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Finding A Place in College: Re-Examining Residential Learning Communities as Third Places for Student Development

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Finding A Place in College:
Re-Examining Residential Learning Communities as
Third Places for Student Development

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
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Abstract

This study investigates Residential Learning Communities (RLCs) as places of union for academic and non-academic student development. Through the lens of a "Third Places" framework, this study examines RLCs' physically and philosophically established community spaces as fertile grounds for holistic student growth, while considering their limitations and obstacles. This study specifically investigates the University of Vermont's Sustainability House Residential Learning Community, which is made up of University Heights South (once GreenHouse) and Harris Hall. This study has been carried out with the intent of examining UVM's expectations and values, alongside the experience of the student body. Through a case study of Sustainability House, triangulation of observational data, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups, with Sustainability House residents and staff, this study shall assess how physically and philosophically structured Third Places within Residential Learning communities facilitate students' holistic development in a specific university setting. This study shall provide a non-administrative, student-administered analysis, and will serve as a platform through which both student and institutional standards and expectations are synthesized upon common ground.

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Introduction

Higher education is undergoing national redevelopment. Across the country, colleges and universities are re-examining structures and approaches traditional of the American learning experience. As different ways of learning are undergoing study and acceptance, institutions are adopting new styles of instruction that diverge from conventional teacher-student instruction and classroom structure. As apart of higher education's mission to hone and prepare a holistic individual for the world ahead, institutions are addressing the fundamental divide between students' personal development and academic growth. Holistic student learning is becoming recognized as an experience that not only transcends classroom walls, but as one that also occurs in campus residential settings.

Since the late 1900's, Residential Learning Communities have increased in popularity at many colleges and universities across the United States (Smith, 2001). In recent years, the University of Vermont has ignited a Residential Learning Community movement, setting a goal of a 100 percent first-year enrollment rate in 2017. The university is actively working toward this goal, as it cultivates more opportunities for students to "connect around a common interest" through programmed housing (LaPointe, 2017).

Within this context, this study aims to focus on the role of Third Places within Residential Learning Communities, and how, by making this physical and philosophical space accessible, RLCs facilitate holistic student development.

"Third places" are informal, neutral grounds within an area of residence where a community can openly and pleasurably gather with ease, and exchange and develop ideas, philosophies, values, skills, and cultures (Oldenburg, 1997).

I began my journey at the University of Vermont bearing substantial uncertainty of who I was, and what I wanted make out of the four obscure years that loomed ahead of me. Fresh off the high school press, I scrambled to do everything that seemed standard of the first year experience. Building friendships, getting a hang of higher education's striking new academic content, trying on clubs and activities for size, driving my own self-discovery, and balancing it all quickly became exhausting.

My first year in the Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources helped me simplify the unfamiliar journey I was embarking upon. Beneath the umbrella of sustainability as a theme, I found in close proximity students who were also curious to explore its meaning: academically, socially, and personally. This common interest affixed us with an ambiguous, yet common ground around through which we could center ourselves and communicate, as first years and onward. Environmentalism as a common theme brought us together not only as students and hall mates, but as friends, socially and academically.

In my time for room selection as an incoming first year, I weighed my options carefully. I had my eye on University Heights, the newest dorm on campus. As apart of the Honors College, I had the opportunity to live in University Heights North with the rest of my college-mates. However, there was another dorm that sparked my interest: University Heights South, also called *GreenHouse*. This Residential Learning Community touted sustainability as a community value, which I found of great importance in my own life. But when it came time to choose, I figured that the two buildings looked the same anyway, and that the residential experiences probably wouldn't be all that different. Well, I was wrong. As it turned out, the main theme that thinly united my residence hall was academia, whereas across the way, things were different. My friends next door in UHeights South bragged not only about their beautiful residence, but also

about their close-knit halls, fun events, and the cool resources *GreenHouse* offered. I was surprised to uncover the fundamental difference between these two buildings that looked, and had sounded so similar.

In time, the paradigm of sustainability I held close was what led me to the Slade Ecological Cooperative: a student-led, intentional community on the University of Vermont's campus. Slade, a cooperative of about 40 years and counting, is a community in which students shared food, space and ideas. In an on-campus setting, Slade made viable the environmental consciousness that different batches of students at UVM fostered together. The co-op's common rooms, in which community members engage in weekly meetings of consensus-based decision making, and its kitchen space, in which members prepare and serve community meals, provide mediums through which students can comfortably exchange and discuss academically related, and unrelated, ideas and perspectives. Slade's framework, although strong in tradition, remains fluid enough to embolden self-organization and creativity in its members and their shared experiences. In the end, it is up to the community to figure out how it wants to uphold Slade's historic values of intentional cooperation, community and sustainability. Slade's walls cradle a dynamic, open, and creative culture that its affiliates can confidently return to within, and without the classroom.

As reiterated by De Liddo and Concilio (2017) open communities are both physical and philosophical, in that they are supported by both spatial architecture and social interactions that encourage intra-communal synergic relationships. UVM's recent initiative to establish Residential Learning Communities bears the question as to whether they can serve as Third Places, in which students can freely interact and self-organize around their own academic and non-academic discovery alike.

<u>The University of Vermont's mission statement reads as following</u>:

"To create, evaluate, share, and apply knowledge and to prepare students to be accountable leaders who will bring to their work dedication to the global community, a grasp of complexity, effective problem-solving and communication skills, and an enduring commitment to learning and ethical conduct".

<u>The University of Vermont's statement regarding Residential Learning Communities reads as following</u>:

"Residential Learning Communities (RLCs) at the University of Vermont are designed to engage the whole student, tying together the intellectual, ethical, cultural and social aspects of college life. By living together with fellow students who share common interests and ideals, the individual student becomes part of a true community, a community that is also tied to the greater world beyond the confines of the university. In addition, students, faculty, and staff are given the opportunity to interact outside the classroom, the lab, or the office, thereby encouraging the pursuit of knowledge as a lifetime activity."

