachowiak, and Furr, 1984; Thompson,
Samiratedu, & Rafter, 1993; Nicpon, Huser, Blanks, Sollenberger, Befort, & Kurpius, 2006). Blimling (1999, September/October) conducted a meta-analysis of the influence of residence halls on academic performance and found that through nine different studies residence hall students performed slightly better academically than students living in fraternity and sorority houses. 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.

Research of Inkelas & Weisman (2003) has shown the critical impact of living-learning communities in residence halls and how they lead to higher involvement by college students in the university community. Other research has demonstrated that students in living-learning communities were more likely to persist, have higher academic achievement, be involved in campus activities, and interact with faculty and peers (Pike, 1999; Stassen, 2003; Pike, Schroeder, & Berry, 1997).

Living-learning communities typically have shown an added value for student success. Living-learning communities resemble early American higher education and Oxford/Cambridge models of residential living (Schroeder and Mable, 1994). Living-learning communities work to develop a seamless relationship between a student’s living environment and their learning environment often through direct faculty interaction. They “promote higher levels of student involvement in out-of-class activities, greater interaction between faculty members and students, and a more supportive peer environment” (Pike, 1997, p. 7). Zheng, Saunders, Shelley, and Whalen (2002, March/April) found that students involved in living-learning communities performed better academically than those who were not involved. Current research shows positive effects of living-learning communities and their impact on student learning and indirect effects from faculty-student interaction (Pike, Schroeder, & Berry, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1981; Johnson & Romanoff, 1999). These findings support the need for University Housing to continue to expand its partnerships across campus with academic units and establish intentional living learning communities.

The impact of the Living environment has also been studied for minority students. Edwards & Mckelfresh (2002, May/June) demonstrated that living-learning communities can strengthen institutional retention for traditionally marginalized groups without any negative impact for the majority. Other research (Inkelas, Johnson, Lee, Daver, Longerbeam, Vogt, & Leonard, 2006; Chang, Witt, Jones, & Hakuta, 2003) demonstrates diverse interactions and perceptions were correlated with growth in learning and development in living-learning communities. Flowers (2004) found that African American students’ personal and social development was enhanced by living in university housing. These findings are significant in that the positive attributes of living in a
Typically, first-year students are not likely to choose their living option based on its academic impact, but more likely to be influenced by its social opportunities which has been the traditional strength of Greek Housing. Luzzo & McDonald (1996, July/August) surveyed students on the aspects that most influenced their choice of living environment. They found that freedom, friendship, and cost were much more strongly correlated with their decision than academics. Conversely, students who choose to live in Greek communities traditionally state the social connections, camaraderie, and opportunity for service and philanthropy as their motivations for choosing to live in a Greek house. Pike (2000) found that Greek students reported higher levels of social involvement than non-Greek students. When compared to off-campus students, on-campus residents experienced a sense of camaraderie and reassurance living with peers (Johnson, Staton, & Jorgensen-Earp, 1995).

U of I data

Since 2003, University Housing has studied term grade point average, cumulative grade point average, and retention rate of first-year students. The data was to look at first-year students who lived in residence halls versus all other first-year students at the University of Idaho. The data has been thoroughly reviewed and analyzed by the office of Institutional Research and Assessment. It shows that residence hall first-year students have maintained a higher cumulative grade point average versus first-year students not living in residence halls in every semester since fall 2003. In only two semesters since that time has the term GPA for residence hall first-year students been lower than other first-year students. In spring 2005, residence hall first-year students averaged a 2.77 semester grade point average while all other first-year students averaged a 2.79 semester GPA. In spring 2007, residence hall first-year students averaged a 2.79 semester GPA versus the 2.84 semester GPA that other first-year students received. On average first-year residence hall students have a term grade point average .088 higher than all other first-year students and a cumulative grade point average .099 higher. In fact in fall 2007, residence hall first-year students had a term and cumulative GPA that was .22 higher.

In terms of first-year student retention to the second year, the data varies from year to year. Between fall 2004 and spring 2006, first-year students living in residence halls had higher retention rates on average by 3.25% than students not living in a residence hall. In fall 2006 and spring 2007, residence hall first-year students were one percent below the total first-year population for retention. Overall, residence hall students enjoy positive academic successes during their first year.

Conclusions
University of Idaho describes itself as a “residential campus”. In defining residential housing, University of Idaho offers university-operated residence halls and apartments and privately-owned and operated sororities and fraternities. In addition to a staff member housed in the Dean of Students office, the Greek system does have governing councils for both the fraternities (Interfraternity Council) and sororities (Panhellenic Council) which is made of student leaders from the respective associations who provides oversight of the organizations and their university affiliation. University Housing reports through Auxiliary Services and Student Affairs while Greek Life reports through Student Affairs solely. Only about ten percent of first-year students do not live in either University Housing or the Greek system. On many residential campuses, off-campus first-year students often do not have the same opportunities that University Housing and Greek students do. Without student services directed specifically toward commuter students and off-campus living, it is not surprising that these students are at the biggest disadvantage to succeed. Even in comparing the staffing patterns between University Housing and Greek Life, there is only one University staff member for Greek Life and seven full-time professional staff for Residence Life (Housing). Additionally, University Housing hires over 50 upper-class student Resident Assistants each year that go through almost two weeks of training each August on issues such as mediation, counseling, academic resources, crisis management, and peer mentoring.

While one can argue that proximity becomes the greatest variable for student success, one can also look toward the organizational structure of the living environments as a critical component. As the University of Idaho continues in this evolving era in higher education, it becomes critical to look at how the institution can better prepare students to succeed. Simply put, the University of Idaho needs to ask itself how it wants to define what it means to be a residential campus and what students should come to expect from their living environments in order to support their learning.

References

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