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Students' recollections of participating in a first year residential learning community experience

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STUDENTS' RECOLLECTIONS OF PARTICIPATING IN A FIRST YEAR

RESIDENTIAL LEARNING COMMUNITY EXPERIENCE

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by

Catherine A. Akens

2001

To: Dean Linda Blanton
    College of Education

This dissertation, written by Catherine A. Akens, and entitled Students' Recollections of Participating in a First Year Residential Learning Community Experience, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this dissertation and recommend that it be approved.

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Linda Bliss

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Janice R. Sandiford, Major Professor

Date of Defense: November 9, 2001

The dissertation of Catherine A. Akens is approved.

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Dean Linda Blanton
College of Education

_____
Dean Douglas Wartzok
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Florida International University, 2001

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DEDICATION

With much love and appreciation,

to my parents, Joe and Judy Chontos, and my husband, Jody.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Professor Janice R. Sandiford, Major Professor

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an understanding of what participation in a first year residential learning community meant to students 2-3 years after their involvement in the program. Various theories including environmental, student involvement, psychosocial and intellectual, were used as a framework for this case study. Each of the ten participants was a junior or senior level student at the time of the study, but had previously participated in a first year residential learning community at Florida International University. The researcher held two semi-structured interviews with each participant, and collected data sheets from each.

The narrative data produced from the interviews were transcribed, coded and analyzed to gain insights into the experiences and perspectives of the participants. Member checking was used after the interview process. A peer reviewer offered feedback during the data analysis. The resulting data was coded into categories, with a final selection of four themes and 15 sub-themes, which captured the essence of the participants' experiences. The four major themes included: (a) community,

(b) involvement, (c) identity, and (d) academics. The community theme is used to describe how students perceived the environment to be. The involvement theme is used to describe the students' participation in campus life and their interaction with other members of the university community. The identity theme is used to describe the students' process of development, and the personal growth they underwent as a result of their experiences. The academics theme refers to the intellectual development of students and their interaction around academic issues.

The results of this study showed that the participants valued greatly their involvement in the First Year Residents Succeeding Together program (FYRST) and can articulate how it helped them succeed as students. In describing their experience, they most recall the sense of community that existed, the personal growth they experienced, the academic development process they went through, and their involvement, both with other people and with activities in their community. Recommendations are provided for practice and research, including several related to enhancing the academic culture, integrating faculty, utilizing peer influence and providing further opportunities to create a seamless learning environment.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

> The very first day...I moved in and my parents left that day...I was all alone. It
> was quiet. My suitemate hadn't moved in yet, so it was just me. And what I
> remember was a lot of people passing by my room...and a couple of residents
> from two doors down came knocking on the door and introduced themselves and
> basically took me into their group and we went on room by room introducing
> ourselves to each other. The group got bigger and bigger and as we went to your
> room, you would come out and we would all go to the next room. By the time we
> were at the end of the hall, we were like a group of ten. And I think it was a good
> experience...it was a way of reaching out and just introducing yourself to as many
> people as you can--so, that was the first day. A lot of emotions. You miss home
> and you miss your family, especially being international--but at the same sense
> you realize that this is your chance to have another family, this is where you will
> be for the next year and it's up to you to make the best of it (Joshua, FIU student,
> former participant in the FYRST program).

The sense of isolation and the desire for connectedness that Joshua describes is

typical to many students just beginning their college experience. Each year students all

around the country set foot on campuses and begin their freshmen year. Increasingly,

there is a strong emphasis for institutions of higher education to attend to the needs of

first year students, with the goal being to aid in student success and retention. In the last

two decades, a national reform initiative has been underway to reshape student learning

in the undergraduate experience. *An American Imperative* (Wingspread Conference on

Higher Education, 1993) and *The Student Learning Imperative* (American College

Personnel Association, 1994) represent the growing concern with the quality of the

undergraduate experience. Challenges to current institutional priorities and practices, as

well as shifting societal demands and influences have provided stimuli for this high

interest in educational change. Part of this reform has included an increased emphasis on

student learning, with particular attention to the development of learning communities. Bringing together what has sometimes been considered the two separate lives of students, their in-and out-of-class experiences, is a major focus for these initiatives.

One such change or movement that is happening at many institutions is what some call the "Freshman Experience." Because of evidence that student success is largely determined by experiences during the freshman year (Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985), colleges and universities have begun to "frontload" the services, resources, and attention given to first year students, in order to enhance their opportunities for success. Given the time students spend outside of the classroom and the number of students who reside on college campuses, the residence halls are being viewed as a logical place for the development of learning communities. Residence halls are viewed as having the potential to challenge and educate students as they connect their learning experiences to their living realities (Schroeder, Mable & Associates, 1994). Often first year students are assigned to live together and benefit from social programs, services, classes, and special staffing patterns to foster their success (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). By creating small communities where students are clustered together as part of some educational program, students can benefit from a learning experience that ideally transcends any perceived boundaries between their in-class and out-of-class time.

A variety of studies have been done in the last several years to examine the impact of such programs on first year student success. Much of the research focuses on the impact of the program on GPA or retention (Minor, 1997; Tinto, Love, & Russo, 1993) and others explore the impact on students' cognitive thinking (Pike, 1999; Tinto, 1997b; Tinto, Love & Russo, 1993). Other studies have also assessed the impact of the

program on participants' involvement in the university community (Johnson & Romanoff, 1999; Romanoff, 2000; Tinto, Love & Russo, 1993; Zeller, 1996). The studies are primarily conducted during or immediately following the students' first year, and focus on specific, measurable outcomes. What is lacking in the literature is a body of research that focuses more on the students' perspective and how they make meaning of their experience as participants in a residential learning community. Stage (1992) indicates that in our efforts to speak in quantitative terms, we have lost some of the idiosyncrasies that are important when trying to understand the quality of the college student experience.

> By stripping away those idiosyncrasies, we imply that anything that is important to know about students on our campus can be reduced to numbers. Details about students, their personal lives, and the influences on the college experience are lost. This approach produces limitations that result in gaps between those who gather information and the student affairs practitioners who use it--and who cannot ignore details about college students' lives. (p. 3)

Little data exists that describes the richness of students' experiences. This information is vital to administrators and faculty, as institutions continue to develop residential learning communities. How students--those actually in the program--perceive the experience and the value they place on certain aspects of the experience, would be useful information for program planning and for marketing programs to students. After all, such programs are designed for the benefit of the students--wouldn't we want their perspectives considered in the process?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to develop an understanding of what participation in a first year residential learning community means to students 2-3 years after their

involvement in the program. The case study included research conducted with 10 former participants in the First Year Residents Succeeding Together (FYRST) Program who, at the time the research was conducted, were juniors or seniors at Florida International University (FIU). Through two semi-structured interviews, they were asked to describe and explain their personal thoughts, beliefs, experiences, and reflections of their first year, in order to gain an understanding of how the program helped shape their overall experience at FIU. I sought to understand how students perceived the different aspects of the program, such as social, academic or programmatic, were influential in their experience.

<div align="center">Research Questions</div>

There were several questions that guided this research: (a) What did students most and least enjoy about being a part of the FYRST program?, (b) How did the experience of the program compare to the expectations they had of the program?, (c) How do they feel involvement in the FYRST program impacted their first year experience?, (d) Which specific FYRST events or activities do they feel helped shape their first year?, (e) How do they feel involvement in the FYRST program impacted their experience at FIU? and (f) How do they feel now about the program?

<div align="center">Rationale/Contribution to Theory and Practice</div>

In general, this study was important because it contributed to a growing body of professional knowledge about learning communities. The interest in the development of learning communities has increased significantly in the last several years, and is considered a primary agenda item in both academics and student affairs. While some research exists, the generation of more knowledge about the students' experiences in

learning communities is essential to their continued improvement as vehicles for student learning. Specifically, this research offered several important contributions to the literature.

First, the approach utilized provided the opportunity to explore the perspective of the students, which allowed me as a researcher to delve into issues not necessarily represented in GPAs or retention rates. The findings produced from this study provide rich, vivid descriptions from the students' experience. The voice of the students--that of participants in newly developed learning communities, has been relatively unexplored. This type of research has little presence in current literature. As more institutions seek to develop programs that enhance first year success, there is a need for the literature to expand in terms of how these programs contribute to students' experiences and how students feel about the programs. A student's experience in a program such as FYRST is complicated and multi-dimensional. The social dynamics of the experience alone, make it one that can best be understood through a thorough study of the students' interpretations and perceptions of the activities, relationships and experiences in which they were engaged. It is important for institutions and program planners, faculty, and administrators to understand the students' perceptions of their experience in such a program.

It is important to note here that this qualitative study focused on describing the specific experiences of one group of students. However, as Creswell (1998) indicates, through appropriate analysis and interpretation, the findings from a qualitative study can hold meaning for those working in other settings as well. Creswell asserts that the use of rich, thick description allows the reader to make decisions regarding transferability because the writer describes in such detail the participants or setting being studied. This

depth of detail by the researcher enables readers to transfer information to other settings and to determine whether the findings can be transferred because of shared characteristics. This qualitative study then, is not intended to be broadly generalized, but readers may be able to transfer information to other settings as they identify shared characteristics between this study's context and their own context. So, while I may be specifically describing this unique setting--the FYRST program at FIU, readers can use the rich description to figure out what parts may apply to their own situation.

In some cases a reader will be able to see a connection or draw from some similarities. In such cases, viewing the experience through a different lens, that of a diverse group of students and an invested researcher, can benefit many faculty and administrators in their own planning process. The students' perspectives can be considered during program planning and implementation, policy making, decision making, programming, staff selection and other administrative processes. (Manning, 1999). This may assist administrators in developing and improving programs in such a manner that they are both meaningful and effective for students in their adjustment and learning processes.

As the movement continues for student affairs professionals to develop residential learning communities, this type of understanding can assist in the whole first year experience being better understood. As a result, university decisions should be more capably fashioned and administrative decision-making skillfully achieved (Manning, 1999). For example, if the study findings indicate that peers play an extremely influential role in the students' first year experience, this information could be used to make decisions about staffing, peer mentors, and establishing means for positive peer

interaction to take place.

This research is also important because of the setting for the case study. The participants are students at an urban, primarily-commuter campus, with an enrollment of over 32,000 students. Approximately 51 % of the student body are Hispanic, 21 % are White Non-Hispanic, more than 14 % are Black Non-Hispanic, over 9% are international, 3% are Asian and 0.16% are American Indian. Also, over 86 % of the students come from within the state of Florida, 3 % come from other states and over 9 % of the students come from 154 different foreign countries. The students in the study are somewhat similar to FIU's overall population. The participants consisted of a variety of local (in-state) students, out-of-state students and international students. There was a higher concentration on international students (7 of the 10 participants) in the study as compared to the FIU population. This was because the FYRST program and the residence halls in general tend to attract a higher percentage of international students, since for many of them living on campus is their best housing option at FIU. Studying the experience of international students in a learning community also contributes to the literature, as it is an area relatively unexplored in past research.

The characteristics of the student population at FIU offers an exciting dynamic to the study. As institutions grow increasingly diverse in future years, it is important that the research reflects that diversity, particularly if the experience of students in learning communities differs among students of varied cultures, ages, etc. Until now, much of the research on residential learning communities has focused on homogenous campuses. Again, the population and setting for this study is unique; it is a case study in one particular setting. Readers may, however, pull out certain connections that are helpful in

the interpretation of their own settings. This study follows Denzin and Lincoln's (1998) advice concerning the benefit in "studying the particular." A case study, they say, should not strive to emphasize generalization, but rather seek the benefit of understanding the unique case. "Damage occurs when the commitment to generalize or create theory runs so strong that the researcher's attention is drawn away from features important for understanding the case itself." (p. 91). This research not intended to generalize, but rather to develop an understanding of the unique aspects of this particular case.

Finally, this research is important in that it studied the students' perspectives 2-3 years after their participation in the program. Much of the current research focuses on second semester freshmen. Conducting this research with students in their junior or senior year encouraged students to analyze their first year relative to succeeding years, and make sense of how their involvement in FYRST contributed to or helped shape their college experience. If our goals of such programs extend beyond what happens to the student in their first year, more studies that focus on how students make meaning of the experience several years later is important. For example, some studies have shown that students' grades or retention rates are realized over time if they are involved in a residential learning community (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). This research helped to identify how students make meaning of their first year experience two or three years later. This offered a different perspective than if I studied the same students when they were actually in the program. The long range -impact of the experience in a program might not be so obvious to students when they are immersed in the program and still in their first year. This is supported by considering the work of Perry. Perry (1968) says that a student's verbal reports are valuable because they reveal the students' new

interpretations, those which develop in order to resolve the differences between earlier expectancies, which had proved inadequate, and the transitional process by which the new interpretations were created. In his own study, Perry highlights the developmental changes that students undergo during their college years and how their interpretation of their experience changes and develops. Participants in his study who are juniors or seniors articulated their experiences of the past year and often did so by comparing it to previous years. The new experiences seemed to allow or even encourage students to make new meaning of the experiences of the previous years, and many times in particular the freshman year. This is what I anticipate will also be the case in this study. There is a benefit to talking with students who are juniors or seniors. They are likely to be in a position to be able to make a new and more sophisticated meaning of their first year, by examining where they presently are and comparing it to the previous years. I will not be able to know how they felt about their experience during their first year; that is not my objective. Rather, I want to know how they feel about their first year experience now. It is important to understand more about the program in which the students had participated.

<div align="center">Program Background</div>

The FYRST program at Florida International University was first implemented in 1996. FYRST is a residential learning community designed to provide first year students living on campus with a smooth transition from high school to FIU. Students voluntarily elect to be in this program and agree to a certain level of participation in the housing and university community. In addition, they enroll in a designated FYRST section of the University's required Freshman Experience Class, which is held in the residence hall and taught by a member of the Residential Life staff. A variety of services and activities are

provided to foster a positive living and learning community. This program is similar to others being developed at colleges and universities around the country. The FYRST program seeks to specifically address the student's need for belonging, for involvement, interaction with other students, interaction with faculty and staff, and the acquisition of competencies and resources relevant to their college experience.

Learning Communities Defined

FYRST is an example of one type of learning community. The concept of learning community has been defined in the literature and by professionals in the field in many different ways. Lenning and Ebbers (1999) define learning community as "an intentionally developed community that will promote and maximize learning. For learning communities to be effective, they must emphasize active, focused involvement in learning and collaboration that stimulates and promotes the group's and group members' learning" (p. 8). Other definitions have been subscribed to that emphasize the co-curricular as well as curricular potential of learning communities. Alexander Astin (1985), who has recommended organizing students into learning communities to help them overcome feelings of isolation typical at larger campuses, has defined learning communities in a manner that recognizes that learning occurs in a variety of settings:

> Such communities can be organized along curricular lines, common career interests, avocational interests, residential living areas, and so on. They can be used to build a sense of group identity, cohesiveness, and uniqueness: to encourage continuity, and the integration of diverse curricular and co-curricular experiences; and to counteract the isolation that many students feel. (p. 161)

This broader definition encompassing different aspects of the students' experience and different settings for learning is the one I used as my framework in analyzing and discussing learning communities. Additional literature, which helped to form the context

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for the study, is included in the next chapter. Several theories have also been selected as the framework for analyzing and interpreting the study. These theories relate to college environments and student development, and are presented in more detail in Chapter II.

Organization of the Study

The remainder of the study is divided into several chapters, with each focusing on a different aspect of the study. Chapter II provides a review of the related literature and theoretical framework used for this study. Chapter III describes the methods used to carry out this study. An analysis of the data is provided in Chapter IV. The conclusions and recommendations from this study are presented in Chapter V.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The call for reform in undergraduate education over the past two decades has caused higher education to rethink its approach to student learning in the undergraduate experience. As part of this, student affairs professionals have been called upon to more intentionally contribute to student learning, particularly in collaboration with faculty, on the development of learning communities. The residence halls are being viewed more now as a vehicle for student development and learning, and an ideal forum for the establishment of these learning communities. Various specialized programs, particularly ones for first year students, are being implemented in residence halls with the goal of increasing student success and retention. The literature is growing in terms of the impact of these communities on student performance. This study, however, focused on exploring the experience of the first year students in a residential learning community. Therefore, this chapter will review the literature in several areas related to this study.

First, this review will explore the concept of learning communities from a broad perspective and with a specific focus on residential learning communities. Through an examination of the literature, learning communities will be analyzed from an historical, philosophical and theoretical context. After defining learning communities, I will examine how there has emerged this increased emphasis on student learning and learning communities. Next, a variety of theories and research related to student development and learning will be explored. This information served as an important context for this study. I will also describe the concepts of the first year experience and the residential living

experience, and provide a brief overview of the impacts of these experiences on the overall development of students. In combination, this literature provided an appropriate framework for examining the perspective of students who have experienced their first year of college in a residential learning community.

Learning Communities Defined

The concept of learning community has been defined in the literature and by professionals in the field in many different ways. The lack of consistency stems from differences in opinion about the specificity or breadth with which a learning community should be defined. Lenning and Ebbers (1999) define learning community as "an intentionally developed community that will promote and maximize learning. For learning communities to be effective, they must emphasize active, focused involvement in learning and collaboration that stimulates and promotes the group's and group members' learning" (p. 8).

From a more narrow perspective, a common definition of learning community is offered by Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith (1990):

> Any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses--or actually restructure the material entirely--so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and with teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise. (p. 19)

This definition focuses on the curricular aspect of learning communities, emphasizing collaborative learning within the context of a classroom or a cluster of courses.

Other definitions have been subscribed to that emphasize the co-curricular as well as curricular potential of learning communities. Alexander Astin (1985), who has recommended organizing students into learning communities to help them overcome

feelings of isolation typical at larger campuses, has defined learning communities in a manner that recognizes that learning occurs in a variety of settings:

> Such communities can be organized along curricular lines, common career interests, avocational interests, residential living areas, and so on. They can be used to build a sense of group identity, cohesiveness, and uniqueness; to encourage continuity, and the integration of diverse curricular and co-curricular experiences; and to counteract the isolation that many students feel. (p. 161)

This broader definition encompassing different aspects of the students' experience and different settings for learning, was presented in Chapter I and is the one I used as a framework in this research. Residential learning communities then can be viewed as just one type in this broad category. Such programs are based on the belief that so much of student learning occurs in their daily living (Pascarella, Terenzini, & Blimling, 1994). By creating small communities where students are clustered together as part of some educational program, students will benefit from a learning experience that integrates their in-class and out-of-class activities (Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

Examples of residential learning communities include residential Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs), residential colleges, theme-centered living communities, major-based living communities, and more (Shapiro & Levine). A primary emphasis of many residential learning communities is to assist first year students with their transition to university life (Schroeder, 1994). Often first year students are assigned to live together and benefit from special programs, services, classes, and special staffing patterns to help foster their success (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989).