This report exhibits interconnectivity with the following administrative and student-led efforts underway University of Vermont:

- The University of Vermont's current mission statement
- The University of Vermont's development of Residential Learning Communities, and its corresponding mission statement
- The development of the University of Vermont's new Sustainability House Residential Learning Community program

- A specific undergoing student-led initiative to implement a new nested community within the University of Vermont's Sustainability House Residential Learning Community program (See Appendix B)

- All student-organized efforts to hoane creative spaces in RLCs

Project Networking / Extension of Relevance: I intend for this research to inform and support the undergoing student-led initiative to design programmed housing with a cooperative-oriented, Third Place structured theme, as a sub-program of the Sustainability House program at UVM. This on-campus RLC project will make conscious effort to reflect not only UVM's policy and ethics, but student voice and effort as well (See Appendix B).

Objectives

Oldenburg (1997), explains the concept of "Third Places," as public gathering spaces that serve as an alternative, ambiguous space: "The phrase 'third places' derives from considering our homes to be the 'first' places in our lives, and our workplaces the 'second'."

The intent of my study is to address the action toward mitigation, or lack thereof, of the contemporary issues discussed thus far. In doing so, I will employ the supporting literature in a case study of the newly implemented Sustainability House RLC at UVM. Using Sustainability House as a case study, and through triangulation of observational data: semi-structured interviews with program directors and staff, conversations with student leaders, and focus groups with program residents, this study shall assess how physically and philosophically structured Third Places within Residential Learning communities facilitate students' holistic development in a specific university setting. This study shall provide a non-administrative, student-administered analysis, and will serve as a platform through which both student and institutional standards and expectations are synthesized upon common ground.

Studies show a literature gap in general understanding of Residential Learning Communities, highlighting the need for "qualitative inquiry studies" (De Liddo & Concilio, 2017). With this in mind, I have directed my research with the intention of engaging with program participants directly and openly, in focus group and conversational format. I am interested in seeing how students self-organize and operate within residential Third Places. I firmly believe that each students' experience is unique, and cannot be accurately recorded via numbers. Each story is worth exploring deeply.

In collaboration with the Sustainability House student body and administration, I intend to have my report provide as contribution to the following:

1) The development of Residential Learning Communities in higher education, their mission, and expected outcomes.

2) The development the Residential Learning Community movement at UVM, its mission, and expected outcomes.

3) The development of UVM's own Sustainability House, its mission, and expected outcomes.

Limitations

Primarily, I recognize my background in this subject matter. As a student with academic and social ties to environmental and community study at UVM, I understand that my knowledge and experience with this theme can also provide minor bias within my research. However, I recognize my expertise as a platform through which I can strategically engage with a unique case, apart of a greater movement. I believe my position as a student-researcher to be advantageous in engaging with fellow students, as it might be more natural for them to communicate with someone that is more like a peer. However, I still occupy the role of a researcher, which can inevitably facilitate divide between myself as an interviewer and those I am interviewing.

When conducting qualitative research methods, I anticipated difficulty in management of depth versus breadth. I was concerned about spreading my research too thinly, thus ineffectively gauging meaningful stories and experiences. Simultaneously, I wanted to ensure that my research accurately reflected the UVM student body's experience in Sustainability House, and would not streamline a single story.

I expected difficulty in guiding my research to where my findings could be implemented with relevance within the established fabric of UVM's higher educational system. I aimed to include the experiences betweeen both top-down (Administrative, Residential Life oriented) and bottom-up (student organized) framework and behavior.

My research will engage only with UVM's programmed housing, specifically one particular house. As it has not been conducted on a national scale, I cannot make conclusions that are wholly applicable to the national higher educational system. I hope that, in recognition of insufficient analysis and published literature on in depth programmed housing experience, my research will make some headway in this subject matter.

There have proven to be limitations in recruiting student interest. I recruited participants through class presentations, email blasts, posters, verbal advertisement, and incentive by food. However, no matter the technique, difficulties tend to arise when navigating a full-time student's availability. About half of the participants responded to advertisement. I randomly recruited the other half in passing through the common spaces in which the focus groups were held.

Literature Review

The Theory of Third Places

"Third places," as outlined by Oldenburg (1997), are informal, neutral spaces in which a community can openly and pleasurably gather with ease. An accessible Third Place can serve as a midway medium between one's home (First Place), and work (Second Place). Third places 1) help unify neighborhoods, 2) serve as "ports of entry" for visitors and newcomers to the neighborhood, 3) serve as "sorting" areas where those with special interests can find one another, 4) can bring youth and adults into association with one another, 5) serve as gathering space for addressing community issues, 6) Foster political debate and exchange of knowledge, 7) Facilitate natural emotional and economic support groups, 8) create space for entertainment, 9) create space for cultivation of friendship (Oldenburg, 1997). In the framework of higher education, Third Places often manifest within and between academic and residential buildings on campuses. Mulcahy et. al. (2010) suggest that third places are not only distinguishable by their physical architectures, but are defined by the emotions, values, ideas and socio-cultural meanings that a person or community upholds. Simultaneously, the way a space's geography is arranged can direct the way one perceives and navigates a space, and interacts with others in that space.

Limitations of Third Places

As philosophical and physical forces can enable perception of and movement through space, Mulcahy et. al. (2010) argue that uneven or restrictive social and physical landscapes can seed uneven movement and exchange. Spaces can be arranged in a defensive manner that inhibit movement through or use of the space and its resources. However, a space can also be

philosophically limiting, as spaces also consist of the social dynamics, paradigms, and relationships that people express toward and within said space (Yuen & Johnson, 2017).

<u>Structure of Residential Learning Communities</u>

In higher education, Residential Learning Community programs serve as environments in which students can engage in both academic and personal development in an intentional, themed community setting. Studies show that student learning and development is a process influenced by experiences both in and out of the classroom, and suggest that a combination of the two can lead to more meaningful and complex learning outcomes (Frazier & Eighmy, 2012; Hill, 1985; Marquart, 2017; Pasque & Murphy, 2005). Successful RLCs provide support for multiple styles of learning, including interdisciplinary, collaborative, and experiential learning (Nordstrom, 2015; Smith, 2001), by creating a philosophical landscape for student engagement in critical thinking, acceptance of different ideas, motivation for learning, and sense of connection within their community (Gamson, 2017). The outcomes of RLC environments correlate with efforts within the national higher education system to address the growing complexity and interrelationships of modern societal issues (Hill, 1985).

