



Student-faculty interaction is often described as occurring in only two distinct categories: casual or substantive (Cox et al., 2010). However, living-learning communities blur the boundaries and expand the potential for learning (Blimling, & Schuh, 2015; Grohs, Keith, Morikawa, Penven, & Stephens, 2013). Residential colleges are a specific type of living-learning community that locates faculty offices and residences within students' living environments. The benefits include "students' self-reported: (a) growth in critical thinking, (b) overall cognitive complexity, and (c) appreciation for liberal learning" (Inkelas, Soldner, Longersbeam, & Leonard, 2008, p. 503). These outcomes align directly with Virginia Tech's (2012) vision for undergraduate general education. In 2011, Virginia Tech joined the national movement toward more residential colleges because "the residential college reflects all aspects of student learning" (DeLauder, 2010, para 3).

For each residential college, the faculty principal serves as the intellectual leader of the college, working collaboratively with the residence life staff and supporting faculty fellows to enhance the learning environment by engaging residents in educational activities designed to promote intellectual and community engagement. As such, the Faculty Principal works to nurture a vibrant sense of community that fosters academic excellence and promotes faculty-student interaction. Specific, identifiable activities include:

- Setting an overall academic/ intellectual trajectory for the community, often through a "theme" for the year.
- Facilitating guest speakers each week in the faculty apartment, commonly referred to as "Principal's Tea" or "FaculTea."
- Engaging in intellectual conversation during weekly community dinners.
- Encouraging and supporting ad-hoc presentations and discussions by faculty and/or students.
- Guiding and advising students in governance of the community.
- Preparing reference, recommendation, and nomination letters for students who are pursuing intellectual and professional interests.

In aggregate, one may see that the types of interactions between faculty and student closely approximate (if not mirror) those of a "traditional" classroom. The Faculty Principal sets a clear learning objective and then works with faculty colleagues, professional staff, and the students themselves. This is done by careful planning of scheduled events across a full year (though often taken 1 semester at a time), with a desired learning outcome for the students at the end. At the end, a deeper, mentor-like relationship has developed between faculty and student so that affiliated faculty in the residential colleges are in an excellent position to counsel students on their career path and oftentimes write letters of support for them. The Residential College at West Ambler Johnston, for instance, has chosen "Be Together. Not the Same" as their theme for 2015-16. To that end, the faculty and students have focused on programming and educational activities related to diversity – from a kick-off lecture by a MacArthur fellow and novelist about the immigrant experience, to faculty lectures on such topics as the history of hip-hop, to film screenings on the place of Latinos in American society led by a guest speaker from another university. Following on from these, the student governments of the community are enjoined to create their own programming around these themes, monitored by affiliated faculty.



Empirical evidence on the benefits of these efforts at Virginia Tech is emerging. Quotations from some students within the Honors Residential College exemplify some of the value gained:

- “It is exciting to see interaction between senior [faculty] and junior [student] fellows, and I think it makes for a good opportunity to network. In all, it has helped me become more comfortable talking to people in a professional sense... These events give a chance for the community to interact and broaden their horizons.”
- “The community at the HRC is one that values and fosters learning, especially from other people.... As a result, I have the opportunity to challenge ways of thinking that I have held my entire life, to examine other patterns of thought and ideologies, and either incorporate them or grow to appreciate their value.”
- “D2uesday [the weekly dinner] also provides the opportunity to meet new people and learn about where their passions and interests lie. Since D2uesday also includes senior and graduate fellows, it provides junior fellows with a unique and incredible to get to know graduates and professors and learn about their life experiences, what they are currently working on, and what amazing opportunities they have taken advantage. Their experience gives insight to junior fellows as to what amazing opportunities are available and advice for pursuing them.”
- “The thing that I liked best about Dr. Kaufman was that he gave a lot of opportunities and incentives to interact with senior fellows and VT faculty. Through Principal's tea, #VTHRC, and other events, he allowed us to interact with people in departments that weren't related to ours and to have out-of-the-ordinary conversations with a variety of people.”

References

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