Background on the Development of Learning Communities

With an understanding of what is meant by learning communities and residential learning communities, it is important to examine how these concepts gained prominence

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in recent years.

Call for Reform of Undergraduate Education

Historically, the American public accepted at face value the claims by colleges and universities about the quality and effectiveness of higher education (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Recently, however, there has been growing cynicism and an increased demand for higher quality undergraduate education. Several critical reports over the last couple of decades have put higher education in a position to place student learning at the top of its agenda. This, in turn, has led to the increased interest in the development of learning communities.

In an open letter to chancellors and presidents, the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land Grant Universities (1997) called on colleges and universities to focus their efforts on improving undergraduate education. The Kellogg Commission also noted that tighter coupling of students' in-class and out-of-class experiences is a key element in efforts to improve undergraduate education. The report articulates three general ideals for our campuses:

> (a)our institutions must become genuine learning communities that support and inspire faculty, staff, and learners of all kinds;
>
> (b) our learning communities should be student-centered, committed to excellence in teaching, and to meeting the legitimate needs of learners wherever they are, whatever they need, and whenever they need it;
>
> (c) our learning communities should emphasize the importance of a healthy learning environment that provides students, faculty, and staff facilities, support, and resources they need to make this vision a reality.

In another critical report, The Wingspread Group on Higher Education in 1993 stated the following:

A disturbing and dangerous mismatch exists between what American society needs of higher education and what it is receiving. Nowhere is the mismatch more dangerous than in the quality of undergraduate preparation....What does our society need from higher education? It needs stronger, more vital forms of community. It needs an informed and involved citizenry. It needs graduates able to assume leadership roles in American life...Above all, it needs a commitment to the idea that all Americans have an opportunity to develop their talents to the fullest. Higher education is not meeting these imperatives. (p. 104)

Speaking specifically in his 1987 study of American higher education about the disconnection between in- and out-of-class learning, Ernest Boyer stated that there existed a great separation, sometimes to the point of isolation, between academic and social life on campus. Boyer said that although colleges like to speak of the campus as community, the reality is that what students are learning in most residence halls today has little connection to the classroom.

The Boyer Commission (1998) report included one recommendation regarding the need for institutions to cultivate a sense of community.

Research universities should foster a community of learners. Large universities must find ways to create a sense of place and to help students develop small communities within a larger whole....the campus must be a purposeful place of learning in which every student feels special connections, as shared rituals play a powerful role in creating the larger university community in which smaller, personalized communities of learners can coalesce....commuters and residential students alike need to know that they are needed and valued members of the community. (pp. 34-35)

These reports all encourage the development of community as a vehicle for student learning, with an emphasis, as Boyer indicates, on developing small groups within the larger whole. Such reports have brought about challenges in higher education today, as institutions strive to meet the public's demand for educational reform and improvement. In response to the pressures, regional

accreditation agencies mandated the creation of institutional assessment plans to

document and provide guidance for improving student learning (Lenning &

Ebbers, 1999). In addition, societal influences and forces have helped develop the

need for learning communities. The argument has been made that in modern

society we have become so alienated and isolated from each other that we have

had to artificially re-create the guise of learning communities (Lenning &

Ebbers).

Toward Collaboration

The development of learning communities has also been driven by the belief that

student affairs and academic affairs need to work more closely together toward a

common goal of student learning. This notion of collaboration is so important because it

is a key tenant of a program such as First Year Residents Succeeding Together (FYRST),

and is also really an example of this research project. There existed collaboration between

the program participants and the researcher to understand and describe the meaning of the

participants' experiences.

This push toward collaboration was highlighted in 1993 when a small group of

higher education leaders convened to examine how student affairs educators could

enhance student learning and personal development. Out of this discussion was presented

a document called *The Student Learning Imperative. The Student Learning Imperative*

(SLI) is intended to stimulate discussion and encourage dialogue about how student

affairs professionals can intentionally create conditions, via services and programs, which

enhance student learning and personal development. It stresses the importance of linking

students' in-class and out-of-class experiences to create seamless learning environments

focused on student learning and academic success. It provides new challenges that the profession needs to address during this transformative time in higher education.

Authors of the SLI point out that too often student affairs has operated as a "functional silo", often seen as highly specialized, compartmentalized, and fragmented units. However, evidence shows that a majority of the important changes that occur during college are probably the cumulative result of a set of interrelated and mutually supporting experiences, in class, and out, sustained over an extended period of time (Pascrella & Terenzini, 1991). Because we know that students learn best from having these varied experiences, the student affairs professionals should seek to create a "seamless" environment, where experiences are bridged by an intentional collaboration between faculty and staff. This document has fueled many institutions to bring together their faculty and staff in collaboration for the development of learning communities or other initiatives.

The notion of collaboration was also emphasized in The Powerful Partnerships Report (1998), a joint report from the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE), the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA). The report calls on student affairs professionals to take the initiative to connect to each other and to academic units with the goal of developing programs that purposefully incorporate and identify learning contributions, in an effort to help students view their education holistically and to participate fully in the life of the institution and the community. While this report focuses on collaboration among faculty and student affairs, it certainly is essential that students are part of

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the collaboration in the learning process.

The need for collaboration is further underscored by the research that highlights student gains when they have a more integrated experience. Terenzini and Pascarella (1994) conducted a meta-analysis of over 2,600 books, book chapters, monographs, journal articles, technical reports, research reports, and conference papers produced over the last two decades. From this they concluded that the greatest impact on student learning may stem from the students' total level of campus engagement, particularly when academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular involvements are mutually supporting and relevant to a particular educational outcome.

The creation of learning environments is a university wide responsibility, and one in which student affairs can play a significant role, by engaging in partnership with the academicians of the institution. It is through this partnership that staff can devise ways to deliver undergraduate education, that are as comprehensive and integrated as the ways students actually learn (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1994).

Bloland, Stamatakos and Rogers (1996) discuss how Student Affairs professionals must be able to articulate the meaning of student learning. Historically, the terms learning and development have sometimes been used interchangeably. Instead, they argue, learning should be viewed as "primarily a process of gaining knowledge and/or understanding by study, instruction, or experience-that is, the process of increasing the complexity of one's capacity to process information." Development, in contrast the authors say, is an "outcome of learning, the result of gaining knowledge and understanding." The hallmarks of a college educated person then, according to those proposed in the *Student Learning Imperative* for example, are seen as the results of the

learning that occurs during the college years. The key to learning in the out-of-classroom setting is for student affairs professionals to first identify as many of the "unintentional" opportunities for learning that occur. Then, these opportunities need to be structured or facilitated in such a way that students become intentional in their involvement in these activities. The authors conclude that the creation of an integrated learning environment necessitates the collaboration of student affairs professionals, faculty members, and students to achieve educational outcomes.

Interestingly, in reading about this notion of collaboration that has emerged over the last decade or so, one finds in the literature that this desire for the two cultures of faculty and student affairs to work together and the goal of educating the total student are not really new concepts. In a report dating back to 1945, the American Council on Education (ACE) emphasized the importance of the student's well-being, both in and out of the classroom, on the effectiveness of education. They cautioned that students dealing with personal issues or those in environments that don't support their need to study, are not likely to do as well in the classroom. Clearly the call for greater collaboration is widespread. Collaboration is desired between student affairs and academic affairs, in order to provide the best educational experiences for students. Similarly, the whole notion of learning communities and collaborative learning calls for the interaction between the student and the faculty and among the students themselves. These collaborative environments are valued as important vehicles for enhancing student learning.

It appears that recent reports are not suggesting anything substantially different, but it is a clear call for rededication to the mission and values of college student affairs.

Historical Roots

This rededication to student learning has helped bring about the "learning community movement", and in particular the emphasis on the development of linking the living experience to the curriculum, through the residential learning communities. However, it is important to note that although these reports and forces have really caused a resurgence and redefinition of the notion of learning communities, learning communities as a concept actually has strong roots in the history of higher education. Residential learning communities, and particularly efforts to orient first year students during their transition to university life, can also be traced back in history.

The term "learning community" is rooted in the traditions of the colonial colleges. Coye (1997) states that "The first colleges in America were places that deliberately sought to create a community of scholars with common values. In those days, the focus on community and the moral character of students was as important a part of the college years as academic work" (p. 25). Experimental colleges popular in the 1960s used the concept of learning communities, as did residential colleges, modeled after the Oxford and Cambridge systems (Lenning & Ebbers). At institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge, residence halls were at the heart of the educational enterprise and they were designed to bring the faculty and students together in a common life, which strived to be both intellectual and moral (Brubacher & Rudy, 1968). Because a primary objective of the American colleges was to prepare students for civic and religious leadership, faculty were involved in all aspects of students' life. There were not distinctions made between

students' in-class and out-of-class learning activities. Faculty members viewed themselves as responsible for the students' total education (Schroeder & Mable). The early work of John Dewey, Alexander Meikeljohn, and Joseph Tussman had a profound influence on what we now know as learning communities (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Their focus was on liberal teaching and their educational plans promoted connected knowledge as opposed to unrelated or unconnected knowledge. During this significant period of change in undergraduate education, Dewey insisted that education and experience were the same thing. This concept promoted bringing disciplines together in new ways, a concept that is part of what we now know as learning communities.

During the post-Civil War period, when the German model of education was adopted, this integrated approach to learning was lessened. Faculty became more focused on research and the residence halls gradually were viewed more as a place to live and less as a place to learn. During the 1960s with greater emphasis being placed on the development of the whole students, with the formation of educational preparation programs for student affairs administrators, and a rise in student activism, residence hall administrators were being replaced with residence educators, individuals committed to providing educational experiences in the students' living environment (Schroeder & Mable, 1994). As access for students to attend college increased and more residence halls were being built, some institutions began to get creative with the style of living environments being developed (Winston & Anchors, 1993). On some campuses, this meant moving from single-sex housing to co-educational housing, and on some campuses, the

development of living-learning centers and co-op housing was occurring.

Programmatic changes also reflected an emphasis on the whole student. As a result, living-learning communities in residence halls were developed at institutions such as the University of Nebraska, Michigan State University, Stanford University and others (Schroeder & Mable, 1994). Other programmatic developments included an emphasis on providing special services for first year students. While institutions have always sought to help freshmen students, the concept of the "Freshman Year Experience" at the University of South Carolina really took shape in the 1970s and began to receive national, then international, attention in the 1980s (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). This concept, as supported by a theoretical framework to be discussed later in this chapter, has had a significant impact on the development of first year residential learning communities. In general, the concept advocates that because the most critical time for first year students is in the first six weeks of their freshmen year, it is advisable to "front-load" services to maximize student success (Upcraft & Gardner). This gave way to the establishment of first-year learning communities, now gaining in popularity at institutions around the country.

A Changing Philosophy of Knowledge

Learning communities are based on the concept of collaborative learning (Cross, 1998). Collaborative learning has become associated with a distinctive epistemology for learning communities, strongly advocated by Kenneth Bruffee. Bruffee (1999) asserts that knowledge is socially constructed rather than discovered. "We construct and maintain knowledge," Bruffee says, "not by examining the world, but by negotiation with

one another in communities of knowledgeable peers" (p. 9). Further, "Knowledge…is not universal and absolute. It is local and historically changing. We construct it and reconstruct it, time after time, and build it up in layers" (p. 222). If one subscribes to this belief about knowledge, Cross says, cooperative learning is essential, as the "fundamental assumption of constructivism is that knowledge is actively built by learners as they shape and build mental frameworks to make sense of their environments" (p. 5). Learning communities foster this social construction, as faculty and students are called to work together interdependently.

Wenger (1998) advances social theory of learning by proposing that the primary focus of learning should be on social participation. Participation, he says, refers:

> not just to local events of engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities…. Such participation shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do. (p. 4)

Another sign of a strong shift in our view of how knowledge is generated and of its implications for learning can be found in research work on people of ethnic minorities and women. Many researchers (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Clinchy, 1994) have found that women and people of ethnic minorities display "ways of knowing" that are different from the traditional male model that has dominated teaching for so many years. The "male model" is often characterized by "separate knowing"--learning in a detached and objective manner, most closely aligned to the scientific method (Cross, 1998). Understanding college students' intellectual development is at the heart of effective educational practice. Assumptions about how students know have often been based in traditional educational practices and philosophies

(Baxter Magolda). Baxter Magolda offers three principles that she believes promote student voice in curricular and co-curricular life: a) validating the student as a knower, b) situating learning in their own experience, and c) viewing learning as constructing meaning with others. These notions too cause educators to rethink the traditional delivery of education and help form an argument for the utility and effectiveness of learning communities.

The business literature also offers another indication of the pervasiveness of a changing perspective on the origins of knowledge. Peter Senge (1990), in his book *The Fifth Discipline*, calls for:

> a shift of mind--from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connected to the world, from seeing problems as caused by someone or something 'out there' to seeing how our own actions create the problems we experience. A learning organization is a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality. And how they can change it" (pp. 12-13).

This represents the shift from gaining knowledge that is "out there" to creating knowledge that lies within human interchange. Learning communities, and particularly residential learning communities, are in essence learning organizations, as Senge calls them, connecting students with one another for the purpose of cooperative learning.

<center>Theoretical Framework for Study (Developmental Theory)</center>

The body of theory that provided the framework for this study, and is commonly referred to in the study and development of learning communities, deals with the personal and intellectual development of students. Theory and research remind us that student behavior is not just a matter of chance and random effect. In fact, many facets of student behavior can be measured, observed, explained, generalized, and to some extent, predicted (Strange & King, 1990). This allows strategies to be developed to effectively

address the goal of intentional student development. Developmentalists, much like social constructionists, also are interactionists, holding that the individual and the environment interact in a continuous dialogue. It is through this interaction, developmentalists believe, that students are able to attain higher levels of intellectual and personal development (Cross, 1998). The specific theories used as the framework are outlined in the following sections and include intellectual development theory, psychosocial development theory, environmental impact theory, and student involvement theory. Table 1 provides a summary of these theories.

Intellectual Development

These cognitive-structural theories, rooted in the work of Piaget, examine the process of intellectual development during the college years (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). One type of theory the researcher used in the interpretation of this study examines how people think, reason and make meaning of their experiences.

One theorist, William Perry, proposes positions of intellectual development for college students (Perry, 1968), suggesting that students advance through levels of intellectual development in a logical order. These levels are internal to the student. Perry refers to these as forms, a sort of structure that shape how people view their experiences. Perry's scheme starts with the level of dualism, where things are absolute, and students assume there is a right answer to every question. They see the world in black and white, right and wrong, good and bad. Traditional education seems to foster this position, where students always seek the answer from authority. They rely upon their teacher, a parent, or whomever they view as an authority to have the "right" answer. They do not have a lot of tolerance for varying viewpoints or multiple perspectives. Obviously this can be

Table 1

Summary of Theoretical Framework Used for Analysis of Study

Theorist	Theory Type	Issue Studied	General Findings	Application to Learning Communities Concept
Perry	Intellectual Development	How people think, reason and make meaning of their experiences	Students move through stages of intellectual development. Early on, things are seen as dualistic and absolute (right versus wrong). In more advanced positions, students see that some opinions are better than others and truth is seen as contextual.	In learning communities, the teacher must not be looked to as the person with the "right" answers; rather, they help facilitate learning in a collaborative environment, such that students are challenged to reach their own understanding.
Chickering	Psychosocial Development	How traditional aged students develop in the emotional, interpersonal, ethical and intellectual dimensions	Students move through "vectors", leading to greater complexity, as they face developmental tasks in their life that lead to the formation of their identity. Vectors are spiral like, rather than a straight line, as students move through them at different rates and the vectors can interact with each other.	In learning communities, the organization of programs needs to be designed systematically to enhance opportunities for students to move through these vectors and begin to exam issues related to their own identity development.
Lewin	Environmental Impact	The relationship between students and their campus environment	$B=f(P \times E)$, where B, the behavior, is the function (f) of the organism or person (P) interacting with the environment (E).	In learning communities, the environment should be developed to create conditions that will inspire students to be involved in learning activities.
Astin	Involvement	How involvement influences student learning	Learning, academic performance, and retention are positively associated with academic involvement, and involvement with faculty, students, and peer groups.	In learning communities, the involvement with peers, faculty and the learning process must be fostered.

challenging in an educational environment, where, often, varying perspectives are sought out and encouraged. Further, mid-levels of Perry's theme lead to areas where students can tolerate "gray" areas, where they see that authorities often disagree. At the more advanced positions, students see that some opinions are better than others are and that truth is contextual (Perry, 1968). They realize that they must find integrity for themselves by identifying the things that are important and central to their sense of self. Cross points out that developmentalists support the idea that in learning communities, "the teacher must not be looked to as the person with the right answers; rather, the task of education is to help students think through the conflicts that exist in a relativistic world and reach their own understanding." (p. 9)

Psychosocial Theory

Psychosocial development is a term that is used to describe a view of development that focuses on the whole person as opposed to cognitive components only (Miller & Winston, 1990). This differs from intellectual development theories such as Perry, in that other aspects of the person are taken into account. Psychosocial development is concerned with personal, psychologically oriented aspects of self and the relationships that exist between the self and society (Miller & Winston).

Student development is further understood when one views the work of Chickering. Chickering's theory has been widely used by student affairs professionals since its introduction in 1969 (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Chickering's seven vectors, as presented in his revised theory (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), provide a framework for viewing how traditionally aged college students develop in the emotional, interpersonal, ethical, and intellectual dimensions. The direction of the different vectors is

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not to be viewed as a straight line, but rather as a spiral or steps (Chickering & Reisser).