RLCs that have established physical space for institutional engagement via faculty-student interaction, mentorship, inter-communal collaborative activities, and interdisciplinary exploration have been proven to facilitate union of academic and personal livelihoods and relationships between student, faculty, and administrative subcultures. These spaces include in-residence faculty apartments, classrooms, and common areas (Frazier & Eighmy, 2012; Marquart, 2017; Smith, 2001). This intentional space in-residence can catalyze development of student critical thinking and analysis skills, civic engagement and volunteerism, academic achievement and intellectual curiosity, as well as confidence in college success, sense of

belonging and student retention rate (Frazier & Eighmy, 2012; Marquart, 2017; Nordstrom, 2015; Pasque & Murphy, 2005; Smith, 2001; Weaver, 2013).

History of Residential Learning Communities

Residential Learning Communities (RLCs) have been growing in popularity at public and private colleges and universities across the nation (Smith, 2001). This model of residential living can be cited back to the historic Oxford and Cambridge Residential Colleges; residential communities of students and faculty structured as hubs for commonplace social and academic engagement (Pasque & Murphy, 2005).

The movement for RLCs developed throughout the the 1900's in response to increased accessibility to higher education, progressive social movement and educational reform for more student-centered learning (Smith, 2001). In the early 1900's, John Dewey and Alexander Meiklejohn called for improvement in higher educational learning to address the fundamental fragmentation of knowledge within academia (Marquart, 2017; Smith, 2001). Dewey emphasized the importance of interdisciplinary thought, and the necessary recognition of higher education as a social center and, "laboratory for democratic citizenship" (Marquart, 2017). Meiklejohn, Dean of Brown College and Professor of Philosophy, established the first living-learning programs (LLPs), with a mission of re-incorporating "humanistic perspective" into higher education. Meiklejohn believed in education as not only a study of academia, but of life itself as an opportunity to explore the human experience, not just disciplines of it (Marquart, 2017). At the University of Wisconsin in 1927, Meiklejohn founded the "Experimental College," in which students enrolled in a two-year common curriculum that incorporated clustered courses by theme, collaborative student-faculty teaching, and common residential space and dining. LLPs endured a renaissance throughout the 1950's and 60's, during which at least 44 colleges

and universities began incorporating the model into their respective education systems (Marquart, 2017).

History of Residential Learning Communities at the University of Vermont

The University of Vermont's Residential Learning Communities initiative began to take form in the 1960's, in correlation with the nationwide movement to restructure higher education (Nordstrom, 2015). In 1968, the university implemented the "Experimental Program" in response to three specific problems identified within higher education; fragmentation of knowledge, lack of contextual relevance in society, and a low sense of intellectual community. The Living and Learning Center opened in 1973, as well as University Heights in 2005, both of which were architecturally designed to facilitate community and faculty-student interaction via common space, in-residence classrooms and faculty apartments (Weaver, 2013; Marquart, 2017). The Living and Learning Center provides opportunity for students to design their own Residential Learning Communities (Weaver, 2013) and integrate their academic and social lives under one common experience (Marquart, 2017). University Heights South, or GreenHouse, served as the University's first Residential Learning Community centered on sustainability education, aiming for place-based ecological literacy and active citizenship outcomes (Weaver, 2013) (Nordstrom, 2015). GreenHouse has since become apart of the University's overarching Sustainability Living Community program.

Fundamental and Emerging Issues of Residential Learning Communities

In an outline of the American College Personnel Association (ACPA)'s analysis of the Student Learning Imperative, Bloland (1996) notes the necessary reunion of academic and non-academic learning, in light of the historic national goal of individual development in higher education. Marquart (2017) presents the structural division between personal and intellectual

development, alongside difficulties in synthesized program establishment by college administrations as one of the great challenges of college campus life in the United States. Marquart (2017) notes this disconnect in the "the philosophical and structural" arrangement of higher education between disciplines and academic niches.

Although Residential Learning Community programs are gaining relevance within higher education, in the grand scheme of higher education, the movement is new and can be difficult to have effect in institutions guarded by tradition (Marquart, 2017; Smith, 2001). Marquart (2017) and Smith (2001) comment on general student and administrative resistance to academic integration of residential life, given historically, culturally, and socially reinforced divisions between student life and the institution.. Smith (2001) also notes the difficulty of RLC implementation and acceptability at the research institutional scale, in regard to size of student body, specialization of disciplines, and compartmentalization of knowledge (Bloland, 1996). Marquart (2017) explains that to adequately instill change at the collegiate level, educators in an institutional setting must "possess not only a comprehensive understanding of the external challenges and the options available to them, but also strive to develop a complete, nuanced understanding of their institution's culture and how each decision may be interpreted - and therefore impact - their respective campus community. Only then can they articulate decisions in a way that effectively speak to the perceptions, needs, and desires of the individual and group constituencies whose support they require". Without feedback from and conversation with the participating student body, there is likelihood that students will react to any perceived 'control' of their behavior and college experience, further reinforcing institutional division.

When existing programs abstain from development into more complex and interconnected residential experiences, they lose momentum, effectiveness, and survival ability.

Programs that inefficiently support equal student and faculty access, participant democracy, and classroom community (Pasque & Murphy, 2005; Smith, 2001) can create mismatched expectations and outcomes amongst stakeholders (Hill, 1985; Frazier & Eighmy, 2012), and fail to meet RLC outcomes of a complex learning environment. Without clear structure, mission, implementation and outcomes, ambiguity in program content can muddle the learning experience (De Liddo & Concillo, 2017). RLCs that fail to address the growing intricacy and interrelationships of modern societal issues are proven ineffective in meeting the higher educational goal of producing an individual educated in holism (Hill, 1985; Frazier & Eighmy, 2012; Marquart, 2017; Nordstrom, 2015; Smith, 2001; Weaver, 2015). Studies argue a fundamental shift toward addressing student-program experience, rather than meeting pre-defined outcomes (Nordstrom, 2015).

