

## **WIP - Living-Learning Programs: A Model for Student Success and Engagement**

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# Work-In-Progress

## Living-Learning Programs: A Model for Student Success and Engagement

### *Introduction & Background*

Academically-focused living-learning programs provide students with a unique opportunity to live among peers with similar scholastic interests and goals. These programs encourage increased frequency and meaningfulness of student-to-student interactions [1], higher student satisfaction with the college experience, and can have a positive impact on retention of first-year students. A shared academic focus within a living community cultivates an environment conducive to promoting student involvement in academic pursuits, integrating social and cognitive growth, and promoting peer education [2]. Research on development in college students demonstrates that students are influenced heavily by out-of-class involvement, as well by faculty and peer interaction [3,4,5]. By providing opportunities for students to get involved in an intentionally-structured residential community and enlisting faculty support, living-learning programs are able to increase students' engagement [6] in a way that positively impacts their cognitive and affective development [7].

In 2004, the School of Engineering and Computer Science (ECS) at Baylor University opened its first living-learning program in response to conversation among students who expressed a desire to live with others embarking on a similar academic journey. The ECS Living-Learning Center (LLC) included a faculty-in-residence, structured programming to serve the population, leadership development for students within the community, and tutoring. The popularity of this type of living arrangement grew as did the retention numbers for students who lived in the ECS LLC at any point in their academic career. With the demand to live in this type of community increasing, ECS advocated to critical campus partners to move to a new residence hall facility with increased bed space in order to expand the program. In Fall 2013, the ECS LLC transitioned to become Teal Residential College (TRC), which now serves 350 students of all classifications through a residential college model.

### *Teal vs. Non-Teal*

A comparison of several key student success factors allows for a holistic look of the impact of this type of intensive living-learning environment. Figures 1 and 2 detail the average retention rate, graduation rate, and first-year GPA from Fall 2013 – Fall 2018 for students who have selected to participate in Teal Residential College (Teal) and students who have chosen to not participate in the living-learning program (Non-Teal).

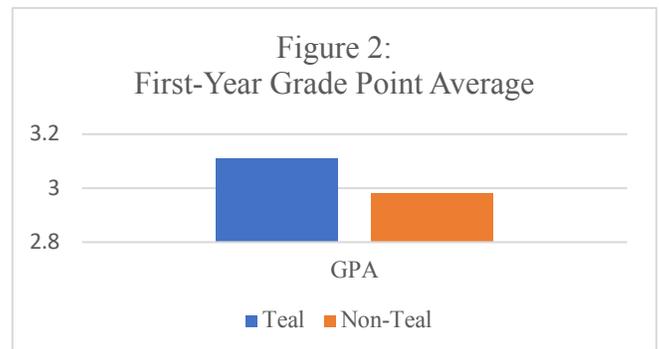
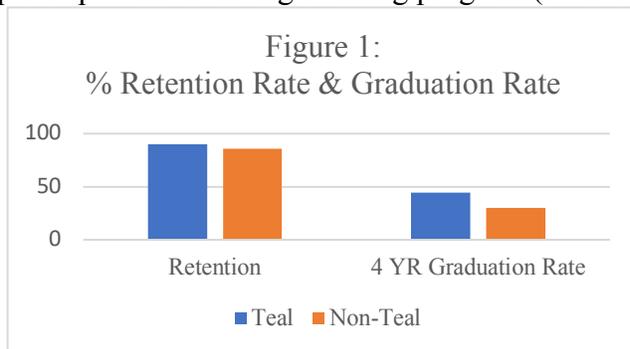


Figure 1 shows data on student retention rate and graduation rate. Since fall of 2013, the average fall-to-fall retention rate for first-year Teal students is 89.7%, whereas the average fall-to-fall retention rate for first-year Non-Teal students is 85.6%. The average four-year ECS graduation rate for Teal is 44.3% with the Non-Teal four-year ECS graduation rate being 29.8%.