Chickering called these vectors "major highways for journeying toward individuation--

the discovery and refinement of one's unique way of being--and also toward communion

with other individuals and groups, including the larger national and global society"

(Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 35). Students move through these vectors, and while they

are not viewed to be rigidly sequential, they do build on each other, leading to greater

complexity, stability and integration as the issues related to each vector are addressed by

the individual student (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). The seven vectors,

according to Chickering & Reisser, are outlined as follows:

1. Developing Competence: In this vector, students must learn to develop
   intellectual skills, interpersonal competence and physical skills essential for
   further development. Overall, students need to develop confidence that they
   have the skills or sense of competence to cope with what comes their way and
   to successfully achieve whatever they set out to do.

2. Managing Emotions: In this vector, students develop the ability to recognize
   and accept feelings, as well as appropriate ways for expressing and controlling
   emotions.

3. Moving through Autonomy Toward Interdependence: In this vector, students
   become more independent emotionally, with less need for continual
   reassurance or approval. They also become more aware of interdependence, or
   the sense of connectedness with others.

4. Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships: This vector addresses the
   idea that one's relationships with others, contributes significantly to the

development of a sense of self. The tasks associated with this vector include more tolerance and appreciation of differences, and relationships characterized by greater trust, independence, and individuality.

5. Establishing Identity: In this vector, students develop a comfort with themselves. They are more at ease with their body and appearance, as well as with gender and sexual orientation, their cultural heritage, and their roles and lifestyle.

6. Developing Purpose: In this vector, students begin to develop clear vocational goals and make commitments to their interests, regardless of any opposition that they may face.

7. Developing Integrity: This vector includes three stages: humanizing values, personalizing values, and developing congruence. Students progress from a literal view of values that is often absolute in nature, to a more relative view. They also examine their own beliefs and ultimately develop their own personal set of values, while still respecting the values of others. Finally, students begin to behave in ways such that their actions are congruent with their personal values.

Numerous other theories exist that describe the development of students. More recent research has focused on the experiences of women, people of ethnic minorities and homosexuals (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). The work of Perry and Chickering has been described in this review, as these theories were used as a framework for the analysis in describing the experience of the student participants. These theories also helped guide the researcher in the development of the interview questions.

Environmental Impact Theory

The next theory that served as a reference for interpretation of this study is environmental impact theory. This theory contrasts the previously mentioned intellectual and psychosocial works of Perry and Chickering, in that the emphasis is not as much on sequential development phases of the person, but rather the environment in which learning is to occur and the student's interaction with the environment. The residence hall environment can have a profound impact on a student's first year experience and ultimately their college career (Schroeder & Mable, 1994). There are many ecological perspectives and theories that serve as a framework in thinking about the freshmen year and can also serve as a guide to interventions to enhance the success of first year students (Banning, 1989). Banning explains that ecology, in its generic form, refers to "the study of the relations between organizations and their environment. Campus ecology then is the relationship between students and their campus environment" (p. 53). Often the early work of Lewin (1936) is cited, in particular his formula B=f (Px E), where B, the behavior, is the function (f) of the organism or person (P) interacting with the environment (E). Some consider this equation or concept to be the cornerstone on which our understanding of student development is based (Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). They explain:

> To understand why people behave as they do and to facilitate their development, such factors as their characteristics, background, and developmental level must be examined. Factors related to the environment in which the person is living, studying, or working must also be explored. Most important, the interaction of those variables must be considered; not every person will experience an environment in the same way. (p. 25)

Therefore, it is important that educators be able to create conditions and

environments that inspire students to be involved in activities, both in and out of the classroom, that will enhance their educational experience. In its broadest sense, the environment encompasses everything that happens to a student during the course of an educational program that might conceivably influence the outcomes under consideration (Astin, 1993). In other work studying college students and their environments, Astin found several environmental factors that enhance educational outcomes. They include (a) student-to-student interaction, (b) student-to-faculty interaction, (c) a faculty that is very student oriented, (d) discussion on racial/ethical issues with other students, (e) socializing with other students, (f) a student body that has high socioeconomic status (g) an institutional emphasis on diversity, (h) a faculty that is positive about the general education program, (i) and a student body that values altruism and social activism. It is important that educators are aware of these factors and can assess their presence in current learning environments.

Student Involvement Theory

The theories explored thus far focused on the development of the intellectual and psychosocial dimensions of the student, and the impact of the environment on student learning. The fourth and final theory used as a framework for this research has to do with the student's involvement in the learning environment. Of the previous theories discussed, it is more similar to the environmental impact theory, in that the student involvement theory also is concerned with how the student's interaction with the environment influences the growth of the student.

The degree to which a student participates in their environment is a critical issue in their development. The "involvement model" provides theoretical and conceptual

reasons why student learning communities should impact college students positively. As numerous researchers have pointed out (Astin, 1984; Astin, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980), the greater students' involvement or integration in the life of the college, the greater the likelihood they will persist. We also know that involvement influences learning (Astin, 1984; 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Generally speaking, the greater the students' involvement in the life of the college, the greater their acquisition of knowledge and development of skills (Tinto, 1997a). Much literature indicates that involvement outside of the classroom contributes positively to student success. In regard to his findings from a study of more than 20,000 students, 25,000 faculty members and 200 institutions, Astin (1993) stated,

> The review once again underscores the tremendous potential that student involvement has for enhancing most aspects of the undergraduate student's cognitive and affective development. Learning, academic performance, and retention are positively associated with academic involvement, involvement with faculty, and involvement with student peer groups. (p. 394).

Recent studies on learning communities (Johnson & Romanoff, 1999; Romanoff, 2000; Tinto, Love & Russo, 1993; Zeller, 1996) have shown that students' participation in these learning communities has led to their greater involvement in the campus community.

Involvement with other students, faculty and staff is also a key goal of learning communities. In his national study of undergraduate education, Astin (1993) concluded from the many empirical findings from his research that the student's peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years. The second most potent source is the relationship that exists between students and faculty. Having a faculty that is

highly student-oriented contributes significantly to student success and retention. This growing volume of evidence of the benefits of student involvement and student-faculty interaction (Astin, 1996) upon student learning, supports the emphasis being placed upon creating "seamless" learning environments (Kuh, 1996) to educate the whole student through greater collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs.

<div align="center">The "Freshman Experience"</div>

While the previous four areas served as the theoretical framework in the interpretation of this study, other literature exists that provided a framework for understanding the context of the FYRST Program. One area of this literature has to do specifically with first year students. It is no surprise that the concept of learning communities has earned the endorsement of proponents of first year student success programs, such as John Gardner (1999):

> If I were to be asked what structural and pedagogical innovation currently being developed in American higher education may hold the greatest promise for improving first-year student academic performance and retention, I can now argue that it may well be the learning community. (p.v.)

Gardner has been instrumental in the development of the concept now known as the "freshman experience" or "first year experience." Because of evidence that student success is largely determined by experiences during the freshman year (Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985), colleges and universities are beginning to "frontload" the services, resources and attention given to first year students, in order to enhance their opportunities for success. Also driving the desire to develop specific programs (learning communities, for example) for new students is the body of success and retention theories. There is a belief, based on research, that many students drop out of college in their first year, not

because of poor academic performance, but because they have difficulty adjusting to the campus culture (Thompson, Samiratedu, & Rafter, 1993). Studies of more than 500 postsecondary institutions suggest that if a campus implements programs and services designed to meet students' needs, it can reduce its dropout rate by one-third. If students make it through the first year successfully, the chances they will persist improve considerably. Data from individual institutions indicates that attrition generally decreases by almost 50 percent with each passing year of a student's education (Levitz & Noel, 1989). Clearly then, institutions that are able to improve performance in the first year are most likely to boost the freshman-to-graduate retention rates. Studies on residential learning communities have shown increases in student retention and GPA (Minor, 1997; Tinto, Love, & Russo, 1993).

Upcraft and Gardner (1989) say freshmen succeed when they make progress toward fulfilling a set of educational and personal goals. These goals, in fact, are fairly consistent with what the previously mentioned theorists say about how students develop, and how the environment and their involvement in the environment, shapes their learning experiences. The goals Upcraft and Gardner offer include the development of academic and intellectual competence, integrity, and an integrated philosophy of life; the establishment of interpersonal relationships; personal health and wellness goals; and career lifestyle goals. These goals serve as a basis for many first year programs and are worthy of further examination. Developing academic and intellectual competence has to do with acquiring those skills necessary to succeed academically (Upcraft & Gardner). Most freshmen come to college expecting to prepare for a career by getting good grades and graduating, but they soon find out that they can learn how to learn, how to

synthesize, integrate, criticize and analyze what they are learning in the classroom.

Establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships is a critical concern for first year students. Freshmen express as much, perhaps even more concern about this as they do about flunking out of college (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). They need to develop a solid support system with fellow students, and to engage in activities of interest that require strong interpersonal skills. They also may find themselves relating, for the first time, to people who are different from them (Upcraft & Gardner).

Developing Identity is similar to what Chickering's theory addresses. Upcraft and Gardner (1989) say that first year students must make some progress toward understanding and defining themselves more clearly, as they often are faced with struggles related to their identity during their first year.

Deciding on a career and lifestyle, or at least making progress toward this decision, is critical as first year students examine majors (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). Quite often students change their majors, while others sometimes drop out due to career indecision.

Maintaining personal health and wellness, according to Upcraft and Gardner, is critical during the student's first year, in order to cope with the increased stress college brings. Freshmen become more aware of the impact of college on their well-being and should begin to see health and wellness as an active rather than a reactive process.

Developing an integrated philosophy of life also relates to one of Chickering's vectors and addresses the need for first year students to begin to discover their values and beliefs so that there is a consistency between their actions and their beliefs (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989).

Upcraft and Gardner (1989) have proposed that freshmen success is enhanced by a campus climate that (a) promotes student-to-student interaction, (b) promotes faculty-student interaction, (c) offers on-campus, residential living, and (d) offers extracurricular opportunities. It should be noted that these factors seem consistent with many ecological theories, such as Lewin's (1936), which suggests that one's behavior is a function of the organism or person interacting with the environment. The college environment is a major factor contributing to the impact of student learning. Nowhere is this more important than in the student's initial transition to the university environment.

The Residential Experience

Literature that examines the residential experience was also used as a framework for this study. In particular, this section will explore the benefits of a residential experience, the concept of peer influence, the notion of community development and programming in a residential setting, and the impacts of intentional residential environments.

Benefits

It is important to examine a body of literature that addresses specifically the influence of the residential experience. This can provide the foundation for understanding the added value to a learning community when students are residing together.

Almost three decades ago, Astin (1973) found that students living in residence halls were less likely than commuters to drop out and more likely to attain a baccalaureate degree in four years. Chickering (1974) conducted a study involving nearly 170,000 students in one analysis and 5,400 in another. He concluded that students living in residence halls exceeded the learning and personal development predicted, were more

involved in academic and extracurricular activities and earned higher grade point averages than those students not living in residence halls. Astin (1977) found that the most important characteristic associated with finishing college was living in a residence hall.

A growing body of research indicates that students' interpersonal interactions with peers and faculty members shape a number of dimensions of cognitive growth (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) and that residence halls clearly afford more opportunities than other living arrangements for students to interact with peers and faculty members. Pascarella, Terenzini, and Blimling (1994) explained a premise about why the residence hall setting fosters growth:

> In the case of college residences, the premise is that residential living creates a social-psychological environment for students that is qualitatively different from that experienced by those who live at home or elsewhere off campus and commute to college. Simply put, this perspective hypothesizes that living on campus will maximize opportunities for social, cultural, and extracurricular involvement, and this increased involvement will account for residential living's impact on various indices of student development. The weight of evidence clearly supports this set of interrelated propositions. (p. 25)

Pascarella, Terenzini, and Blimling (1994) offer the following summary after their review of numerous studies that looked at the benefits of residential living. Compared to their counterparts who live at home and commute to college, students living in college residence halls:

1. Participate in a greater number of extracurricular, social and cultural events on campus.

2. Interact more frequently with faculty and peers in informal settings.

3. Are significantly more satisfied with college and are more positive about the

social and interpersonal environment of their campus.

4. Are more likely to persist and graduate from college.

5. Show significantly greater positive gains in such areas of psychological development as autonomy and inner-directedness, intellectual orientation, and self-concept .

6. Demonstrate significantly greater increases in aesthetic, cultural, and intellectual values, social and political liberalism, and secularism.

These studies all demonstrate the benefits of the residential experience, highlighting how students can gain academically and personally. This information is important when considering the added value of a learning community that also includes students residing with one another.

Peer Influence

The concept of peer influence has been addressed in some of the previously mentioned studies. It is important to examine the notion of peer influence within the residential experience. The peer group influence is even more intensified in the residential setting. One might reference Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which uses principles of how students learn in a social environment (i.e. residence halls). One of the central principles is his concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is seen as the difference between what a student can do alone and that which she or he can do in collaboration with more knowledgeable peers (Sanchez, 1999).

According to Upcraft & Gardner (1989):

Peer groups establish norms and provide behavior guidelines that are enforced through direct rewards and punishments. As a result, students, particularly new students, transfer some of the control over themselves to the group and become

subject to its influence. This influence has pervasive effect on students' academic and personal lives, particularly in residence halls. (p.10)

Having a peer culture that values academic achievement and social integration is critical then to maximizing the developmental impact of the living unit (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Intentionally planned residential learning communities can foster this type of peer culture. Evidence indicates that living on campus, versus commuting to campus, facilitates integration into the campus community, including the network of peers (Pascarella & Terenzini). The influence of peers is cited again later by Pascarella, Terenzini, and Blimling (1994). In reviewing several studies that examined the effects of living-learning centers on students, they concluded that "the impact of structural residence arrangements such as living-learning centers are indirect, being mediated by peer and faculty interactions they foster and that, in turn, exert strong, direct influences on various dimensions of student growth and development during college ." (p. 34) Thus, the peer interaction fostered in a residential experience, such as FYRST, can contribute positively to the development of students, in ways proposed by the work of theorists such as Perry and Chickering.

Community Development and Programming

Residence life professionals have long focused on the development of community as a vehicle for developing cohesive, integrated and effective living environments. Only recently has there been more of a shift to thinking about community development as a means to a greater end of student learning and development (Minor, 1999). Initially much of the emphasis was on how a community environment helps students with their transition. Schlossberg (1989) and others have discussed how important it is for an

individual to feel that he or she "matters" and the negative impact when this is absent. The benefits of community, we now know, are greater than just assisting the individual student with adjustment. A well planned community, one that is tied into the institution's academic mission, can have a positive influence on a student's academic achievement and personal development in many different dimensions (Minor). Living in a residence hall alone does not necessarily ensure these positive benefits. Small student groupings structured around students' academic major, common interests, or service interest help to break down student isolation and anonymity, and increases the likelihood that students will engage in academic work that ultimately leads to greater student learning (Kuh, Douglas, Lund, & Ramin-Gyurnek, 1994). They add that smaller communities form more easily for students living in the residence halls.

Communities do not form on their own. Many authors have offered lists of necessary elements or characteristics for effective communities. Boyer (1990) offered six fundamental characteristics of a true community: caring, just, open, purposeful, disciplined, and celebrative. Minor (1999) offers the following set of essential elements: (a) common purpose and core values; (b) membership and relationships; (c) proximity, territory, and boundaries; (d) shared standards and expectations; (e) communication and decision-making; (f) active involvement in shared experiences; (g) customs, traditions, and celebrations; and (h) identity and commitment. To achieve a sense of community, Minor adds, it is important for students to understand these elements, but also to understand how the elements and the individuals all interrelate. This, he says, is important so that students understand their place in larger communities as well (the residence hall community, the university community, the greater community, etc.)

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The benefits of the on-campus experience is further enhanced when residence hall communities become purposeful and intentional educational environments. Programming is one way this is achieved. The literature shows that "halls with the strongest impacts on cognitive development and persistence are typically the result of purposeful, programmatic efforts to integrate students' intellectual and social lives during college" (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1994, p. 32). Educational initiatives must be mission driven and reflect the values and objectives of effective undergraduate education (Schroeder & Mable, 1994). They propose

> Residence halls can promulgate educationally purposeful activities by developing an explicit curriculum. Such a curriculum would include creating learning communities that directly support the academic mission of the institution, enhancing an appreciation of cultural and racial diversity, developing civic leadership skills, providing opportunities to explore academic, career, and leisure opportunities, and fostering cultural and artistic sensibilities. (Schroeder & Mable, p. 17)

Hart (1996) suggests that residence hall programs should:

1. Support and assist the student in understanding and adjusting to the academic opportunities and expectations of the institution.

2. Focus on academics and support intellectual pursuits.

3. Encourage students to seek needed academic information and improve their academic performance skills.

4. Involve faculty, staff and their families in ways that encourage students to know them personally and seek their advice and support freely. (p. 36)

Learning communities that are well grounded in these concepts of community and programming benefit from maximizing opportunities for student development and learning in the residential setting. This requires a well-planned, intentional experience.

The literature is full of information that demonstrates the impacts realized when residential communities are purposeful and educational. "Residential living can be a powerful force in shaping both the essential character and the developmental impact of an individual's college experience" (Pascarella, Terenzini, & Blimling , 1994, p. 39). Pascarella, Terenzini, and Blimling reached several conclusions about the influence on special communities (referred to as living-learning centers) on students compared with those living in more conventional residence halls. These findings were based on the combined results of two studies. The first was a study conducted by Pascarella and Terenzini in 1991, synthesizing over 2,600 studies done on the impact of college on students. The authors compared student gains among those who lived in residence halls as compared to those who commuted. The second study done by Blimling in 1993 looked at the impact of college residence halls on different outcomes. The conclusions summarized from these two studies about students residing in living-learning centers include the following:

1. They report a higher quality social climate, engage in more informal contact with faculty and report a more intellectual atmosphere in their residence arrangement.
2. They perform better academically.
3. They are more likely to persist in college. (p. 40)

These findings are certainly important and relevant to this study in that they provide some insight into the impact of these programs on students' success. However, what they do not provide is an insight into how students view the experience and make meaning of their involvement in a first year residential learning community. The literature in this area is lacking. The descriptive studies that have been done have been

primarily the subjects of other dissertation research. Henscheid (1996) examined the implementation process of learning communities and Woods (1999) studied the conditions that foster academic interaction in a residential learning community. There is a lack of information focusing solely on the student experience, particularly from the perspective of students.