Cooperative Housing As Third Places

The "communities movement" of the late 20th into the early 21st century has exemplified an era popular for development of alternative housing (Sullivan, 2016). Cohousing, or housing with common spaces and shared facilities, created space that supported alternative social and economic approaches toward individualized livelihood, like the nuclear family and industrial capitalism (Vestbro & Horelli, 2008).

Cohousing can be broken down into subcategories that focus on different aspects of livelihood: *collaborative housing* is centered around residential collaboration, *communal housing* highlights housing design that facilitates community, and *collective housing* encompasses the collective organization of services (Vestbro & Horelli, 2008). Cooperative cohousing serves as a physical and social space that facilitates interaction and shared resources (De Liddo & Concillo, 2017; Sullivan, 2016).

Cooperative housing is centered by the seven Rochdale Principles: (1) voluntary and open membership, (2) democratic member control, (3) member economic participation, (4) autonomy and independence, (5) education, training, and information, (6) cooperation among cooperatives, and (7) concern for community (Schugurensky et. al., 2006). These principles, when upheld, can facilitate non-hierarchical, horizontal community engagement and direct member involvement (Sullivan, 2016). Collective and equal membership prompt participatory democracy and collaboration, which create space for diversity in thought and inclusion (De Liddo & Concilio, 2017; Schugurensky et. al., 2006; Sullivan, 2016).

Cooperative Housing in the Context of Learning

This style housing is recognized as a crucial epicenter for effective formal, informal and experiential learning, or "learning by doing". Schugurensky, et. al. (2006) describes experiential learning as a process that encourages concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Cooperative housing showcases a functionality based in participation and collective ownership, as members are responsible for running and maintaining their own system. Such independence reiterates the theory of Participatory Democracy; that active and even participation in a small group can increase membership learning in self-governance, group work, broadening of perspectives, disposition toward the common good, and engaged citizenry. Studies in cooperativism indicate great improvement in 1) social and interpersonal skills, 2) accountability, responsibility and transparency, 3) public speaking, communication skills, and language, 4) listening and interpreting, 5) diplomacy, conflict resolution, consensus building, and 6) political efficacy, or increase in political and civic engagement. Studies also note development in finances and budgeting, management and technical skills, as well as social and economic support systems (Schugurensky et. al., 2006).

"Individuals seldom work in isolation; they rather collaborate with other key actors with whom they connect in an attempt to solve common issues" (De Liddo & Concilio, 2017).

Methods

Background

I began researching with the intent of understanding the mission and purpose of Residential Learning Communities. Through the exploratory phase of my research, I explored each of the different programs currently offered by UVM: *The Wellness Environment*, *Sustainability*, *Leadership*, and *Outdoor Experience*. After conducting piloted conversations with students and staff, I selected Sustainability House for a case study. Even though it is a young program, its roots have been in the works for years (through the *GreenHouse* program). Through the information I gathered, I selected Sustainability House, not only for its longevity compared to other programs, but in recognition of the structural and philosophical intention behind the development of the program, as well as a strong representation of UVM's undergoing RLC effort.

Within Sustainability House, I chose to engage with small sample interviewing of students and staff for the advantage of in depth study. Through this research, my objective was to gather the experiences of program participants, how they perceive and navigate their community's Third Places, and how this influences their sense of community. This, I feel, is difficult to gauge via quantitative and large scale qualitative analysis. For the sake of my research, it is worth taking the time and giving the space for people to tell their stories. All participating identities have been kept anonymous.

Semi-Structured Interviews

I administered an interview with the Program Directors and Community Student Leaders of Sustainability House. I staged the interview as semi-structured so as to include any visions,

feelings, and stories the staff and leaders associated with their experience in Sustainability house (see Appendix D). In data collection, I relied on memos. The Program Director interview took place in the program office in Harris 100, a community space utilized by Sustainability House residents. The primary purpose of this conversation was to gather information on the background, structure, function, and overall mission of Sustainability House. Two interviews with Community Student Leaders also took place, one on campus, outside of the SH community, and one in the UHS multi-purpose community space, Room 9. These conversations were guided toward observation of student behavior and interpretation of academic and social experience.

Focus Groups and Questionnaires

To gauge student perceptions and experience in Sustainability House, I organized three focus groups, two in the Harris 100 commonspace, and one in the University Heights South multipurpose Room 9. In locating a base for conversations to occur, I selected common spaces within the Sustainability House residence halls. The purpose for this was to engage with interviewees in a setting that was familiar to them.

To prepare for these conversations, I relied on strategic sampling to recruit Sustainability House program participants. I collaborated with Sustainability House staff to send out blast emails to the community, and displayed posters within the community (see Appendix C). I also advertised in various lecture classes so as to advertise to a wide variety of program participants. My intent was to recruit a range of people with different experiences that were relevant to my topic. Participation was voluntary, however, it was incentivized with provision of pizza. I kept the groups small for the purpose of engaging with detailed conversations, but also for the comfort of the participants.

The sessions were accompanied with short questionnaires, on which students could identify spaces within their community that they, and others, felt welcome in (see Appendix A). My mission was to facilitate conversation between myself and the participants, and amongst the participants about their use of community space and sense of place within these spaces.

I have triangulated observational data with questionnaires from focus groups, and memos from interviews to explore student interaction with the physical and philosophical community space of Sustainability House, and how the role of these community spaces, or Third Places, supports UVM's mission to facilitate holistic student learning. I hope that what I can find about sustainability house will become applicable in the University of Vermont's greater initiative to bridge student academic and personal development through Residential Learning Communities on campus. By conducting in-depth, qualitative research with the different actors that make up the community, I intend to have this study serve as a platform through which perspectives and experiences can emerge, be effectively communicated, and be made visible to students and the administration alike. I hope to provide a deeper collection of stories and experiences in this unique time of transition of UVM, and higher education as a whole.

Results

This section shall showcase the results I have gathered from the various conversations that occurred within the Sustainability House community. The section is separated into general themes that have emerged.