Figure 2 shows data on the grade point average of first-year ECS students. On average, the first-year grade point average of Teal ECS students is 3.11, whereas the first-year grade point average for Non-Teal ECS students is 2.98. There are likely confounding variables (e.g., academic preparation, socio-economic status, etc.) here, but the increased fall-to-fall retention rate, four-year graduation rate, and first-year GPA data appear to confirm the value of this structured living-learning environment.

### *Mentoring*

One core tenant of the residential college model is to engage students at each level of their academic experience, freshman through senior year. At Teal, mixing classifications of students within the residential experience allows younger students to form mentoring relationships with upper-division students in both structured and organic ways. These connections can form through formal roommate arrangements, as some first-year students live with upperclassmen. The room style options at Teal also facilitate connection through physical space arrangement. Cove style rooms share a community bathroom, suite style rooms allow four students to share a common space, and the apartment style rooms draw particularly on the upper division student type. These mentorships can form through informal contact as well. Students can meet and connect with others by living on the same floor, meeting at a hall program, or sharing a common space designed for building community. Mentorships are critical for first-year students as they transition so that they are able to see a model of academic expectation which can set them up success for the future.

### *Intentional Programming*

A unique element of the residential college model is an opportunity for students to engage with a faculty member, known as the Faculty Steward, who lives and works among students in the residence hall. The Faculty Steward at Teal crafts a vision to guide community. This vision centers around the idea that Teal is a place where relationships are established, mended, and cultivated to become thriving aspects of students' lives. The specific tenants are relationship with God, relationship with others, relationship with self (or self-understanding), and relationship with creation.

This vision is used as the basis for a six-week programming model that begins the first week of class with at least one program taking place each week. Students explore the relationship with God tenant through connection with the Resident Chaplain and participating in programs such as chapel and/or worship nights. Relationship with others often happens naturally, but is intentionally focused through social programs like hall specific events or Community Dinners. In these early weeks, relationship with self presents an opportunity for students to engage with programming that encourages talking about adjustment to college, study skills, and their own professional and personal goals, among others. Finally, relationship with creation is established

first and foremost through the kick-off of the community garden. This garden allows students to select and cultivate plants and flowers or fruits and vegetables throughout the year with the support of each other and Teal leadership. Through these programs, students begin to form relationships with each other and with the Faculty Steward.

### *Leadership Development*

In addition to peer mentorship, interaction with faculty, and a shared vision, Teal offers two opportunities for first-year students to be leaders in the community. The Teal Ambassador program allows first-year students to welcome prospective students into the community by facilitating tours of the community spaces, working a variety of large recruitment events, assisting with guest visits, and serving as a representative at conferences. Many students enjoy participating in this program because it provides an opportunity to share their heart directly with prospective students and families.

Perhaps the most sought-after leadership position for first-year students is the Freshman Representative position on the Teal College Council. The College Council serves as the student governing body of the living-learning program. This opportunity is granted to a number of first-year students each year, and provides these students with immediate leadership opportunities in addition to informal mentoring from the upper-division College Council members. College Council members plan and facilitate a calendar of holistic programming as well as address concerns brought forth by residents. By engaging first-year students in these meaningful leadership experiences, Teal is able to enhance opportunities for connection between the academic experience and the extracurricular lives of its students.

### *Future Implications*

Continual evaluation and assessment of aspects of the Teal community and opportunities is important for future improvement of the first-year experience for ECS students. The most impactful change is the implementation of a first-year student retreat only for those first-year students living in the community. This retreat will take place during the fourth week of classes after students have a chance to acclimate to their new home environment. Programming at the retreat will feature a small group model led by upper division student leaders which will compliment large group sessions focused on learning the history and traditions of the community as well as the Faculty Steward's vision for the community experience.

Teal Leadership is constantly evaluating the community experience and looks for ways to establish exciting opportunities for all classifications of students. Their ultimate goal is to have students look back on their living-learning program experience, and recognize the ways in which Teal has positively transformed their college experience and future perspective on life beyond Baylor.

## References

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