The literature presented in Chapter II served as the framework for this study. The literature provided both a contextual framework and a theoretical framework. That is, it helped to place the research problem in the context of history, of higher education and of the values inherent in student affairs work and the residential experience. The theories served as a guide in planning for the interviews and later interpreting the data. Chapter III will provide an overview of the research design and methods that were used, and further explain why this type of research is so important.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

The literature and theory presented in the previous chapter provided the framework for the study. This chapter will outline the way in which the study was carried out. The purpose of this research was to develop an understanding of what participation in a first year residential learning community means to students 2-3 years after their involvement in the program. The inquiry was qualitative in nature. The case study included research conducted with 10 former participants in the First Year Residents Succeeding Together (FYRST) Program who, at the time of the study, were juniors or seniors at Florida International University (FIU). Through two semi-structured interviews, they were asked to describe and explain their personal thoughts, beliefs, experiences, and reflections of their first year in order to gain an understanding of how the program helped shape their overall experience at FIU. The researcher sought to understand how the participants perceived the different aspects of the program, such as social, academic or programmatic, were influential in their experience.

The questions that guided this research were: (a) What did students most and least enjoy about being a part of the FYRST program?, (b) How did the experience of the program compare to the expectations they had of the program?, (c) How do they feel involvement in the FYRST program impacted their first year experience?, (d) Which specific FYRST events or activities do they feel helped shape their first year?, (e) How do they feel involvement in the FYRST program impacted their experience at FIU? and (f) How have their feelings about the program changed since they were a first year student?

Qualitative Inquiry

This study used qualitative inquiry methods. Qualitative research, by definition, is concerned more with understanding than with causes (Patton, 1991). This study attempted to bring meaning to the unique and complex experiences of a group of first year college students. Qualitative research allowed me as the researcher to explore the topic in a manner that provided the opportunity to gather a detailed view of the topic. As Creswell (1998) describes, this detailed view is essential when, "The wide-angle lens or the distant panoramic shot will not suffice to present answers to the problem, or the close-up view does not exist" (p. 17). In this case, working in conjunction with the students being studied and obtaining rich descriptions, was essential in order for me to gain an understanding of how they make meaning of their experiences in a first year residential learning community. A broader view of the students' perspectives on their first year experience simply does not exist. It must be gathered in a detailed view, obtained best through qualitative inquiry.

The Case Study Method

This study used a case study method. A case study is an exploration of a "bounded system" or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context. This system is bounded by time and place, and it is the case being studied--a program, an event, an activity or individuals (Creswell, 1998). In this research, the case is made up of participants in the FYRST program at Florida International University during the academic years of 1997-98 and 1998-99.

The issue being studied in this research is the transition of first year college

students and their subsequent acclimation to the university. This fits in with Creswell's (1998) description of qualitative research as,

> an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting. (p. 4)

Qualitative Assumptions

The qualitative inquiry is approached by researchers with a certain paradigm or worldview, a basic set of beliefs or assumptions that guide their inquiries. Understanding these assumptions is important to understanding my approach as a qualitative researcher in this study.

According to Creswell (1998), these assumptions are related to the nature of reality (the ontology issue), the relationship of the researcher to that being researched (the epistemological issue), the role of values in a study (the axiological issue), and the process of research (the methodological issue). The ontological issue addresses the nature of reality for the qualitative researcher. The assumption is that reality is subjective and multiple realities exist, as is evident by the varied views offered by the participants, the researcher and the reader of the study. The researcher then must report these realities and rely on the voices and interpretations, often reporting divergent views within the same study.

In this study, I was able to gain multiple views; each of the students had a unique experience and perspective, based on how they interacted in the environment with their peers, and how they formed meaning of their experience. That is, their different views were based on how they have socially constructed their experience. In addition, my view

as a researcher, the reality I create, ultimately influenced me in how I interpreted the experiences of students and the results of the study.

The epistemological assumption reinforces the role of the researcher to that being researched. I interacted with my participants through the interview process. Because of my understanding of the FYRST program and my familiarity with developmental theory, the interviews served as a form of collaboration, as ideas and thoughts were exchanged, in order for me to ultimately best describe the experience of participants. My experience and knowledge aided me in this collaborative process, as I was able to understand what they were talking about and then ask meaningful questions based on my own knowledge and understanding of the program.

The axiological assumption refers to the role of values in qualitative research. My background and beliefs mean I brought biases to this study. I will discuss these in more detail later, but it is important to know that in a qualitative study, the researcher openly admits the value-laden nature of the study and reports the experiences and biases that he or she brings to the experience (Creswell, 1998).

The rhetorical assumption refers to the language used by the researcher (Creswell, 1998). In qualitative work, the researcher uses specific terms and a personal and literary narrative in the study. Definitions and terms evolve during the study and as themes emerge. There are few set definitions established in advance. The definitions or themes I've used emerged as I was analyzing my data. I selected words, such as community, balance, and self-reliance to capture the essence of the experience I was describing. Some of the words came from the descriptions used by participants and other words I selected during the analysis process. I tested out many of these words through the member

checking process, which I will describe in more detail later.

The methodological assumption refers to the process of the research. In a qualitative methodology, the process is generally inductive in nature (Creswell, 1998). Rather than identifying specific categories or themes in advance, I allowed themes to emerge as I worked with my participants.

Rationale for Using Qualitative Inquiry

This study was well suited to a qualitative design for several reasons. The nature of the study is such that the participants being studied played a critical role in this research. Their varied experiences and multiple realities were used to enable a greater understanding of the meaning of their experience as first year college students, than any singular perspective would provide. As a researcher and as a student affairs professional, my philosophical perspective on first year students and my involvement in working with the FYRST program provided a framework of assumptions, understandings and biases that could not be set aside. Conversely, I used this framework to enhance and contribute to my understanding of the realities of the students' experiences. My experiences allowed me as the researcher to help interpret their multiple realities. The qualitative methodology is also appropriate given the fact that little research exists that allows us to explain and define the experiences of students in a first year learning community. My research approach provided the means for inductively developing this meaning.

I believe the context of this study, a college campus, lends itself well to a qualitative study. Manning (1992) argues that campus cultures have been shown to be a rich arena for educational research. The case study method in particular can "portray a campus in depth in such a way that the reader gets a feel for what it was like to be there,

to experience the campus as a student might, and to gain insight into the culture" (p. 45). While I was not a participant in the FYRST program, my hope was to gain rich descriptions from my participants that would allow my reader to feel as if they could understand the experience of being in the FYRST program. Through an open and trusting relationship between myself and the respondents, I was able to gain a "slice of life", as Manning refers to it. As Caple (1991) adds, the qualitative methodology can provide "another window that can illuminate aspects of the human experience that may be inaccessible through quantitative methods" (p. 387). In this research, the qualitative method was selected to illuminate the experience of first year college students in the FYRST program. This experience could not be similarly described through quantitative methods.

<center>Role of the Researcher</center>

Particularly in qualitative research, the researcher is a tool for interpretation. My role was to collect and analyze data. As Creswell (1994) says, "Data are mediated through this human instrument, rather than through inventories, questionnaires, or machines" (p. 145). Janesick (1998) also emphasizes the important role of the researcher in saying that meaning is constructed in the ongoing social relationship between the researcher and the participants in the study. She says,

> It is no longer an option to research and run. The researcher is connected to the participants in a most profound way, and that is how trust is established, which in turn allows for greater access to sources and which ensures an involvement on the part of participants that enables them to tell their respective stories. (p. 62)

In my study, I played a key role in helping to bring to life an understanding of the experiences of the students in my study. I gained an understanding of my role through the

<center>50</center>

work of Denzin and Lincoln (1998), who discuss how knowledge is transferred from researcher to reader.

> In private and personal ways, ideas are structured, highlighted, subordinated, connected, embedded in contexts, embedded with illustration, laced with favor and doubt. However moved to share ideas, however clever and elaborated their writings, case researchers, as others, pass along to readers some of their personal meanings of events and relationships—and fail to pass along others. They know that the reader too will add and subtract, invent and shape--reconstructing the knowledge in ways that leave it differently connected and more likely to be personally useful. (p. 95)

As a researcher, I had to seek ways to protect and validate the transfer of knowledge, to communicate in such a way that I increased the likelihood that my readers construct their knowledge of my case in a manner similar to that which I intended. I used a method of triangulation, as the literature advises. Triangulation is a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 97). While the term triangulation was originally used by land surveyors to describe the use of three points to locate oneself at particular intersections, in this application it is used as a tool for the researcher. I used the process of triangulation to help reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation, as suggested by Denzin & Lincoln. I did this by seeking multiple perceptions within my interviews, in order to produce a richness of interpretation. That is, I presented an observation or interpretation in more than one manner, with more than one single quote, story or explanation so that my reader is more likely to gain an understanding of the interpretation I am trying to communicate.

My perceptions of higher education and the experiences of freshmen students and learning communities have been shaped by my own professional experience and formal educational preparation as a student affairs professional. I received my Master's Degree

in College and University Administration from Michigan State University. This program prepared me for a career in university administration, with my emphasis area being student affairs. Much of my coursework was concentrated in the area of college student development. Since then, I have twelve years of experience working in Residential Life, where my responsibilities have always included working closely with first year students and helping to design communities that aid in their transition and success in college.

As a researcher, I am invested in the impact of the FYRST program. In my recent position as Associate Director of Housing, I oversaw the creation and implementation of the FYRST program at Florida International University. I have met some of the students and their parents when they first arrived on our campus, and have gone on to establish an awareness of their progress as students, through my role as an administrator supervising the staff members who work more directly with the program. My current role with the FYRST program in my position as Director of Residential Life, is a bit more removed. I act as a source of support and resource for those who operate the program, but I am no longer as involved in the direct implementation of the program. I do not serve in a teaching or advising role with these students. I am not directly involved in the daily affairs, nor do I facilitate the programs and services provided to these students.

Because of the visibility of my position, most participants knew me to some degree. For all of the participants, it was critical for me to develop a positive rapport, one characterized by open communication and trust. I also believe that my familiarity with the program and with student development served as an asset, in that this awareness helped me to better understand the setting and the context, while also providing me enough understanding to ask questions that helped bring out rich details from

participants. Some may see my involvement (mostly previous involvement) in the program as a potential source of bias in data interpretation, while other qualitative researchers have viewed such experiences as a source of insight Strauss (1987) argues:

> These experiential data should not be ignored because of the usual canons governing research (which regard personal experience and data as likely to bias the research), for these canons lead to the squashing of valuable experiential data. We say, rather, "mine your experience, there is potential gold there!" (p. 11)

I would assert that my knowledge and familiarity with the program only assisted in this process of collaboration with my participants. I am uniquely qualified to understand such aspects as the setting of the case and the references made to components or expectations of the program. This helped me in the interpretation process, for example when participants referenced a particular program they attended or talked about the influence of someone in a staff role; these were things I was familiar with and so was able to facilitate further discussion. This notion is supported by the constructivist paradigm, which is based on the assumption that truth is not objective but rather socially constructed from the experiences, background, perceptions, and thought processes of human beings (Manning, 1999, p. 13). My background allowed me to form a true collaborative relationship with my participants, where truths were constructed; this is a tenet of the constructivist paradigm. The interpretation and conclusions drawn from this study evolved out of the collective experiences we all brought into the study, and the collaboration that occurred between the participants and me.

Bogdan and Biklen (1992), in discussing the potential concerns with researching in one's own "backyard", indicate that one reason for the concerns is that the participants may not see the researcher as a neutral observer and would have difficulty opening up.

They do indicate that their suggestions are not rigid and if a researcher feels able to conduct research close to him or her, so be it. My experience from conducting the pilot study made me confident that I would be able to establish this open rapport with participants. My experience then was that the participants were open and very willing to share information, including that which was critical of the program. In this study, I experienced the same degree of cooperation and openness from the selected participants. Going into the study, it was also important for me to recognize that in my efforts to develop a positive rapport with participants, one characterized by open and honest communication, I may receive information about the program that is critical. I acknowledge the personal and emotional investment that I have in this program, and I also resolved that such information must be viewed as a means for improvement of the program. As I proceeded in my study, I noted items in my journal that were related to how the program might be improved. While this was also data relevant to my study, by recording it in my journal, I was able to acknowledge the feedback and resolve to consider the use of it in my work setting. This helped me to acknowledge this feedback and store it away for future consideration.

In my position at the University, I have also worked with committees and staff in the development of residential learning communities at FIU. My work experiences and my previous research of first year students and residential learning communities, provided extensive framework for my study. This understanding of the context enhanced my awareness and knowledge of the challenges, experiences, and struggles faced by first year students in their transition to university life.

I also brought to this experience a theoretical framework based in student

development, and specifically, psychosocial developmental theory. I have studied other theorists, including those whose works focus on psychosocial and identity development, cognitive development, first year student issues, integrated learning, and college environments. Theory allows student affairs professionals like me to connect the everyday reality of students' experiences with the conceptual frameworks provided by developmental concepts (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). In my research, the theoretical framework influenced the questions I asked, the design of my study, the implementation of the study, and the way I interpreted the data, as suggested by Janesick (1998).

I view a college student's experience with the foundational belief that college students progress through incremental stages during their college years, and as a result, will benefit from opportunities that assist them in advancing from one level to the next. The college experience also provides many opportunities for students to gain increased understandings about themselves as developing human beings (Astin, 1985) and to learn such important life skills as personal assessment, goal setting, and conducting interpersonal relationships (Gazda, Childers, & Brooks, 1987; Miller & Prince, 1976). The theories outlined in Chapter II, and especially the work of Chickering (1969) and Chickering and Reisser (1993), have influenced the way I think about college student development. My background and the theoretical framework I possess, along with my experiences in working with FYRST and the students involved in the program, mean I brought certain biases to the research experience. In acknowledging these biases, I referred to the work of Peshkin (1988), who advises the researcher that, as subjectivity is inevitable, researchers should actively seek out their subjectivity, while the research is in

process. This, he argues, will enable researchers to be aware of how their subjectivity may be shaping their inquiry and its outcomes. Many would say that subjectivity is inevitable and would direct the researcher to make use of their prior experiences and knowledge. Eisner and Peshkin (1990) said, " What we consider legitimate research procedure is a product of our judgment and our judgment is influenced by our professional socialization." (p. 366). It is unrealistic, they say, to expect that any research could be completely objective.

As a way of managing my subjectivity though, I took Peshkin's (1988) advice and I intentionally monitored myself to sense how I was feeling during the research process. Although every effort was made to manage my own subjectivity, these biases certainly impacted the manner in which I interpreted data. However, the procedures I chose to use for data verification and to manage my subjectivity should have helped minimize the impacts of bias. I will describe these procedures in more detail later.

My familiarity with the setting helped provide me access to the participants in this study. Permission to conduct this study was granted by the University's Human Subjects Review Board and my supervisor, the Associate Vice President for Student Affairs. She is familiar with the FYRST program, has supported me in the continued development of the program, and is a strong proponent of the establishment of residential learning communities. Her support of this project provided the needed permission to proceed with accessing the setting and cases for the purpose of this research.

Pilot Study

In the spring of 2000, I conducted a pilot study as part of the requirements for a qualitative research course. The project was a case study, involving three students who

were former participants in the FYRST program during their first year at Florida International University. Single interviews were conducted, with the aim of gathering data about what participation in the FYRST program meant to these students. While the study itself was limited in scope, the results offered a glimpse into the meaning that these students had attached to their first year experience.

Several themes emerged from the interviews. These are themes that I followed up on in my participant interviews for this research. First, the students saw the program as a "stepping stone." Because of the information and resources provided, along with the extra interaction with the staff, students felt that the program provided the support for them to make their transition more smoothly. Their interviews also indicated that they came to view the staff as "surrogate parents." Many faced the challenges associated with their new independence, and relied on support from the staff and mentors to help guide them. They also saw the staff as positive academic role models, encouraging their own formation of positive study habits. A third theme that emerged was that of peer interaction. The participants reflected on many lessons learned from peers, and the sense of camaraderie that developed among the peers. This aided the students also in opening up more to individuals who they perceived as being different from them. The final theme identified was that of involvement. The participants reflected on the program's influence on their getting involved in the campus community. In Chapter IV, I will provide an explanation of how there was some similarity between these themes and those derived from the study.

This pilot study is relevant in that it was an initial examination of the experience of students in FYRST. It also helped me better define the theoretical framework for this

study. An analysis of the themes I've previously mentioned from my pilot study, allowed me to carefully select the four areas of theory for my current framework: intellectual development theory, psychosocial development theory, environmental impact theory, and student involvement theory. In my pilot study I had used only psychosocial theory but found it to be limiting in that it did not really encompass the breadth of issues that emerged. That is, in addition to students' own psychological changes, the data suggested that aspects of the students' involvement and their actual environment, for example, contributed significantly to their experience in FYRST. Adding these additional theories to my framework helped me better interpret, analyze and explain the students' experiences. The pilot study was limited in scope and depth due to the confines of the semester timeframe. However, it fueled my interest in learning more about the perspective of students.

Data Collection

Relevant to the collection of data is how participants were selected and the procedures used to collect the data.

Participants

Research participants consisted of 10 junior or senior level students who actively participated in the FYRST program at Florida International University during their first year. The students were mostly traditional aged first year students (primarily 18-19 years of age) during their participation in the FYRST program.

Procedure

A list containing the names of students who participated in the FYRST program for the 1997-98 and 1998-99 academic years was obtained from the Department of

Housing and Residential Life. From this list, the staff members who worked directly with the students in that program were asked to help me identify the students who were active participants in the program (i.e. met program requirements, attended programs and activities, passed the required Freshman Experience Course, etc.) I contacted these individuals first by a letter (see Appendix A), then by phone, to assess their interest in participation in this study. From those who were interested, I talked with them informally and then selected a sample for my study. Purposive selection was used here to ensure that I selected those who I thought would offer the most to my study. My goal was to purposely select individuals based on what I believed they could contribute to the research. In doing so, I followed the advice of Manning (1999), who said:

> Purposive sampling was originated as a strategy by which one could learn or come to understand a particular subject. Unlike random sampling where representativeness for the purpose of generalizing is the goal, the researcher uses purposive sampling to identify people with particular characteristics. The researcher uses criteria to locate respondents who are likely to be knowledgeable about the topic being studied. (p.16)

Through my informal conversations with the potential participants, I selected "atypical cases", individuals who seem to have done a lot of thinking about my topic, students who were able to express their individual experience effectively. This is supported by Denzin and Lincoln (1998), who encourage researchers to select cases which seem to offer the most opportunity to learn. They say the "potential for learning is a different and sometimes superior criterion to representativeness. Often it is better to learn a lot from an atypical case than a little from a magnificently typical case" (p. 101). I did not seek to obtain a sample that was specifically representative of all aspects of the FIU population. I first sought to select students who were articulate and those who had

successfully completed the FYRST program. In doing so, however, I was able to include participants from a variety of backgrounds. As I describe each of the participants later, the reader will see that within this group, there is representation from several different countries, as well as from in-state and outside the state of Florida. The group consisted of five males and five females, and five who entered the program in 1997 and five in 1998. The participants' "home" include five different countries. Four of the ten participants are from the United States, with three from the local tri-county area.