Sustainability House Background

GreenHouse began as a first and second year programmed housing option, consisting of 240 students in University Heights South. The program incorporated a required class (NR 015 for first years, NR 016 for second years). The class was entirely self-paced, and ran over the period of seven weeks, requiring attendance at five relevant events, and the completion of a personal project. In time, as the University of Vermont began to expand programmed housing, *GreenHouse* was tapped as one of three pilot programs to develop quickly alongside the overarching initiative. In turn, the program nearly doubled in size (from 240 to 400 students), absorbing Harris Hall to form the Sustainability House that exists today. The program is continuing to develop. Next academic year (2018-2019) it will grow to accommodate a greater number of students (LaPointe, 2017).

The program's overarching mission is to:

1) Foster a sense of place
2) Build community

Philosophical Space

Sustainability House aims to uphold a balance between organized academic and social structure, and a student's self-paced, and individually reflective nature. First semester, first year

students are currently required to take NR 015 under one of the following themes: *Outdoor Exploration*, *Natural History*, *Matter and Energy*, *Social Justice*, *Mindfulness*, and *Food Systems*. The variety of themes are offered as different ways to enter the conversation of sustainability. Each of the eighteen sections are entirely field and discussion based, and are staged as an "exploratory setting" with the purpose of, orienting students to place: to themselves, to their immediate community, and the larger (university, city, state, etc.) community. Students are able to decide which themes they are interested in, and within each theme, are able to choose from different kinds of events that reflect their own interests. Next academic year (2018-2019), in response to student feedback from NR 015 classes, each section will shift to incorporate all themes instead of focusing on one extensively. Second semester, first year students have the option to take a class, but it is not mandatory, nor is event attendance. Second year students have access to optional NR 016 classes, as well as a Guild Program, through which they can receive budgets, supplies, and space for projects.

Focus Group 1 (Harris 100) exhibited the following responses when considering class-oriented philosophical space:

- Satisfaction with class components, field trips, and other program required events (note: depending on TA)
- Positive emotional outbursts in response to big community-wide events (Welcome Gathering, Harvest Festival, Thanksgiving Feast)
- Non-required events aren't as well attended, lower participation second semester
- Suggested: more community-wide, celebratory events

Focus Group 2 (UHS 9) exhibited the following responses when considering class-oriented philosophical space:

- Positive emotional outbursts in response to big community-wide events

- Noted divide between environmental majors and non-majors

- Noted lower community-wide event participation second semester, higher dedication to Resident Advisor's events

- Suggested: guild program for first years

- Desire to maintain community intentionality around sustainability theme

Focus Group 3 (Harris 100) exhibited the following responses when considering class-oriented philosophical space:

- Expressed strong connection to NR 015 section instructors as mentors

- Noted lower participation in events held second semester

- Positive emotional outbursts in response to big-community wide events (Harvest Festival, Welcome Gathering)

- Suggested: multiple, more big community-wide celebrations

Community Student Leader 1 expressed the following responses when considering class-oriented philosophical space:

- Saw impressionability in first year students, experienced mentorship

- Saw classes as spaces in which students formed community bonds

- Saw classes as spaces where students come together and exchange different visions of sustainability themes

- Observed students learning from each other

- Expressed community value in student input, openness, and suggestions

Community Student Leader 2 expressed the following responses when considering class-oriented philosophical space:

- Noted lower participation in events held second semester

- Expressed difficulty in facilitating conversation when students unfamiliar with each other

- Although sustainability represents overarching theme, noted a select group of people (female, first year Environmental Studies students) that are into really exploring sustainability

- Expressed community value in student input, openness, and suggestions

- Suggestion: Virtual community space: "We need a way to unify via social media."

Physical Space

Sustainability House occupies two distinct buildings with different community spaces. As described by (Weaver, 2013; Marquart, 2017), University Heights South's common space, in-residence classrooms and faculty apartments were built to facilitate community and faculty-student interaction. Student-identified community spaces in this building include:

- Multipurpose Room 9

- Fireplace Lounge - Lobby

- Kitchen

- Green Roof

- Classrooms

Harris Hall, of the Harris-Millis Complex, on the other hand, was not built with the same intentions. It was constructed to be "riot-proof," one interviewee commenting: "You can't pass

two rooms without turning a corner". There are no common rooms in the hall itself, only in the building's extended lobby area. Student-identified community spaces in this building include:

- Room 100

- Fireplace Lounge - Lobby

- Kitchen

- Classrooms

- Dining Hall

Harris - Room 100

Room 100 is a unique space in the Harris-Millis complex. It is multi-purposed, serving as an office space, student lounge, study area, and conference room. An interviewee commented on the ambiguity of the space: "Every morning I walk in, it's configured differently".

Some students described Harris 100 as a social hub where "people know to find you". Others marked it as a quiet study space and a "place to slow down". However, every student considered it as an accessible, open community space. Students also accentuated the "welcoming" nature of the Sustainability House staff that shares the space.

University Heights South - Multipurpose Room 9

Room 9 also inhabits an ambiguous space. It is a large room built with faculty and staff offices, a classroom space, and a kitchen. The room harbors a wide array of resources for the use of students, faculty and staff: books, kitchen utensils, art supplies, a bike pump, maple sugaring tools, even a freezer full of Ben and Jerry's pints. Despite these amenities, students scarcely identified Room 9 as a community space. Community Student Leaders did not consider Room 9 to be "heavily used," attributing it as more of an office area than a student space. Certain

students that participated in NR 015 reported their section being taught in this room, but did not mark it as a community space.

Kitchen Spaces

Harris Hall and University Heights South possess very dissimilar kitchen spaces. Students continually referred to the kitchenette in Harris as a "closet" with insufficient counter space. Residents of both UHS and Harris praised the UHS kitchen space as a good "bonding" and "gathering" space. However, residents of Harris do not have swipe access to this space after hours, physically limiting their participation in this space.

Between The Two Buildings: Fundamentally Different Residence Halls

Sustainability House is made up of two residence halls: University Heights South (UHS) and Harris Hall. The halls are established on opposite sides of Athletic Campus, separated by a green space and basketball courts. In an interview, Harris and UHS were referred to as the least popular and most popular residences on campus, respectively. Each of the interviewees suggested that although the halls are close in proximity, this physical separation enables division within the SH community. When asked about how this affects students, it was stated that, "to go across the court feels like a significant shift for the students. You get comfortable in your own space". It was also observed that students like to take NR 015 in their own residential space. Students will travel from UHS to Harris most frequently to access the dining hall. However, most community events are held in Harris, as it was reported that "people from Harris won't come [to UHS]".