There are several measures I took to ensure the acquisition and reporting of trustworthy information in a manner that did not cause discomfort or harm to any of my participants in the process. First, I openly discussed with them the purpose of my research, the time commitment I was seeking from them, and the degree to which confidentiality could be assured. This was outlined in an initial letter I sent to them and discussed further in a follow-up conversation. I also let them know that at some point following the interview, I would ask their involvement in discussing the themes I developed from the interview. These agreements were outlined in a written consent form (see Appendix B) I provided to participants and had them sign. I also utilized the process of member checking, whereby I summarized with participants my interpretations based on their responses, in order to verify that I have made accurate interpretations. I will explain this process in more detail later.

Interviews

I conducted interviews with each of the selected participants. An approach to qualitative interviews is said to have three guiding themes:

First, successful qualitative interviewing requires an understanding of culture.

Culture affects what is said and how the interview is heard and understood. Second, interviewers are not neutral actors, but participants in the interviewing relationship. Their emotions and cultural understandings have an impact on the interview. Third, the purpose of qualitative interviewing is to hear and understand what the interviewees think and to give them public voice. (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 19)

The interview format was selected, as it would allow me to gain rich detail from the students; they were active participants in this process. While I bring a general understanding of the culture of the first year student experience, the format of interviews allowed me as a researcher to understand and reconstruct the events and experiences, of which I was not a part , as suggested by Rubin and Rubin (1995). Finally, this format was appropriate, in that it allowed students to provide an historical perspective on a situation upon which they were asked to look back, another criteria for selecting the method of interviews (Creswell, 1994). Initial interviews, ranging from 45 minutes to one hour each were conducted. A preliminary set of questions was used as a guide for this interview (see Appendix C). Follow-up interviews were then conducted with 8 of the 10 participants to seek out more information and to test out emerging themes. The remaining two participants responded to follow-up questions sent to them via e-mail, since both were out of the country at that time of the study.

The preliminary themes that emerged from the first round of interviews guided me in what questions to ask in the follow-up interviews. I used what I heard to decide how to modify the themes and which themes to explore in more detail or depth. Many times I asked more probing questions during the second interviews to check out an interpretation gathered after the first interview. Also, in some cases, something one participant talked about may have led me to ask other participants about the same issue. I

found that the time between the two interviews was helpful, as it allowed me time to consider the responses from the first interview. Each interview was audio taped and transcribed. The tape recordings, transcripts of interviews and my own field notes were used for recording the data.

The design of my interviews was flexible, as suggested by Rubin and Rubin (1995), who said that qualitative interviewing design is flexible, iterative, and continuous, as opposed to being prepared in advance and carved in stone. Rubin and Rubin liken the design of a qualitative interview study to planning a vacation. You may have an overall idea of what you want to see and do, but there is not a fixed, locked itinerary. You allow flexibility along the way and are willing to change plans as new adventures entice you. I kept in mind this metaphor as I designed my qualitative interviews. I had an initial plan, yet allowed for flexibility as my research proceeded. This flexibility was essential in the collaborative process I have described.

Going into the interview, I expected to find out all I could about the students' first year experience and what being part of FYRST meant to them. The information and themes that emerged from my pilot study were followed up on, in these interviews. The theoretical frameworks used for this study served as a guide in the creation of my interview questions. My interviews consisted of "grand tour" or overview questions, followed up by "mini tour" questions that helped me probe for more detailed information. Grand tour questions were used to have interviewees describe the big picture perspective, to take the researcher where periods of observation are not feasible. (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). For example, one grand tour question used in this research included, "Tell me about being a freshmen," "Tell me what it was like to be involved in the FYRST

program, or "Tell me about the first day you moved in to the residence hall." As Rubin and Rubin suggest, these grand tour questions provided a broad overview and elicited examples, narratives and stories. Some follow-up questions were used during the same interview or some at a later time, after a review of the notes and tape could be made. These follow up questions helped me to explore meanings, seek examples, seek elaboration on a particular incident, and encouraged greater depth and detail (Rubin & Rubin). With these questions, I sometimes chose to ask about the relationships they had with other members, the workshops or programs they attended, their interaction with faculty and staff, and their most memorable experiences. Many of these questions emerged as the interviews occurred.

I looked for patterns that helped me develop an understanding of what aspects of the program were influential in their experience. Based on the results from my pilot study and the information from the literature, I expected that I would find that students place great meaning on the interpersonal and social aspects of the program. As explained in the next chapter, that was certainly the case.

<center>Data Analysis</center>

The analysis of my textual data included sorting, formatting and coding of information. Once all of the data was collected, I did as Creswell (1998) suggests and first did a general review of all of the information. I read through all of the transcripts and took notes about some general patterns that emerged. I also reviewed my field notes and research journal. As I began to see patterns emerge, I developed categories for sorting the data. This was a tentative list of themes. I then reviewed each transcript individually to see if the tentative list of themes did indeed capture everything in the data. I highlighted

data not captured in those initial themes and at the end, reviewed and revised my themes. From the tentative list and subsequent revisions, I decided on four themes. I then went back a second time and coded my data based on these four major themes of community, involvement, identity, and academics. I highlighted each a different color throughout my transcripts. Once the coding according to the four major themes was completed, I reviewed the data for sub-themes. I realized that there were patterns in the data within each theme. I then selected a short word for each sub-theme and went through all the transcripts to code these sub-themes. In my analysis of the data, I found that some if it seemed to fit into more than one theme or sub-theme. I chose to double code this data, for example, identifying a particular quote as being an illustration of both the community theme and identity theme. This also caused me to explore some of the relationships between the themes, as I will further discuss in Chapter IV. During this coding process I used my peer reviewer, as will be explained later.

There are several techniques I employed to ensure the authenticity and trustworthiness of my research. Merriam (1998) refers to this in qualitative research as the internal validity, the accuracy of the information and whether it matches reality. As the themes and interpretations emerged, I used a process called member checking Respondents helped to review my interpretations, to ensure that my accounts were consistent with the meanings, feelings and descriptions of the participants. This allowed a process of co-construction to occur, where meaning was constructed by not just me as the researcher, but by me and the participants working in collaboration. This is significant to the process of qualitative inquiry. At the conclusion of my second interview with each participant, I presented to them my interpretation of the interviews. I summarized what I

thought I heard them saying and provide some interpretation from my own perspective. In all cases, participants indicated that my interpretations were very accurate. At times they commented on or added to something I said, reinforcing my interpretation and helping me to clarify or expand it. This process was another example of the collaborative nature of this research.

I also used a peer reviewer, who acted as an external check of the research process. My peer reviewer is a fellow graduate student and a student affairs professional with over 25 years of experience. I selected her based on her expertise in student development. I used the peer reviewer to offer feedback on my interpretations of themes. I shared with her a summary of the transcripts and findings and she assisted me in developing themes that captured the essence of the participants' perspectives. Her input helped me to clarify my themes, as together we reworked and reconfigured them until we both believed we had developed a set of themes that would capture the essence of the data. She also assisted me by reviewing drafts of my conclusions and recommendations and helping me to brainstorm in this area.

I also used rich, thick description as a means for verification, as advocated by Creswell (1998). He explains that the use of rich, thick description allows the reader to make decisions regarding transferability because the writer describes in such detail the participants or setting being studied. This depth of detail by the researcher enables readers to determine whether the findings can be transferred because of shared characteristics. As I described in the first chapter, this case is unique yet given the rich descriptions I provide, some readers will be able to pull things out that have meaning to their own setting.

To assist in managing my subjectivity throughout the research process, I did two things. Peshkin (1988) advises researchers to observe themselves in a focused way, in order to learn about any personal qualities that contact with the research process has released. He adds that if researchers are informed about these qualities, they can be disclosed so the reader is aware of how the research and subjectivity interrelate. While conducting interviews, I took field notes, and as part of this, specifically documented my feelings that emerged. This allowed me to acknowledge and make note of any changes in feelings that may have indicated any kind of bias on my part. What I found was that there were certainly times when I became more engaged and excited by the responses of my participants. For example, as a developer and educator, hearing students talk about their own growth process as a result of the experiences they had as a freshman, was very exciting to me. On occasion, I found myself drawn in positively when students talked about some significant interaction they had with peers or staff, such as when one student described how his interactions with his diverse group of roommates was "life altering", or when a student talked about how a Resident Assistant helped him with his personal adjustment to college. By recording these feelings, I was able to take note of when those feelings were emerging to monitor how they were impacting my perspective.

I also maintained a journal during my research process and wrote frequently in this. The journal helped me to identify and acknowledge my feelings associated with this project, those that were part of me and could not be simply set aside. The journal also allowed me to reflect on my interviews along the way, identifying areas for further exploration and helping me to formulate follow-up interview questions.

The methods described in this chapter led me to a careful analysis of the data

collected. That analysis is outlined in Chapter IV, where data will be presented to the reader by describing four major themes developed from an interpretation of the participants' responses.

CHAPTER IV

PRESENTATION OF THE DATA

The purpose of this chapter is to present the data and results of the study. First, a description of the setting and program will be provided and then individual profiles on each of the 10 participants will be shared as a way of introducing the students to the reader. Then, the findings of the study will be presented and discussed through the major themes that emerged from the participant interviews.

The Context

This study was conducted with students who participated in the FYRST program at Florida International University. This section will describe the context for the study, including information about the university, the residence hall, the FYRST program and the staff who worked with the program.

The Setting

Florida International University is a large, public, urban research university with two major campuses. The students in this study are at the larger of the two campuses, the University Park Campus, which is located on 342 acres of tropical landscaped grounds in southwest Miami. FIU opened in 1972 and boasts on its website that it has "achieved many benchmarks of excellence that have taken other universities more than a century to reach." The campus continues to grow. Currently, students from throughout the United States and more than 130 countries attend FIU. Students can choose from an offering of more than 180 baccalaureate, master's and doctoral degree programs in more than 280 majors.

The FYRST program is housed in Panther Hall, a modern, four-story, suite-style residence hall, which opened in 1996. The facility is home to 410 students, all housed in four-person suites, with the students in each suite sharing two bedrooms and one bathroom. According to the FYRST brochure, Panther Hall is promoted as being conveniently located near classrooms, the library, student union, health center, fitness center, swimming pool and other campus conveniences.

In 1997 and 1998 when the student participants were in FYRST, Panther Hall also housed students from the Honors College, the English Language Institute, and other students who ranged from freshmen to senior level. The building is known for fostering a strong sense of community among students, offering a variety of programs and activities from which to choose. In addition to student rooms, the building contains several common areas, including lounges, laundry room, kitchens, and a computer lab, as well as staff offices and maintenance areas. A 24-hour front desk operation staffed by student desk assistants, is in place to heighten safety and security in the building and to provide around-the-clock service to students. Students can frequently be seen in the front lobby area or in the lounges, sometimes studying and sometimes just socializing.

Participants in the FYRST program live on the fourth floor of Panther Hall, in a long corridor with rooms on each side facing one another across a wide hallway. When the program first began in 1996, the students occupied one wing of 40 students. The following year, it expanded to a capacity of 80 students, so in both 1997 and 1998, residents were housed on either side of the fourth floor lounge, with 40 students on each side. The fourth floor where FYRST was housed, also contains the building's computer lab. The hallway bulletin boards are commonly adorned with campus resource

information and publicity for upcoming events.

The FYRST Program

The FYRST program at Florida International University was first implemented in 1996. The departmental brochure provided to housing applicants describes FYRST as follows:

> FYRST is a residentially based program designed to assist freshmen in achieving a smooth and successful transition from high school to FIU in a fun and supportive environment. A limited number of freshmen students are chosen to live together and participate in this unique experience.

Students voluntarily elect to be in this program through an application process and agree to a certain level of participation in the housing and university community. In addition, they enroll in a designated FYRST section of the University's required Freshman Experience class, which is held in the residence hall and taught by a member of the Residential Life staff. A variety of services and activities are provided to foster a positive living and learning community. This program is similar to others being developed at colleges and universities around the country. The FYRST program seeks to specifically address the student's need for belonging, for involvement, interaction with other students, interaction with faculty and staff, and the acquisition of competencies and resources relevant to their college experience.

The students who participated in this study had specific requirements as members of FYRST. According to program literature, they were expected to do the following each semester: Attend two Hall Council meetings, attend two programs in the Student Success Series, participate in one large community service project, take the required Freshman Experience Class in the residence hall (fall only), attend monthly community meetings

and attend an opening reception (fall only).

The literature emphasizes the benefits of the program including, being able to take the Freshman Experience class right in the residence hall, access to in-hall academic advising, a welcome orientation and dinner, t-shirts and newsletters, and priority in the housing sign-up process for the following year. As to who should apply, the brochure suggests, "A student who is looking for a special first year experience should apply. Applicants should have an interest in meeting others and becoming involved in the FIU community."

The Staff

Several staff live and work in Panther Hall and directly support the FYRST program. One resident assistant lives on each wing of 40 students and has the responsibility for the day-to-day oversight of that community. The resident assistant, an employee of the university, is an undergraduate student who has been specially trained to work with students in the residence halls, with the goal of helping those students to succeed at FIU. Some of their responsibilities include developing a sense of community in their area, getting to know residents, serving as a resource and referral person, planning programs, and enforcing University policy.

A full-time professional, the residence life coordinator, supervises all of the building's resident assistants and a graduate assistant (the assistant residence life coordinator), and is responsible for the daily supervision of the building's staff and operations. The residence life coordinator also plays an important role with the FYRST program, helping to coordinate many of the programs and serving as an instructor for the Freshman Experience class. This individual is responsible for monitoring the progress of

the FYRST program, and through their supervision of the resident assistants, helps to ensure that there is an appropriate offering of programs and services to address the common needs of first year students.

Another staff position, while voluntary in nature, is the FYRST mentor. Each year approximately10 mentors are selected to work with the students in the FYRST program. The mentors are often previous FYRST members, and get involved to give back to the program. They help students out individually and bring them together by planning both informative and social programs.

<div align="center">Participants</div>

Ten students participated in this study. Key data about each participant is included in Table 2. This data was obtained through interviews and through a data sheet each participant completed. It should be noted, as part of the data sheet, each student was asked to identify their race. Many of the participants responded that they were of mixed race or multiracial. In some cases, they listed two or more races as a response to the question. In line with the recommendations of the 5th edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, I have chosen to report their race according to the way each participant reported it, rather than trying to fit their response into any standard set of categories. A brief description of each participant follows. Pseudonyms are used to protect their anonymity; each participant selected his or her pseudonym. The descriptions of participants are presented in alphabetical order of their pseudonym.

Amanda

Amanda is a 21-year-old junior, who participated in FYRST in 1998. Originally from Guyana, Amanda describes herself as being multiracial. Her mom is Chinese and

Table 2

Summary of Participant Information

Name	Year in FYRST	Age	Major	"Home"	Race (Participant Reported)
Amanda	1998	21	Construction Management And Construction Engineering	Guyana	Multiracial
Anthony	1997	26	Management Information Systems	Trinidad	Multiracial
Chris	1998	23	Management Information Systems	Jamaica	Multiracial
Eduardo	1997	22	Sociology, Anthropology	United States	Hispanic
Hema	1998	22	Management Information Systems	Guyana	Multiracial
Isabelle	1998	21	English	United States	Hispanic
Jasmine	1998	20	Accounting	United States	Black
Joshua	1998	21	Management Information Systems	St. Lucia	Indian
Kevin	1997	22	International Relations	United States	Black
Shakira	1997	22	Marketing	Trinidad	Black

East Indian, and her dad is Black and East Indian. Amanda is now pursuing her degree in Construction Management and Construction Engineering, and plans to attend graduate school. She is active in many campus organizations, and has served as both a FYRST mentor and resident assistant on campus. Amanda stated that she was "very excited about coming to FIU", being the first in her family to attend college. Leaving her country to come to Miami was a big step, with her closest family in the United States being in New York. Amanda is outgoing, expressive in her opinions, and considers herself to have always been fairly independent. Yet, she also remains close to her family and is not shy about admitting the mistakes and subsequent growth she experienced as a freshmen.

Amanda's first year was unique in that she describes two very different experiences between her first and second semester. Upon arriving to Miami, she said that she quickly realized that she had taken a great deal for granted at home, especially in terms of always having her parents there to do everything for her. During the first few months, she spent most of her time with friends whom she had known from home; little effort was made to integrate into the FYRST community. Difficulties with her roommate situation only made her stay away from the residence hall more often. Amanda acknowledges that she really missed out on some opportunities that first semester. " I didn't find a fitting-in spot....And then I just didn't understand what I was here to do-- which was to study, to get an education and make the most out of college." Reality hit during the semester break for Amanda. She had not done as well in her courses as expected and her parents were concerned that she had failed to get involved in the life of the campus. She said:

I didn't really get a chance to know or meet or get involved in the housing or campus aspect of FIU until my second semester, when I did a complete 360, because I had failed my first semester and my dad had told me, "You're there…get involved, do everything you can do. We're paying too much money for you to be there." So, I decided to get involved and…the ball just started rolling from there.

Amanda also dealt with the reality that she was the first in her family to attend college. She described how she had to teach her whole family along the way. She kept in constant communication with them, telling them about the programs and activities in which she got involved, explaining the grading system used in the United States and ultimately sharing her efforts to become more a part of the FYRST community. Amanda did make changes her second semester. She and her roommate ironed out differences they experienced their first semester and eventually became the best of friends. Amanda began to spend more time with her studies and more time getting to know the people around her. She described it as really taking advantage of all college had to offer.

Amanda speaks now as a real advocate for the program, with a bit of regret that she didn't take full advantage of it all her first semester. Looking back on her first year now, she views it as, "the best learning experience I've ever had in my life.…I learned so much about myself that I didn't know."

Anthony

Anthony is a 26-year-old senior from Trinidad, having participated in FYRST in 1997. He considers himself multiracial, being of African, French, Portuguese and Indian descent. He came to FIU to pursue a Bachelor's degree, after having attended a business school back home, which specializes in the certification of Accounting. He had attended this school for four years before attaining his certification. He describes coming to FIU as

a "stepping stone." "At that point in my life, I had a career already and coming to FIU was like becoming more of an adult on my own--to not take the route all of my peers were taking, but to go out there and see exactly what was out there to be offered and explore it." Anthony had all intentions of majoring in finance, just like so many of his peers back home. Experiences at FIU, both in and out of the classroom, changed that perspective. He is now majoring in Management Information Systems and intends to return to Trinidad after graduation to run his own business. Anthony currently serves in a student manager position on campus. He is laid back in his style, yet focused on his career and academic goals.

In talking about his parents, Anthony said, "They are very successful and own their own business and everything, but they never went to college." Anthony was the first in his family to attend college. He recalled the emotion of his parents when they brought him to FIU; they were crying as they prepared to leave him. Anthony admits that the experience of coming here to the United State and FIU was different than what he expected. "It [college] wasn't what we normally see on television." He quickly learned too that his concern about not fitting in because he would be older, was not the case at all. His mother had actually been the one that submitted his application for the FYRST program. When he found out about it, he had concerns that, because he was older, he didn't belong in the program. He said that impression "lasted like ten minutes."

The age difference did emerge though as Anthony took on the role as the responsible one among his new peers. He often drove the other students places, encouraged them to do their homework, and would even wake up his roommate to study. "I was more like the parent than anything else", Anthony said. Anthony treasures the

closeness and the relationships he experienced as being part of FYRST. Like all of the study participants, Anthony still interacts with many of the students who were in the program with him several years ago.

Chris

Chris is a 23-year-old, biracial (Black and Asian) senior from Jamaica who began his academic career and participation in FYRST in 1998 at the age of 20. He is a Management Information Systems major and hopes to one day work in the information technology field. Chris left behind a family in Jamaica, including his parents and younger brother. He admits to feeling "kind of disoriented" at coming to a new country and being totally on his own. This wasn't the first time Chris spent time away from home, as his high school was two hours away, so he made trips home on weekends only. However, the move to Miami was more significant for him, knowing that he couldn't get home any weekend he wanted to. He also admits to being not very fond of talking on the phone, so often his family would have to call him to talk. He had actually selected FIU, in part, because of the close proximity to his aunt. He also knew that it would be close enough where he could fly back home now and then.

Chris talked about the differences between Jamaica and the United States. In reflecting on how in Jamaica he "pretty much knew everybody", he was most concerned about meeting people and making new friends. About his decision to apply to be part of the FYRST program, Chris said, "I figured it was my first year away from home so I wanted something where I'd really get involved, not stay in my room and go to class and come back. So I decided to try it out, see what it was like." The experience did indeed assist Chris in getting involved and developing new friendships. The thing he most

appreciated about the program was the way in which a community so easily formed. He knows that for a person like him who is not naturally outgoing, being involved in such a program really helped him:

> The program helped me to get out and meet all these people. If I wasn't in the program, I figure I'd probably still be shy, and not that outgoing, not knowing a lot of people, just going to class, going back to my room, going to sleep, just studying. It gave me all around a better first year.

Chris is somewhat reserved, yet seemed pleased to tell his story. Our conversations told me that Chris had really reflected on his first year and how it helped shape the person he is now as a senior. He looks back on the experience with very positive feelings. His jobs on campus have allowed him to interact with incoming students, where he always makes a point to encourage students to join FYRST

Eduardo

Eduardo is a 22-year-old Hispanic senior from Miami, who began the program in 1997. He is the first in his immediate family to attend college in the U.S. Eduardo was born in Queens, New York and moved to South Florida when he was just seven years old. His mother and father both immigrated to the United States from Argentina when they were younger.

Moving into the residence halls gave Eduardo the chance to experience total college life with the convenience of having family just minutes away. It was his mother who first pointed out FYRST to Eduardo and suggested that he consider applying. Eduardo agreed that it might be a good idea to live with other new students going through the same experience.

Eduardo, a sociology and anthropology major, enjoys reading and aspires to one

day be a university professor. He will be graduating in the spring of 2002. Eduardo is an outstanding student academically and in listening to him, one quickly realizes the value he places upon his education. His biggest concern when starting at FIU was whether he would succeed academically. Many people had given him advice to say that college would be the "best years of his life", yet he also heard that the classes would be very demanding. Eduardo describes himself as coming in "very focused and nervous."

For Eduardo though, he has not been solely focused on the academics. His extensive leadership experiences at FIU put him among the most elite in terms of university involvement. Eduardo learned his first year the value of pursuing those things in which he was interested. Aside from joining a fraternity, he went on to apply for the resident assistant and peer advisor positions; he was successful in getting both. His involvement continued into Student Government, where he has held key leadership positions.

Eduardo looks back now on his experience in FYRST and believes that "it laid a good foundation" for him and it really got him involved in campus life and his studies. Aside from being one of his most enjoyable years in college, he also views it as the year he learned a great deal.

Hema

Hema is a 22-year-old senior student majoring in Management Information Systems, who came to FIU and the FYRST program in 1998 from Guyana. She considers herself to be biracial, part Indian and part Asian.

Hema had been out of high school for two years before coming to FIU. During that time she had spent time traveling, working in her family business, caring for a sick

relative and engaging in charitable and spiritual activities. She remembers her arrival at FIU as being the first time she was away from her family. She describes her family as "very, very protective" and the country that she is from as being "so small and so simple." Yet, one reason she chose to come to FIU was because she knew that students came from everywhere. She wanted the experience that the diversity would offer her. Hema admits that the weather and strong academic programs also played a role in her decision.

Hema considers herself "always the shy one", so coming to the United States and to a new university was a bit scary at first. She had selected to be part of FYRST, believing that it would help if she lived with students who might be experiencing the same concerns as she was experiencing. She also expected that by joining the program, she would make a lot of new friends. Hema quickly developed support systems at FIU, and believes that the structure of the FYRST program really gave her the chance to meet so many other students. Hema still revels in all that she learned during that first year.

Isabelle

Isabelle is a 21-year-old Hispanic female, majoring in English. She came to FIU in 1998, and participated in FYRST. She is originally from Brazil, but she and her family moved to Florida when Isabelle was four years old. Living on campus at FIU was a way for Isabelle to "get away", since her family is only about an hour away. She's very close to her parents and reflects often on that familial relationship as an only child. It was a big adjustment for Isabelle, who never had to share a room with anyone. As she said, "It was always my stuff, my room, my, my, my."

Isabelle was the first in her family to go to college. She admits that she had little

direction about what to expect at FIU. Much of her expectations were formed by what she learned from friends. She chose FIU after deciding last minute not to go to another state university where many of her friends were attending. She believed that she didn't want to be with the same people she was with in high school. Her parents had encouraged her to go further away. Her mom even questioned her choice to go to an institution where she would be surrounded by so many other Hispanics; she felt that the challenge of Isabelle being in a minority population would be a good one for her. During the first few days when Isabelle realized she was alone and her friends were together at another school, she too began to question her decision. In retrospect though, Isabelle believes her decision to attend FIU was for the best because she "branched out and did things" that she might not have done at another school. Isabelle settled in quickly and began to enjoy her experience. She admits though, that she really focused too much time and energy on getting involved and meeting people. Her studies suffered as a result, a mistake she says that she is still trying to bounce back from. Isabelle will begin her senior year now and has aspirations to attend law school after that. Being so close to home was also a drawback in some ways for Isabelle. She enjoyed having family so close, but admits that it probably prevented her from really immersing herself in the full college life. Isabelle was only an hour away from home, so she spent most weekends there. During the first semester, a tense roommate situation caused Isabelle some difficulty. Ultimately, she and her roommate worked through their issues, became great friends, and both learned a valuable lesson in communication.

Isabelle is vibrant and expressive, with a gift for storytelling and communicating with rich descriptions.

Jasmine is a 20-year-old Black female, a senior majoring in Accounting. She is from Miami, but moved on campus and joined the FYRST program in 1998 when she was 17 years old, to begin her college experience in the residence halls. She remembers that when she visited the campus with one of her roommates, they told her to write the essay for the application to FYRST so that they "would be with all freshmen." She thought this seemed like a good idea. She was concerned about being grouped together with older students who might not relate to what she and other freshmen were going through, so she was pleased when she found out that she would be a part of FYRST

Jasmine chose FIU for a variety of reasons. She was impressed with the University's strong accounting program, but her parents were also reluctant about her going away to another city. Living on campus at FIU allowed her to be away from home and "on her own", while also being close enough to keep her friends, church and familiar places at the same time. She was also offered a full tuition scholarship at FIU, an offer she gladly accepted.

Jasmine is academically a strong student. She recalls though, the lessons realized that first year about how she needed to make things happen for herself. No one else, she realized, was going to make her study or help her make sure a paper got written. When she realized how easily persuaded she was to pursue social interactions and procrastinate studying, she took a step back and made the changes she needed to make. Following graduation, Jasmine plans to become a Certified Public Accountant.

Jasmine is one of four children, raised by what she referred to as fairly protective and religious parents. Her first year of college was really a time for Jasmine to explore

her own values and opinions. Her parents remained concerned for her well-being and provided her with a host of reminders when dropping her off at college--things to do and things not to do. They were most concerned, Jasmine admitted, that she would do something to ruin her life. Yet, so many people seemed to have confidence in Jasmine; others instilled in her a belief that she could handle the pressures of college and that she would be successful.

Jasmine has become involved in several aspects of campus life, and credits that involvement to her own desire to feel a part of where she lives. Her involvement has spanned participation in Student Government, as well as other clubs and organizations. She particularly values the relationships her involvement helped her to develop.

Jasmine describes herself as "a very introverted type of person", yet quickly warmed up in the interviews and shared freely and in detail the experiences of her first year.

Joshua

Joshua is a 21-year-old male student of Indian descent. He is from St. Lucia in the West Indies. Joshua participated in the FYRST program in 1998 and just recently completed his requirements to graduate from FIU with a double major in Finance and Management Information Systems. He hopes to become a financial analyst and work with a Fortune 500 Company.

Joshua is the youngest of three children, and left behind all of his family in St. Lucia to study in the United States. He chose to study in Miami because of the warm climate and proximity to St. Lucia. His family also visits Florida often for business, so that helped in his decision. While he had actually intended on staying at FIU for only one

semester and then planned to transfer to another state university in Florida, his positive experience during that first semester made him decide to stay.

Joshua had an unusual start into the FYRST program. Problems with international mail had delayed the receipt of his Housing payment, so when he came to campus, there were only a select number of spaces in Housing available. He accepted a spot in FYRST. While not officially a freshman, he qualified because of his first year status. Joshua was transferring in some credits from a community college. He had actually received his Associate's degree from a school in Barbados, where he studied after high school, while living with an aunt and uncle. He had studied Accounting, Economics and Information Technology. He admits that, while he was pleased to secure Housing, he really had no idea what he was getting himself into. He came in expecting that he would focus solely on his academic goals and that all of his time and activities would focus around that. He'd always been a very disciplined student. Joshua struggled to understand, initially, how other people could devote time to socializing or getting involved on campus. Soon he realized that even he could do those things and achieve some sort of desired balance, without experiencing a negative impact on his grades. And soon he began to realize that he enjoyed developing new relationships and engaging in activities outside of his classes. Joshua's involvement activities on campus include serving for two years as a resident assistant.

Kevin

Kevin is a 22–year-old Black male. A recent graduate in International Relations, Kevin hopes to one day own his own business. He considers home to be the Midwest, but spent a few years in Florida when his family moved there while he was in high school.

Kevin came to FIU in 1997 after having worked a year just out of high school with a temporary employment agency. He had always wanted to go to college and was raised believing that this was the right thing to do. Spending that year working encouraged him even more to apply his efforts toward getting into college. While not the first in his family to attend college, Kevin never really received a clear sense of what to expect. He was quite nervous about coming to college and also about coming to Miami. Kevin decided to apply to be a part of FYRST, because he thought it would be helpful to live with other freshmen. He assumed it would help him to adapt to school easier. Kevin remembers that many of his friends told him not to do it; he decided to apply anyway.

A lot of people around Kevin questioned his ability to be successful. They doubted that he could perform at a college level; this only made him more nervous. He was pleased when things all started going right his first year. He enjoyed the experience, met many new friends, and did fine academically. Looking back now, he recalls that first year as "overall, a very good year--a fun and happy year. I was in heaven. I said that a lot--I'm in heaven."

An independent and admittedly stubborn-at-times individual, Kevin spoke candidly in the interviews about his experiences and the lessons learned since his freshmen year. Most vivid were the descriptions of his own development, especially those lessons learned from his roommate experience. Kevin lived with three other Black males, all of whom had very different backgrounds, different cultural experiences, and different ways of experiencing their own identity. Kevin communicated with ease and openness the tremendous impact this experience had on his first year and his own growth as an individual.

Shakira

Shakira is a 22-year-old Black female. She is a recent graduate in Business, having came to FIU in 1997 from Trinidad. After completing her degree, Shakira returned home with plans to look for employment. She considered the opportunity to come to FIU as "a real blessing."

When Shakira first read about the FYRST program, she was most intrigued by the idea of living with other freshmen. She anticipated that coming to FIU and Miami would be an adjustment as an international student, so she looked forward to being part of a program that might help her with that adjustment. She remembers now the friendships she gained, and the rewarding opportunities to meet people from so many places around the world. The program provided Shakira with even more than she expected. She looks back on the time and recognizes that, while she knew that she would be living with other freshmen, she never imagined the closeness and comfort level that would develop through the ongoing interactions she shared with her peers in the program. Many of those peers from the program are friends that she remains in contact with today.

A strong student academically, Shakira kept her grades solid while still participating in campus life. Shakira went on to be a resident assistant for her last three at FIU and sought to impact others in the same manner that she was impacted by the staff with whom she interacted her first year.

Shakira is soft-spoken, but clear about her interpretation of her experiences; there was a sense that she had really given some thought about where she was and how her first year had helped shape her overall FIU experience.

Themes

Going into this study, I brought in information from my pilot study, which gave me an indication of some things I might explore. As explained earlier, the themes that I expanded on in my pilot study were: (a) stepping stone (students felt that the program provided the support for them to make their transition more smoothly); (b) surrogate parents (students relied on support from the staff and mentors to help guide them); and (c) peer interaction (students reflected on many lessons learned from peers, and the sense of camaraderie that developed among the peers). Each of these issues is represented in some form in the themes of this study, as they did emerge again as significant patterns in my data. However, the data from this more extensive study caused me to reshape and further develop the themes so they are not necessarily reflected in the exact same format as in my pilot study.

Also, as I examined the data, there was certainly more than one way to present it and to organize my themes. With advisement from my peer reviewer, I chose the way that I thought would provide the most clear and detailed explanation. It should be noted, however, that the themes are overlapping so to speak; they are not exclusive of one another, so the reader may detect some similarities or commonalities between various themes or sub-themes. As I explained in the previous chapter, some of my data was double-coded. That is, some of the words of the participants seemed to exemplify more than one of the themes. As I examined my data, it became clear that this double-coding was indicative of how the themes overlapped. In such cases, I chose to present the data either in both themes or in the one area where it seemed to fit best.

In discussing the themes, I've attempted to point out how they relate to others. I

will provide some examples of the relationships that exist, but the reader should not interpret my examples as an exhaustive explanation of the connections between the themes. In fact, I view the connections as so numerous that it would be difficult to identify each one. I should also note that in examining the themes I selected and their relationships to one another, I brought together a small group of colleagues from student affairs, some of whom had worked directly with the FYRST program in the past. I shared with them a general overview of my research and provided a description of each of the four themes. I then engaged them in a discussion about the themes, to see if the themes I had selected and described made sense to them. I also asked them to talk about their perceptions of any relationships between these themes. The members of this brainstorming discussion provided helpful input about the themes and did seem to believe that they accurately described the student experience. They also offered input that reaffirmed the belief I held that these themes overlap.

Four major themes were identified from the interview responses, to describe and explain how the students' participation in FYRST impacted their overall experience at FIU. The four themes that emerged from the data are (a) community, (b) involvement, (c) identity, and (d) academics. Each theme also contains several sub-themes, which provide further characteristics for interpreting the experience. Figure 1 displays the themes and sub-themes, portraying the overlap that exists between them. No one appears as dominant. Rather, each theme is an aspect of the student's experience in the FYRST program. The overlapping design represents how the themes share some commonalities and extend into one another. The center of the model shows the overlap between these four areas. The common area is where some or all themes overlap and represents the

Community
Peer Support and Influence

Shared Experiences

A Close-Knit Community

Involvement
Activities and Organizations

Interaction with Faculty

Interaction with Residence
Hall Staff

Interaction with Other
Students

Striving for Balance

Identity
Making the Transition:
Beginning College

Developing Self-Reliance

Developing Mature
Relationships

Exploring Values and Beliefs

Academics
Developing Academic
Competency

The Freshman Experience
Class

Interaction Around
Academic Matters

Figure 1. Participant perspectives on their involvement in a first year learning community.

many experiences that influence student learning in this first year residential learning community. In different situations in the environment, a participant may be experiencing any one or a combination of these themes. This accounts for the reason why there exists so many combinations of how the themes overlap. Also, each participant experienced the program differently, so the way in which the various themes overlap would also vary from one person to another, and from one situation to another. This will be further explored as I provide descriptions of the themes and give examples of how they overlap. The themes will be further explored in the remainder of this chapter, with examples, descriptions and narratives provided from the participants. The four themes are presented in no particular order, except that I've chosen to present community first, simply because this is the theme that participants most discussed.

Community

The community theme is used to describe how students perceived the environment to be. It includes the three sub-themes of (a) peer support and influence, (b) shared experiences and (c) a close-knit community. The emergence of community as a theme was not unexpected, given that this is such a focus of collaborative learning and residential learning communities. As the literature suggests, from the very beginning when a group of individuals come together, the initial value of a community is couched in terms of providing a "home base" for each individual (Schlossberg, 1989). Students need to feel that they are part of something; they are included (Minor, 1999). The degree to which they feel included or alienated can have a tremendous impact on their eventual success and retention as a student.