Discussion

Throughout history, higher education has co-evolved with society; its values and expectations overlapping with academic life and institutional policy. In recent history, institutions have adopted recognition of human learning as an experience, rather than a transaction, and have made the effort to refurbish academic format by incorporating interdisciplinary content, experiential learning or "learning by doing," and collaborative education between faculty and students. Recent studies have proven non-academic student development as an essential component of a holistic educational outcome. In response, institutions have turned toward Residential Learning Communities in effort to facilitate a holistic learning experience.

Studies recognize these contemporary social and academic issues of higher academia, as well as strategic frameworks for solutions. However, it is essential to acknowledge the apparent chasm of RLC participant feedback and outcomes: How do students feel about the programs they are apart of? How does it play out in their college experience, the choices they make and the habits they hone?

When institutions make big changes, expectations versus outcomes must be acknowledged. Thus, student feedback, communication with the administration, and follow up is essential to facilitate effective development of RLC programs (Marquart (2017).

Throughout this section, I shall address significant themes that have emerged from my research, in light of the literature I have examined. This discussion is a breakdown of the facts, opinions, feelings, experiences and visions expressed throughout the various conversations administered with Sustainability House students and staff.

I return to Oldenburg's (1997) definition of Third Places:

> Third places 1) help unify neighborhoods, 2) serve as "ports of entry" for visitors and newcomers to the neighborhood, 3) serve as "sorting" areas where those with special interests can find one another, 4) can bring youth and adults into association with one another, 5) serve as gathering space for addressing community issues, 6) Foster political debate and exchange of knowledge, 7) Facilitate natural emotional and economic support groups, 8) create space for entertainment, 9) create space for cultivation of friendship.

With this definition in mind, I would like to also return to some of the characteristics of a successful Residential Learning Community:

> RLCs that have established physical space where students and faculty can interact and collaborate, foster room for mentorship, interdisciplinary exploration, and relationships to be honed (Frazier & Eighmy, 2012; Marquart, 2017; Smith, 2001). However, without proper development of a program's philosophical structure, mission, implementation and outcome delivery, a space is merely a space (De Liddo & Concillo, 2017).

In this section, I shall refer to my compiled qualitative research, and discuss how, by creating physical and philosophical spaces, Third Place characteristics facilitate Residential Learning Community outcomes.

"Creating a Space"

One of Sustainability House's main initiatives is to create a space for students to engage with others, and formulate their own experiences. These spaces exist through classes like NR 015, and in spaces like Harris Room 100 and UHS Room 9. Ideally, in these spaces, students have the opportunity to engage with academic and personal development under one roof. As

reiterated by De Liddo and Concilio (2017) open communities are both physical and philosophical, in that they are supported by both spatial architecture and social interactions that encourage intra-communal relationships. In regards to Oldenburg's Third Places Framework, these spaces indeed serve as "ports of entry" for program participants to exchange knowledge and interests with one another, while also cultivating their own friendships and social lives.

<u>Self-Organization</u>

In exploring what made students feel a sense of place in Sustainability House, a theme regarding structure emerged. In interviews, Program Directors and Community Student Leaders explained the importance of self-organization in the community. The Sustainability House program was, "...designed to orient students to place, to this immediate community and the larger community". Interviewees discussed how, as students transition from the often highly supported living structure of home life, to the semi-supported living style of campus life, there ought to be room for students to "build their own routines and values" in the ambiguous and opportunistic environment of higher education. By providing Third Places, and making physical and philosophical room for students to engage in guided self-organizing, Sustainability House has been successful in facilitating opportunities for holistic student development.

In SH, a first-year student is required to go to a certain number of events. However, the student goes in their own time, and they get to select events of their choosing. Interviewees and focus group participants fondly referred to this community encouragement as a gentle ushering out the door to "go play" and explore on their own. Students are free to make community room reservations for events, and van reservations for transportation. However, when the optional nature of these opportunities comes into play (like for second semester, first-year students), participation can dwindle, revoking the Third Place aspects. However, it is important to note how

different students perform with structure, or lack thereof. Interviewees also noted how, "Life blooms here at night," when staff programmed space pauses, and students truly operate in their own.

Defensive Architecture

I also consider examples in which there is structural limitation. This is where the strength of an RLC can waver. De Liddo and Concilio (2017) suggest that ambiguity in program content can muddle the learning experience. Programs that are underdeveloped in structure and consistency can fizzle out. My research notes the drop off in participation of second semester, first year students in Sustainability House. Without requiring or encouraging students to participate in an educational third place, their attendance in a community space often does not follow through, thereby inhibiting the opportunity for organization of a Third Place.

Simultaneously, if a space is not built to be accessible, people will not self-organize into that space. Yuen & Johnson (2017) review the effect of defensive architecture: "Leisure spaces alone do not facilitate community. Rather it is the interactions, the relationships, and the feelings that exist within the setting that create community". As an example, I consider the Harris Fireplace Lounge. The room is labeled as a commonspace, however, Sustainability House participants claimed its bland look and feeble arrangement of seating do not encourage its use as a gathering space, despite its optimal location and an optimal view of Mt. Mansfield.

This idea extends to the controversial use of Room 9 in University Heights South. Although it is arranged as a multipurpose space, and stocked with resources, student use and perception of the space remains uneven.

Mulcahy et. al. (2010) explain how, "place is defined by more than just its physical elements; it refers to the socio-cultural meanings and emotional attachments held by an

individual or a group for a social setting". If students perceive the Room 9 space as an isolated office space more so than an open community space, their reactions to and feelings for the space might establish its social geography more so than the intended arrangement of the space. This is a situation where, although the space expresses the physical and philosophical geography for Third Place characteristics, it doesn't play out that way.

Feedback

Marquart (2017) reiterates the importance of interpreting and discussing the outcomes of institutional program instatement. Without properly gauging the culture and opinions of the student body, it is difficult for an institution to understand the true effects of its implementations.