The environmental theory presented in the second chapter is often viewed as a

cornerstone for all student development. That is, it is believed that behavior is the function of the person interacting with the environment (Lewin, 1936). The elements that are brought to bear on the community then, to shape the environment, are significant to determining how the person develops. That is, a student will not grow simply because they are a member of a group such as FYRST. Their interactions with that environment and the characteristics present in the environment are of a major influence. One of the first interactions that will be described has to do with the influence of peers in the environment. As I describe other sub-themes later, it will be apparent that the influence of peers is interwoven too into other aspects. As mentioned, each of these themes overlap with one another in different circumstances.

Peer support and influence. The first sub-theme in the community theme is peer support and influence. This sub-theme is used to describe the impact that peers have on one another in FYRST. It was not surprising that this emerged as a theme in the data, since the peer group has long been regarded as one of the most powerful influences on a student's collegiate experience (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terrenzini, 1991). This certainly seemed to be the case for FYRST participants.

Several of the students talked about their peers and those relationships as being the very most significant part of their experience. Students sought out this connection with their peers within the first few days of their arrival. This is important to student success and retention, as highlighted by Upcraft and Gardner (1989), who point out that the establishment of close friendships, especially the first month, is vital to freshmen success. Chris noted that forming those relationships early on, as he now remembers, was so important to him. In describing what he did that first day he moved in, Chris, said:

I walked around, tried to meet a few people and I met Kamala, who was my RA at the time, talked to her and met a bunch of other people. I just tried to make a few friends as quickly as possible.

Similarly, Kevin said that he joined the program as a way to make friends more quickly. He remembers that this was important to him:

I thought it would be easier to make friends. I was very nervous about coming, so when it said you'll be with first year residents together, I…assumed it would help me to adapt to school easier.

Eduardo was relieved to make friends quickly through FYRST. "It was comforting….I made friends on the hall within those first 2-3 days, and I had already made a group of friends that I was hanging out with." This group of friends were influential in him getting further involved on the campus too. He expanded further on how these relationships encouraged him to become more involved, sometimes in things he perhaps would not have joined on his own. Eduardo said:

The three of us just happened to click and hit it off…and we all lived in proximity to each other….One of the first few days…[one of the guys] told us about a fraternity event that was going on. And I was kind of hesitant--I wasn't really planning to join a fraternity when I came to campus….But we went there, we started meeting some of the guys, we ate the food and we thought the guys were kinda cool. They invited us to their next event….Afterwards I think it was Scott and Matt told me they were going to rush and they're like, oh why don't you do it with us, [Eduardo], c'mon…they encouraged me to. So, it was kind of like the three of us just decided to do it together and it was a great experience. I'm really glad now that back then I did it because I mean my fraternity experience is one of the most memorable experiences that I've had here at the University.

Eduardo, in essence, had surrendered some of the control or decision-making about his free time to his peer group. He was influenced by his peers' interests and made choices about how he would get involved based on the influence from his peers. Upcraft and Gardner (1989) point out that this is a common thing new students do, particularly in a residence hall setting. The experience Eduardo describes is also an example of how

aspects of the community theme overlap with aspects of the involvement theme. It was the influence of his peers that motivated Eduardo to get more involved in the University community.

The support from their peers was not important to participants just in terms of getting involved in formal organizations. To some students, just having a peer group to be with while getting orientated to the campus was important; most of them were concerned about not feeling alone. Joshua laughed now as he recalled how none of the freshmen wanted to go to the student union (Graham Center) alone. Having a peer group to go with was quite important to him and to other first year students. He recalls:

> I remember--especially at lunch, Brian would drive to GC [the student union].
> So, we'd all go in Brian's car, because it was always a road trip in his car and
> we'd drive to GC and park in the parking garage. I didn't see the point of that
> (laughter), because we could always get there faster by walking. But you know, it
> was always fun to go in Brian's car, so we would go in Brian's car and go and eat
> in GC. Even later on when you would go there and you would look across and
> there would be another crowd of FYRST students sitting at the other table,...so it
> wasn't like you were the only ones who were doing this group thing. It just made
> it more comfortable.

This kind of comfort as Joshua describes it, is so important to first year students. Studies suggest that more students drop out of school their first year, not because of poor academic performance, but because they have difficulty adjusting to the campus culture (Thompson, Samiratedu, & Rafter, 1993). In this case, Joshua and his friends were trying to get oriented to an aspect of the campus culture that was related to how students interact in the student union.

Some participants also commented on how the lack of peer support at times was difficult. Joshua had a single room while in FYRST, meaning that he shared the four-person suite with only one other person, who had a single accommodation in the

adjoining room of the suite. Joshua remembers feeling a bit left out because that

relationship was not forming in the same sense that he saw others forming on the floor:

> I remember that because I had a single, I kinda felt like I was missing out on
> something because I didn't have a roommate. When I would go into other rooms,
> I would see everything. So I guess I felt like I was missing out on something. I
> remember my [suitemate], he had a single as well; he was very quiet. I thought I
> was quiet...he was extremely quiet. He had a big wall in front of him. You could
> not talk to him initially, so that was very rough, not being able to communicate
> with him and not having anyone else in your room. Where else did that leave me
> but to go outside and to meet everybody else.

Like Joshua, Amanda also recalls what it was like to not have that peer support

initially. Amanda had come to FIU from Guyana and spent most of the time during her

first semester with friends from back home. Her situation, as was described earlier, was

such that she really did not interact with her peers much that first semester. She talked

about how she realized what she was missing:

> [These students] lived on my floor, but I never made an attempt to get to know
> them and then over Christmas and when we came back in January and everyone is
> talking about how much they missed each other and they missed talking to each
> other in the halls...and I would never be there because I never spent nights there,
> so I was like, OK, it is time to do a three-sixty.

After taking the time to get more involved with her peers, things changed for Amanda.

She recalls now that "The people that I met on campus, all of these new people that I

made friends with...I learned so much from them." Amanda described how, as she began

to spend more time with her peers, she realized how much they shared in common. Her

friends from her first semester were concerned about going out and seeing Miami, so

that's how she spent much of her first several months. Amanda described how during her

second semester, she spent time with her peers, just getting to know them and focusing

more on her studies.

Hema was one student who, in looking back, cited the interaction and support from her peers as being the most enjoyable part of the program for her:

> I liked best making all those friends. That was the main thing. You know, in the end, all you need is your friends around you. I mean, we were all brought together by FYRST and you know that was the whole idea, to just develop one big friendship and that was it, that was like the main thing; that was most important to me.

Jasmine added that, when she looks back on the experience, she reflects on how valuable that support from her peers was to her:

> I feel that the program was there to help you form relationships with people, friendships with people that you could possibly have for the rest of your life, and I know of a couple of people that I met through the FYRST program, and I know that we'll be friends for a very long time.

While many of the students reflected on what they gained from their peers, some also were able to see how they contributed to their peers, how they were influential to others. Anthony believes that part of his influence had to do with the fact that he was older than other students:

> When people came over, I would [say], OK, not too long….Or I was the one who had the license so I would take them around….When it came to schoolwork and stuff like that, they would come to me. Actually everyone came to me. I would remind my roommate to study and would try to wake him up to study. I was more like the parent than anything else. But it was cool; it wasn't anything that bothered me.

Anthony was one of the two students who transferred into the FYRST program with prior college experience. Joshua was the other student, having gone to a community college in Barbados. While Joshua was not older in age than the other students, as Anthony was, interestingly they were the two participants who did seem to be most influential with their peers. As Anthony described, he was seen as a parental figure by some. Joshua was "looked up to" by other participants because of his outstanding academic record and

strong self-discipline. While both served as informal leaders while in FYRST, they each also became Resident Assistants after their experience in FYRST. Their leadership exhibited early on within FYRST seemed to have been recognized by others in the community and by members of the staff who hired them.

Shared experiences. The second sub-theme in the community theme is shared experiences. This sub-theme is used to describe the sense that participants enjoyed living with others who were "in the same boat" and often were motivated to join FYRST in order to be with others going through the same experience. Kevin described it by saying, "We all felt that we had something in common." It was not surprising that shared experiences emerged as a theme for FYRST participants, given that this sense of common purpose and experience is articulated by Minor (1999) as an essential element for the development of community. That is, there needs to exist a clear sense among members of the primary focus and purpose of its members.

Having these shared experiences was considered by participants to be important even in their application process to FYRST. Many of the participants applied to be part of FYRST because they believed that being with other freshmen would provide greater comfort in their transition than if they lived among older, upper division students. Isabelle expressed this in talking about what prompted her to apply to FYRST:

> I remember that I read that you would live…on a freshmen wing or freshmen floor, and I was like, well that's good and bad--but I was more for the pros of doing that, because at least these people would be in the same boat [as me]…If I was sharing a room with a senior, I don't know how that interaction would be because they're not really experiencing what I'm experiencing.

Jasmine echoes this sentiment as she remembers coming from her home in Miami to visit the campus with a friend. Her friend and she were applying to be roommates in

Housing and the friend told her they should apply for FYRST She described what she thought would be good about living with other freshmen:

> I guess being with people on the same level--you know we're all coming into college. I guess being someone who is probably much older or who had been here for a couple years, I guess they would kind of think we were some kind of cuckoo kids, so if we were around other cuckoo people, at least you don't feel weird (laughter). So, I guess that was a good thing--just knowing that everyone is on a same level here, that we're just all on an equal plane. I guess that's good to have.

That concern about living with older students and being able to relate to one another, was also expressed by Eduardo:

> I thought yeah, it might be kind of cool to live with other residents [in their] first year so they were going through the same things that I was going through and I think it was just more appealing to be living with all freshmen rather than juniors or seniors who might have, I don't know...I just felt like for the age, I felt like I'd be able to relate more with freshmen than some of the other people I saw walking around campus, because I think FIU--from orientation I noticed it and from my experiences with FIU, was that the traditional student was a lot older than 18...so I wanted to make sure I had people my age to be around.

While participants expressed a hope that their decision to live with other freshmen would lead to a more comfortable situation for them, once at FIU, they found that this indeed was the case for them. Participants commented that the shared experiences-- knowing that people are going through the same things--made it easier to cope with the challenge of beginning college. Shakira remembers that the opportunity to go through the same experiences with other freshmen "seemed valuable." Hema described her thoughts when deciding to apply to FYRST:

> I thought, OK, it's a new university and a new place and people are in the same boat as I am, so I may as well....I think I chose to be part of the group because we can all share our first concerns or any problems we might have....It wouldn't have been the same if I had not been a part of that. I would have just been on my own and I didn't really like that. So, I liked that everyone was living on the same wing. You knew everyone as soon as you stepped out of your room. I liked that.

Eduardo also indicated that knowing that his friends and neighbors in FYRST were going through the same thing made it easier. He cited this as the thing he most enjoyed about being part of FYRST:

> What I enjoyed most was definitely having a wing full of people who were in the same situation I was--in their first year at the university, first time living on their own, just basically trying to survive in a university atmosphere for the first time...worried about money, worried about roommates, worried about academics--and I think that was kind of comforting that I didn't feel like I was alone or that I was a stranger. I felt like there were a lot of people in my situation and that was kind of reassuring.

Even Anthony, who was a few years older in age than the other students, now reflects that living with the traditional-aged freshmen gave him the feeling of being with others "in the same boat." Anthony reflected on how he had assumed that that would not be the case:

> Immediately, because of the structure of the FYRST program, I assumed--not assumed--I irrationally assumed that because I was older, I didn't belong there, that I could have done that on my own--like been on a different floor and why would I want to be with freshmen who were three years younger than me? But, that lasted like ten minutes.

He went on to talk about the things he shared in common with other first year students and the comfort that that sense of community provided for him. It is interesting to note that both Anthony and Joshua, the two participants with some prior college experience, both came in thinking that FYRST would not be beneficial to them. Yet, for both, their perceptions quickly changed and they each integrated well into the community, feeling certain commonalities with other students, as they were all trying to adjust to a new environment while beginning their college experience at FIU.

A close-knit community. The third and final sub-theme in the community theme is a close-knit community. A close-knit community is used to describe the environment that

was fostered in the FYRST community, which led members to feel at home. It includes the student behaviors, norms and interactive experiences shared by residents. As this sub-theme is discussed, it may be easy to see how it overlaps with the sub-themes discussed already, and even to other themes, as for example involvement. Certainly the close-knit community that is fostered in FYRST is directly related to how students support one another and the fact that they do share many similar experiences. In fact, a cohesive community without the element of peer support or shared experiences would be a very different community. Similarly, a community does not just happen. It results, in part, from the interaction of students with their environment. This includes involvement with others in the community, as well as involvement in activities. This illustrates then the overlapping relationship between the themes of community and involvement as well. This example will be further discussed as I describe the involvement theme later.

As part of the close-knit community that developed, the participants all described how they needed to feel connected to their environment, to feel at home and to be successful. Minor (1999) offered a set of six essential elements for community. These include: (a) common purpose and core values; (b) membership and relationships; (c) proximity, territory, and boundaries; (d) shared standards and expectations; (e) communication and decision-making; (f) active involvement in shared experiences; (g) customs, traditions, and celebrations; and (h) identity and commitment. The presence of many of these elements are evident in the students' discussions, as they talked about the close-knit community that they experienced in FYRST. These elements of community also illustrate the work of Lewin, in that one can see how the students' behavior is shaped, in part, by the interactions with others and with experiences in the environment.

Every single participant spoke at great length about how the FYRST program fostered what many described as a "home away from home" or a "close-knit community." Jasmine talked about how the interaction and programs fostered this sense of community:

> Everyone was a part of the same group through Freshmen Experience and through the events that we had to go to…and I guess it helped you to become familiar with each other more and more, with each time we saw each other….I saw you here, I see you in class, and then we talk in class or whatever, so the next time I see you, I don't just walk past you in the hall without saying anything. I can actually stop and have a conversation. I guess bringing us together on a consistent basis helped us or helped me get to know other people better.

Her comments illustrate Minor's (1999) element of membership and relationships. As a member, Jasmine was aware of who constituted the membership of her community and the types of interactions that began to define her community. For example, she said that participants interact; they greet one another when they pass in the halls. The relationships in FYRST were fostered through the continuous interactions, which resulted in the closeness described by participants.

More examples of this closeness of the members of FYRST were shared. Many students spoke of the sense of belonging that a close-knit community fosters. Jasmine said, "The FYRST program gave me a group to belong to, from the very beginning. I didn't need to go out and search for a group, I was already a part of a group." This was important to her, to feel a part of a group. Even though she is from Miami and maintained many relationships from high school, it was important to her to feel a part of something at FIU. As an introvert, it was even more important to her, since she felt it unlikely that she would have searched for much of this involvement or the relationship on her own. Hema said, "[The FYRST program] was definitely a lot of fun. You felt togetherness, you felt a

sense of belonging." Anthony added, "I remember we were close. We were very, very close. You need anything--you could count on any one of them. We used to do everything." When asked about examples of the group's closeness, Anthony shared the following:

> The fact that people used to walk into your room at 2:00, 3:00, 5:00, 8:00 in the morning...We never had any incidents of anyone stealing or vandalizing anyone's stuff, or anyone getting threatened in any way. Everyone's doors were opened and people walked in and out. Actually, most of us used to be in the halls. Just there--hanging out, doing homework, and stuff like that.

In describing her sense of the community, Shakira said that there was always an opportunity for interaction. "Whether we would just decide to go to Denny's one evening or we'd just stay home and watch television, and talk afterwards." She added that the floor had "an open door policy--our doors were always open, so that people could come in and out." This is a common characteristic of community, as described by Boyer (1990), who said that, among other things, an effective community must be caring and open. The open-door practice of the community seemed to help residents meet one another and make them feel at home. Eduardo described:

> It was a very easy environment to meet people just because of the setup of Panther Hall....Everyone had their doors open or was just hanging out in the hall trying to meet people. It was all freshmen on the floor so everyone was very curious to meet people, to see what FIU was like.

Joshua also described the interaction that occurred from the beginning.

> The first few weeks I remember we got stoppers for our doors...so more people were likely to keep their rooms open and when you walked through the fourth floor, it was almost as if it was literally wider than every other wing--that's how it felt at least. Initially it was a lot of people coming and going into rooms. A lot of residents were just trying to get to know each other and trying to get a feel of where they are because people would come into rooms, go out of rooms, people would order food together. Even the first couple of days when you didn't even know who these people are--a couple of residents from next door knocked on my

door and asked me to order food and my first thought was, do I even know who you are and I want to order food with you? But I guess...people are very friendly and people were just looking for some company.

The way participants described the experience, it was as if there was a commitment to closeness built in by the mere fact that students were part of FYRST. These shared expectations relate to what Minor (1999) refers to as identity and commitment, where he explains that the community has to have a recognizable identity, one that is distinguishable from other communities. Students in this program recognized their linkage and identity as FYRST. There becomes, Minor says, established ways that members express their commitment to the community. Kevin remembers the commitment that existed among FYRST members in saying:

> I felt comfortable going into anyone's room and asking to borrow sugar or anything like that. We spoke when we passed each other in the hall. Even if we barely knew each other, if we knew we were in the FYRST program, then we made sure to speak to each other. I guess that was a sense of community; we just looked out for each other and even if we barely knew each other, just because we were [in FYRST], we just wanted to make sure everything was running smoothly.

> If anyone needed food--sure come over; if I have some, take it....A lot of people left their doors propped open, which I miss now....You just walk into someone's room, sit down, and just start talking. And even if you hadn't spoken with that person in three weeks--you just felt like the relationship wasn't broken, just because you haven't spoken--the next time you saw them, it was like you had just talked yesterday....There was no pressure to talk to anyone, but if you want to and the door's open, just come on in and talk. That was very cool...very comforting.

Participants like Hema also reflected on how she realizes now that the sense of home felt in the community really impacted her transition to FIU. This seems consistent with Astin's (1985) assertion, saying that organizing students into learning communities can help them avoid the feeling of isolation that is common at larger institutions. When asked about what advice Hema would give to potential FYRST participants, she said:

> I would tell them there's no way better to get your first step on the ground....I don't think I could have done it by myself. I don't think I could have done it without being part of the group. And I would let them know that it gives a chance for the student to just show his personality, show what he can give and he will receive so much more.

Hema, also an introvert, expressed concern about what things would have been like had she not been part of this identifiable group. If left "on her own", she said that she'd be concerned that she would not have adapted well.