This, I have come to find, can reinforce, instead of bridging institutional division. From feedback, ideas can be piloted, engaging in the further development of a residential learning community program. Where it is needed, physical and philosophical reassessment of spaces can go underway.

Conclusion: Vision

The semi-structured nature of the conversations that went underway often unfolded into vision sessions. As students and staff alike exhibited excitement for and satisfaction with Sustainability House's community-driven efforts, many participants made room to speak for improvements they believed should be made. These conversations that have taken place, their content, and the spaces they have taken place in, I believe, adhere to the essential dynamic nature of successful Residential Learning Communities.

Drawing conclusions around small-sampled qualitative research can be risky procedure. It is innacurate and unprofessional to make sweeping generalizations in response to the stories

and narratives collected, especially at a small scale. With respect to unique narratives and individual opinions, I shall indicate a few big ideas this project has uncovered.

Students are excited about Residential Learning Communities. Their specifically themed structure does not detract heavily from the heavily anticipated student residential experience.

Students are capable of self-organization. No matter the sort of physical or philosophical space provided (or lack thereof), students will respond to and move through the space as they please. Whether they choose to engage with the spaces and frameworks provided, however, is inevitably up to them.

In response to UVM's mission to hone a holistic individual, well-designed RLCs enhance a student's accessibility to academic characters and spaces in-residence.

In all, RLCs have an historically relevant and progressive mission. However concrete and researched this mission may be, such framework cannot succeed without taking into account the complexity and dynamic nature of the college experience. Year after year, different students will enter the higher education system, equipped with their respective visions, capabilities, backgrounds and paradigms. It is important that, although structured by heavily researched objectives and outcomes, these programs incorporate the ideas of all participants, including the student body. Conversation is essential.

The physical arrangement of a space can override its underlying philosophical intentions. Simultaneously, philosophical intentions have the capacity to change physical space and the paradigms associated with it.

Residential learning communities can create space for students to engage with the multifaceted components of their college experience, priming access to a well-rounded experience.

Appendices

A. Focus Group Questionnaire

Residential Learning Communities Statement:

"Residential Learning Communities (RLCs) at the University of Vermont are designed to engage the whole student, tying together the intellectual, ethical, cultural and social aspects of college life. By living together with fellow students who share common interests and ideals, the individual student becomes part of a true community, a community that is also tied to the greater world beyond the confines of the university. In addition, students, faculty, and staff are given the opportunity to interact outside the classroom, the lab, or the office, thereby encouraging the pursuit of knowledge as a lifetime activity."

Sustainability House Statement:

"Our learning community provides opportunities to explore and build the skills and qualities needed to create a regenerative present and future for life at all scales: personal, social, and ecological. It's a place where we explore our self, communities, and larger human and natural systems. We honor our relationships with our local communities and natural environment by getting out and exploring the woods, Lake Champlain, local food systems, campus organizations, fall foliage, and discovering peaceful places to slow down. We seek to deepen and celebrate our sense of place, fostering an atmosphere where everyone find points of connection to their community—the built environments that we inhabit, and the natural landscape that frames our lives."

Please indicate your Residence Here:

_____

What do you use as a community space?

- Harris 100
- UHS 9
- Fireplace lobby (UHS / Harris-Millis)
- Kitchen space (UHS / Harris-Millis)
- Classroom space (UHS / Harris-Millis)
- Dining Hall
- Green / outdoor space (Please specify _____)
- Hallway
- Your private room
- Another private room
- Other:

_____

_____

What do you see others using as a community space?

- Harris 100
- UHS 9
- Fireplace lobby (UHS / Harris-Millis)
- Kitchen space (UHS / Harris-Millis)
- Classroom space (UHS / Harris-Millis)
- Dining Hall
- Green / outdoor space (Please specify _____)
- Hallway
- Your private room
- Another private room
- Other:

_____

_____

B. Programmed Housing Proposal

Programmed Housing Proposal

Mission Statement:

Slade is a cooperative focused on sustainability and community. The co-op's three pillars will be food, expression, and service both on-campus and in the greater Burlington community.

Slade (or whatever name the cooperative chooses) will be a common ground for University students who are seeking intentional communities and control of their food. Further, students interested in being a member of the Slade community would also be people who enjoy practicing diverse forms of self-expression and getting deeply involved with not only the people living in Slade's space and UVM's on-campus community members, but also the greater Burlington area.

The on campus co-op we desire to create is inspired by the model of the Slade Ecological Cooperative, but will be designed from the start to be engaged closely with Residential Life, University organizations, and a Burlington community partner, rather than the Slade Eco Co-op's traditional independence.

In the UVM community:

We are hoping to integrate Slade into UVM's Sustainability Program, ideally as a nested community like the LEAF program. We believe that any sustainable future will be linked to community living and interpersonal collaboration, and we feel that the reinstitution of an on-campus cooperative would be an excellent way to get students thinking this way on their own terms. As with the larger Sustainability Program, the on-campus Slade Cooperative's mission would not be shoving environmental values down students' throats but rather inviting them to integrate environmentally conscious habits into their lives in ways that benefit them. We feel that a student-run initiative would align with the University's goal of having 100% themed housing, and we know that there are plenty of energetic and civic-minded students currently on campus who would be eager to participate in such a program.

Connection to the Slade Eco Co-op:

Being able to connect with the current off-campus Slade Co-op has been a crucial part of our first-year experience. We feel that it would be a disservice to future incoming classes if Slade's intention and history were to be removed from campus entirely. For us, Slade has provided an enormous sense of community even just by increasing the number of familiar faces we see on campus everyday and creating a space that feels like home. With this on-campus co-op, we are really just trying to continue to create an open place where students feel welcome and able to express themselves however they choose. We see cooperative living spaces as not only a means of increasing students' control of their lifestyles but also as inviting and receptive spaces where students feel welcomed and empowered to better themselves and their community.

Pillars:

EXPRESSION:

As members of the Slade community, students will have the ability to be a part of an active creative space in which they can share their thoughts and ideas. We are seeking to create an on-campus home where students from all parts of the UVM community can enter and feel like they are at home. As such, a focus on inter-community activities, such as open-mics and coffeehouses, art nights, and outdoor activities will be a major part of our goal towards more community involvement. Additionally, we are

looking to collaborate with the Arts Incubator space started last semester in L&L by Leena Unger, a space which focuses on showcasing student art and skills through various workshops and events, and we are interested in expanding to collaborate with other on-campus groups as well.

FOOD:

Ideally, this co-op would be off of the meal plan and able to work directly with local farmers, but the system used by the Slade Cooperative Extension in AY 2016-2017 would also work for us. The modified plan would let us to learn to cook and provide community meals to our members and visitors, aspects of the Slade model which we think are vital to its success.

The Sladers of 2016-17 paid $1,972 every semester, which has been raised since to $2,061. That paid for 25 meal swipes in the dining halls, as well as 1,400 retail points. 1,000 of the points and all of the meal swipes were converted into spending power of $540 per member, which was pooled in a shared account.

From that account, they ordered food through Black River Produce, the Intervale Food Hub, Catamount Farms, and a larger supplier. The modified plan worked well to get Slade's members enough food to eat well and cook in a relatively sustainable way.

To cook our meals, we would like to partner with a chef from UVM Dining who would give us regular (semesterly or monthly) lessons in food/kitchen safety, nutrition, and vegetarian recipes. Again, we believe that cooking our own meals is a key life skill as well as a strong base to build a community from.

SERVICE:

As students, we are looking to build intercommunity connections on campus and intra-community connections with Burlington as a whole. This cooperative living space is designed for anyone looking to take greater control of their lifestyle on campus through cooperative living and student collaboration.

Some ideas for volunteering/service aspect of Slade:
- Gleaning/food salvage w/ Intervale Ctr. or other area farms
- Volunteering with partner farms, local organizations
- Collaborating with other on-campus/student groups
- NR15/16 related
- Peace and Justice Center

Membership:
- The application process: Res Life will review the applications we choose that we think we will be a suitable fit for the cooperative
    - Refer to the <u>current Slade Eco Co-op application</u> on sladecoop.wordpress.com
    - A few questions to get a sense of who the person is:
        - Why do they want to live in a cooperative?
        - What part can they play in our community?
        - Which problem bothers them most about their world, and how do they want to help to fix it?
        - What is their relationship to food, and how would they like to change it?

- The students that we'd like to include:
    - A diverse array of students interested in exploring:
        - Artistic expression
        - Music
        - Dancing
        - Environmentalism/sustainability

- Cooperative living
  - Students looking for a stronger sense of home than typical res hall life offers

RAs and RDs:

- The reporting process: How does the co-op communicate and partner with Residential Life?
  - Monthly meetings with our advisors and/or Sustainability House staff
  - Open and regular communication between co-op liaisons and school employees
    - What works, what doesn't?
    - What do they want of us and vice versa?
    - How can we maintain good relations with the university and surrounding community?

- RA recruitment:
  - Cooperative living would work best with someone who would like to join the community!
  - RAs could have CSL training more similar to L&L/cultural crossroads, connecting them with an advisor from Sustainability House.

- Alternative authority figures: Can a small team of grad students live there?
  - Get in touch with Nora to get grad students into house possibly

Community Partnership(s):

- The NR 15/16 course -- what does is look like?
  - Who advises it?
    - Leah Mital or someone from the Sustainability House
    - Karen Nordstrom?
    - Someone from MCSC
    - Service-learning community (CUPS, etc.)
      Potential collaboration with GreenHouse program to set up a one credit NR16 style course (a few of us have to take this anyway for our current housing arrangements) but one that was basically just us working with an advisor to coordinate an on-campus cooperative and network in the Burlington community
- Service based alternative to the course
    - Intervale… Vermont food bank (Andrea Solazzo, community outreach manager, asolazzo@vtfoodbank.org)
    - Peace and justice center
    - Maybe a community partner project-class (similar to NR 206). Community member identifies need, and how students can help. A learning objective for both parties is identified
- NASCO (North American Students of Cooperation
  - Provides training, advice, and support to keep co-ops running smoothly
  - Membership includes free consulting, an annual NASCO staff visit, and a cheaper ticket to the November NASCO Institute, a training weekend in Ann Arbor, Michigan
  - Builds connections with other cooperatives around North America

Daily Life

- Weekly meetings with everyone who lives in Slade
    - https://serc.carleton.edu/introgeo/cooperative/roles.html
    - Once a month, including advisors in these meetings to see how the co-op is doing
- Community-building guidance from the Slader's Handbook, an instruction booklet on the Slade Eco Co-op's traditions, history, and community practices

C. Focus Group Poster

D. Interview Guide

<u>Project question</u>: Looking to understand how the role of Third Places in UVM's RLCs (specifically sustainability house) supports/correlates with UVM's mission to support holistic student learning, development

<u>Third Places</u>: the middle ground between one's home (first place), and work (second place). They serve as open gathering spaces for exchange of ideas, resources, relationships, and support within a community.

"Residential Learning Communities (RLCs) at the University of Vermont are designed to engage the whole student, tying together the intellectual, ethical, cultural and social aspects of college life. By living together with fellow students who share common interests and ideals, the individual student becomes part of a true community, a community that is also tied to the greater world beyond the confines of the university. In addition, students, faculty, and staff are given the opportunity to interact outside the classroom, the lab, or the office, thereby encouraging the pursuit of knowledge as a lifetime activity."

"Our learning community provides opportunities to explore and build the skills and qualities needed to create a regenerative present and future for life at all scales: personal, social, and ecological. It's a place where we explore our self, communities, and larger human and natural systems. We honor our relationships with our local communities and natural environment by getting out and exploring the woods, Lake Champlain, local food systems, campus organizations, fall foliage, and discovering peaceful places to slow down. We seek to deepen and celebrate our sense of place, fostering an atmosphere where everyone find points of connection to their community—the built environments that we inhabit, and the natural landscape that frames our lives."

1) How did you become involved with sustainability house?
2) Where did you get the inspiration? What drew you to it?
3) To you, what is sustainability house?
4) What have you seen happen? Change? Fluctuate?
5) What are some limitations / drawbacks?
8) How do you see students engaging / reacting with the program?

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