Some students believed that this sense of community was initiated from the very first day when the group was gathered as part of a welcome and orientation. Joshua recalled the first day's event, when all of the FYRST students gathered in the residence hall lounge for an orientation meeting. It was the first time the group of FYRST students were gathered together. They participated in icebreakers to meet one another and learned more about the program and its expectations from Residential Life staff members. He recalls:

> I remember at the icebreaker it was very overwhelming because there were 80 people in that one room....And I remember everyone was in that room and we got our FYRST jerseys. I guess it created a sense of identity--we were in FYRST. We went back upstairs in our rooms and people were generally in the hallways and the rooms were never really shut at all.

Joshua recalls this first evening as setting the tone for the openness and interaction that would continue to characterize their community. He said:

> There were times when you would walk down the hall and it would be very quiet, but for the most part it was very busy, very, well, not very noisy, I wouldn't say that--it was active. We had residents coming in and out. We had people playing games in the hallway and the lounge. I remember having a lot of conversations with residents who lived right across from me--people who came into my room because I had a single my first semester, so everyone was fascinated with the single. Everyone would come over just to see what a single looked like, even though it looked like the exact same thing a double room looked like.

Participants became more aware of the sense of community that existed in FYRST when they observed the environment that existed in other residential areas or on other floors. This too demonstrates their identity as being distinguishable from other communities, an important element of community, as described by Minor (1999). Several participants made this type of comparison when describing the community of FYRST. Joshua described vividly how he saw FYRST compared to other floors in the same hall:

> I think it was different. Most of the students [in FYRST] were of the same age. I guess everyone was going through the same experiences. A lot of students had classes together so people knew each other already. A lot of students had also seen each other at orientation, so I guess right from the beginning there were already familiar faces in the hallway. Compared to other wings where people basically started meeting each other when they checked in. I think the meeting on the first day when we checked in also created a different atmosphere because everyone had met each other, everyone had done this silly icebreaker....I think a lot of things contributed to everyone just feeling a little bit more free to venture out of the wing, or just to knock on doors and get people out. Also the RAs, the first weekend, I remember we had a movie....I think a lot of students went to the movie so I think those little things eventually built up to the atmosphere in the hallway throughout the semester. I can't really recall anything like that being done on the other wings, even though I didn't live on the other wings.

He went on to describe later how just the interaction among the students was different. On other floors, he said, "fewer doors were open, fewer people were in the lounges, it was very quiet."

Chris seemed to agree with this comparison. When asked about how he felt his first year would have been different had he not been in FYRST, Chris offered:

> Very boring. Because [FYRST] helped me to get out and meet all these people. In FYRST everybody had their doors opened, you walk in and out of everybody else's room, see everybody that was down the hallway, you knew everybody's name and everybody's face and...when you go to other floors, you see an entirely closed hallway, nobody knew who their neighbor was. You went to visit somebody and sometimes the person didn't even know the name of the person who was their actual suitemate. So, if I wasn't in the program, I figured I'd probably be still shy, and not that outgoing, not knowing a lot of people, just

going to class, going back to my room, going to sleep, just studying. It gave me all around a better first year.

Despite all of the aspects of closeness described by participants, it should also be noted that this tight knit community also had its drawbacks. Some students reflected on the immaturity that existed among members. When talking about what he enjoyed least about FYRST, Joshua said:

> Maybe I enjoyed least the noise at times or the immaturity of some of the students--just the maturity level with some students with noise and with messing up the hallway. I thought it was just unnecessary--people spraying shaving cream in the hallway...you know at times there was ketchup spilled on the doors in the hallway and McDonald's wrappers. So to some point, the maturity of some of the students, not even cleaning up after themselves in the hallway--and the noise, a lot of students were inconsiderate. I guess that is what I would change or what I found most unappealing.

Eduardo also reflected on the negative elements that can come with the rewards of the closeness. He said, "I remember that there was a sense of community. Everybody knew each other very well--in some cases maybe a little too well. There was a lot of gossiping and stuff going on on the floor." He also added:

> I think a disadvantage was that everyone knew what everyone else was doing-- who was dating who or who hooked up with who--and there was just constant rumors flying. I thought that that was probably the biggest negative to the program. Also, since everybody was freshmen, there was a lot of immature [behavior] going around...things like vandalism or just mean spirited type gossip aimed to hurt people.

The community that developed within FYRST certainly did not end with the end of their first year experience. Many of the participants shared that the closeness of the group and the relationships continued in many ways well after that first year. Amanda talked about the group's transition immediately following the end of the spring semester:

> We went to the fair together and then that summer, so many of us stayed for summer A....Almost the entire fourth floor that stayed moved to Building C in the

apartments. So, we just like carried over the whole thing…and it was just the best. Jasmine also believes that the experience helped her develop lasting friendships and, just as importantly, the opportunity to continue to feel at home at FIU:

> I think being part of the program was a very good thing for me because now the reason I can say I know a lot of people who live in Housing and I can walk down wherever on campus and be like, "hey how are you doing"…it is because of that. It opened that door. Even though I got involved in other parts of campus or other activities on campus, a lot of the people that I do know are the people who live here and those faces that I've seen and gotten to know and now I don't feel like I'm in a strange place anymore. I think that's what the program gave you--that ability to meet people and not making it such a big deal. Being that I'm a very introverted type of person already, it helped that, just you know--it's your neighbor down the hall, but before you know it, that person became a friend.

Hema also remains in contact with many of her FYRST peers. "People who I have seen since my first semester, my first day here, I still keep in touch with them. And I think because of this, you know, we were brought together by FYRST."

This theme of community was presented first because with almost all participants, it was the first aspect they discussed in the interviews; it seemed to be the most important aspect of the experience to them. This should not be too surprising, given that Upcraft and Gardner (1989) have said that establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships is expressed often by freshmen as being their biggest concern regarding college.

Involvement

The involvement theme is used to describe the students' participation in campus life and their interaction with other members of the University community. It consists of five sub-themes. They are (a) participation in activities and organizations, (b) interaction with residence hall staff, (c) interaction with faculty, (d) interaction with other students,

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and (e) striving for balance and focus.

Participation in activities and organizations. The first sub-theme in the involvement theme is participation in activities and organizations. This sub-theme describes the experiences of FYRST students getting involved in residence hall and campus programs, activities and organizations.

The involvement in the program stems from the requirements that are in place for student participants, as described earlier in this chapter, as well as the various efforts made by the staff to encourage student participation in the residence hall and campus community. Programs took place several times each week, with students being free to choose those that they attended. They were typically held in lounges in the building. Most involved a University staff member serving as the facilitator or presenter, and addressed one of a variety of the issues relevant to first year students. All of the participants expressed that they gained many benefits from getting involved. The literature is clear that involvement outside of the classroom contributes positively to student success. In regard to his findings from a study of more than 20,000 students, 25,000 faculty members and 200 institutions, Astin (1993) stated:

> The review once again underscores the tremendous potential that student involvement has for enhancing most aspects of the undergraduate student's cognitive and affective development. Learning, academic performance, and retention are positively associated with academic involvement, involvement with faculty, and involvement with student peer groups. (p. 394).

It is not surprising then that participants articulated many of these benefits when talking about their own experiences.

The participants reflected on how the programs they attended helped them interact further with their peers. Again, this highlights how this sub-theme of involvement in

activities and organizations overlaps with the sub-themes of interactions with other students and peer influence. Shakira commented, "I think the programs were geared toward us congregating, toward us interacting with each other." Chris added, "I went to all the programs which really helped in terms of meeting new people and getting really involved and learning about everything and making new friends." This is consistent with literature that asserts that out-of-class learning mostly impacts students' social and affective development (Love & Love, 1995). Particularly for the introverted participants, it seems that their involvement helped foster their social development as well.

Kevin saw the programs as a chance to interact with other students and found that often the conversations began at programs but continued on the floors and in the hallways:

> [Programs were] in place to meet people that you wouldn't see in the FYRST program, because all of Panther Hall was invited....I think the programs helped out a lot. When you come back to your wing, and then all night you're talking about the program we just came from and what did you think about it. You find out what your roommates thought about it, what people down the hall thought about it. It was an educational experience for me, personally--maybe like with some people, it didn't affect them as much. If I was going to be down there and I had to be there, I wanted to get something out of it, so maybe I took the programs a little more seriously than others.

This experience Kevin describes, where students continue to engage in discussion after a program--in their residence hall-- is one the type of experience that student affairs professionals strive to foster in order to enhance student learning.

Through their interaction with peers and participation in programs and events, students are able to exchange with one another thoughts on important issues and topics. The participants remembered some very specific experiences from the programs they attended. Shakira was one of five participants who recalled a program that was intended

to challenge students' awareness of diversity issues. The activity simulated an environment where people were asked to carry out such tasks as getting a job, buying a house, or getting an education. Along the way, however, they were met with barriers of discrimination:

> What sticks out in my mind is that program Archie Bunker [a diversity program]. It was unique in the whole idea behind...how we view ourselves and how people view us in terms of what happens when you're in the minority and when you're viewed differently.

In the discussions about this program, all of the participants commented on how they learned more about issues of oppression. This is clearly an example of how aspects of this involvement theme overlap with aspects of the identity theme, whereby students explore their own values and beliefs while engaging in a residence hall activity.

Chris recalled many programs when asked about what he had learned in FYRST. He particularly remembered programs about friendships, lifestyles, cults, and dealing with roommates. He spoke about one specific program:

> I remember...the rape program that they had and that one stood out because I remember seeing what could go on and what really could be interpreted as going too far and just not good conduct....That one really stuck in my head.

The value of the programs was sometimes not realized until later. Several participants commented that, in retrospect, they see how what they learned at the programs benefited them as students down the road. For example, Shakira said:

> At the time, actually, some of the programs were a bit mandatory and I remember worrying about it at times and when I look back on it now, I know that it was beneficial....Most of the programs dealt with freshmen type issues. They had a program on date rape and alcohol and drugs and a lot of academic programs...I see the benefit of it now.

Other participants like Eduardo, look back now and see the lessons they learned

by getting involved in programs or organizations. Eduardo reflected how the involvement helped improve his own confidence and made him realize that if you want something, you need to pursue it:

> I think I gained a lot of confidence that year in my ability just because both positions [I applied for and got], I remember at the time, there were a lot of people applying for them....I was just really amazed and really happy that I got these positions....I realized that if I stepped up and tried to take a leadership role, I'd stand a good chance of getting it---like, "In the land of apathy, the assertive man is king.", so I think that is the lesson I was beginning to learn at that point.

Joshua also believed that the involvement in different activities and organizations provided him with a lesson not realized until later. He believed that his involvement in programs through FYRST helped him gain confidence, which in turn had a significant impact on his experience inside the classroom:

> I think that having gone to--having spoken to so many people and having voiced my opinion in some meeting or in some program or to somebody, you know helped me out a little bit more in the classroom. You kind of get a better feel, you feel a little more comfortable when you go and sit in the classroom and you have to say something in front of the entire class.

> I remember a couple of my classes I would sit at the back. And you know, I was always the guy who came and sat in the back with the cap and did the schoolwork and left--and then, later on I would start to get to know some of the people in my classes. I guess I was spreading my wings a little bit, and not only getting to know people who lived around me, but also those taking the same classes as me. I decided to get their phone numbers.

This confidence that Joshua gained also helped him in discussions and conversations. He explained:

> I think [my involvement in FYRST] just gave me--I just felt a little bit better about myself. And felt a little more adjusted. I wasn't all about schoolwork. And then the only thing I could talk about wasn't just schoolwork. I can talk about other--look at all of these different conversations I have with all of these residents, or with all of these people around me where I lived. I can have those same conversations with the people in my class.

So I just felt more comfortable going into class....And so I was able to bring that little bit of confidence in the classroom. So I think that [my involvement] did affect me positively. Just in that I felt more comfortable, I felt like I was--I wouldn't say that it made me a better student, but it made me feel like I have the confidence to say something if I think a professor made a mistake or if I agree with something that he is saying, I can just feel free to talk like everyone else around me can. And I think I got a little bit of that from the programs I attended, or from the meetings, or from my interactions in the hallway.

Statements such as those expressed by Eduardo and Joshua were echoed by many of the participants. Their involvement, they now realize, led to positive growth in their own self- awareness. This is consistent with what the literature tells us are outcomes of student involvement. A study was conducted of 14 institutions noted for involving students in educational experiences outside of the classroom. Kuh (1993) reported on the specific outcomes that students most often identified as positive effects related to their high levels of involvement. The top three positive effects students identified were self-awareness, autonomy and self-directedness, and confidence and self-worth. These are the same types of effects students in FYRST reported. It is easy to see then how this sub-theme of involvement in activities and organizations connects to or overlaps with the sub-theme of identity. For many of the FYRST participants, involvement in activities and organizations helped foster their own growth and development. For Joshua, the two themes also were overlapping with the theme of academics, as illustrated by his example of how his involvement in activities gave him confidence, which in turn helped him in the classroom.

For many participants, getting involved in programs and activities through FYRST seemed to open up the doors to their further involvement. This is consistent with recent studies on learning communities (Johnson & Romanoff, 1999; Romanoff, 2000; Tinto, Love & Russo, 1993; Zeller, 1996) finding that students' participation in these

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learning communities has lead to their greater involvement in the campus community.

Isabelle commented that FYRST influenced her to get more involved on campus by

showcasing to her and the other students different opportunities. Through programs, the

Freshman Experience class, mentors and staff members, the FYRST participants were

exposed to numerous opportunities on the campus.

Jasmine was also one who reflected a great deal on her involvement. She

attributes much of her initial pursuits to things she learned about through her FYRST

Freshman Experience class:

> In every class we had the different people, who came and talked about whatever activities were going on on campus and a lot of things I didn't know about. So then I could pick and choose and say, yeah I really like this one, so let me take down this office and I can go and visit it or visit them during the week and find out more about it. So, it gave us the medium to find out about different things.

This, Jasmine said, was important because as a freshman, one does not always know how

to get involved. She explained:

> I think when you are a new student or someone who is not really involved, you don't know really where to go to do this or to do that. If you don't have someone come and tell you about it, you would never know that it ever existed. So, when having that medium--when people came and told us about [a particular club]...or whatever things they have going on in Campus Life, then when I finally made my way up to the third floor of [the union], I could probably be introduced to a lot of other things that were there. But if I never knew there was a [Campus Life Office], how would I ever find out about anything else?

Jasmine added that in looking back now, she realizes that the close community

and the sense of home provided by FYRST allowed her to feel more a part of things, and

so she wanted to go to Hall Council meetings or other activities on campus. This

illustrates the overlap between community and involvement. Jasmine said:

> It [the close community] enabled me in a way to get involved in other things and I didn't feel like some kind of stranger trying to get in some kind of things I would

never fit into, let's say. So it enabled me to take that step to get involved in something else--what made it even better was when someone here was a part of it too. So…you know, are you going to the meeting today? Oh yeah, I am…OK, then let's walk together. And we don't feel like this little lone rider. So, that's what it enabled me to do.

Shakira also remarked:

While in the program, we participated in a lot of campus events and even within Housing itself, and I think that involvement spilled over into my further involvement.

Among the participants, Eduardo is one of the more involved students now, but prior to joining FYRST, he did not value involvement to any great extent. Remember, it was actually the influence of his peers, as earlier discussed, that motivated his involvement during the first several weeks. He said:

At first actually I didn't think it was too important to get involved. In high school, aside from being on the swim team and water polo team, I wasn't too involved. However, when I came to the University, I saw that a lot of people were involved in a lot of different things and I felt that I wanted to make the most of my college experience. I felt that if I didn't get involved, I would really be missing something. That belief was really affirmed by most of the people I met on campus, including my RA. I was seeing that everybody kind of belonged to some group or some kind of organization and was really doing something in regard to university life. And…I really wanted to get everything I wanted out of college, so I decided to get involved in one thing and then it just kind of snowballed. I think that when you get involved in one thing on campus, regardless of the group or organization, you find out people in that group that are involved in other groups or organizations on campus, and then you kind of talk to them and get involved in what they're involved with also.

Interaction with residence hall staff. The second sub-theme in the involvement theme is interaction with residence hall staff. This sub-theme is used to describe the impact of interactions that FYRST students have with staff in the residence halls, including the student resident assistants, professional staff in the building and volunteer peer mentors.

The resident assistants working with FYRST had a significant influence on many of the participants. Studies have shown that resident assistants can have a significant impact on student development when they are specially trained and encouraged to assist students (Miltenberger, 1996); this appeared to be the case in FYRST. The FYRST RAs were identified by many of the participants as one of their main support systems during the first year. Participants most often mentioned how the RAs were friendly, resourceful, and good listeners. Many participants commented on the extensive efforts the RAs made to help the residents get to know one another and feel at home. Joshua said, in talking about one of the FYRST RAs:

> It always seemed that ever since check-in, she always followed up with me and checked to see how I was doing....Her door was always open, so there was always interaction with her and she was influential in terms of me getting a little more settled. Me getting a little more adjusted to the lifestyle, to the food, to all those little things--to homesickness...my schoolwork, advising me on professors. Because when I first came, for me everything was about school--all my questions were about a certain class. She was always there to answer those questions.

Joshua particularly felt that he and his RA shared some things in common. Their majors were similar--within the field of Business--and they were both international students. These commonalities made him comfortable turning to her for support and guidance.

For Shakira, her relationship with her RA was also strengthened by the common experience of being international students. In talking about how her RA impacted her, Shakira said:

> I guess there was an understanding of how it works when you come from a different country and you come here for school....I thought that he was a good listener....In terms of him impacting me, it was necessary, because although I have people around my own age and my own peers, I still needed that guidance. Just his presence and him being there and...checking in on us was good.

For other participants, it was also the small things the RAs did to create a warm

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and supportive environment that the students appreciated. Kevin said about one of the FYRST RAs, "He was very supportive, always positive, no matter what was going on, so I enjoyed seeing him during the day, because he always had something positive to say, so I appreciated that." Eduardo added this about his own experience with his RA:

> I had a great RA who helped me out in a lot of situations. I felt like I could always go to her, and she just gave me good advice and made me feel comfortable....I remember the first couple of days, she was very nice and very welcoming and told us we could go to her with any problems.

> At first I really took it for granted, that OK, she's the RA, she's supposed to get us in trouble. That's kind of the perception that I had of RAs at the time, but she was very nice and a person that you could just really go to and talk to about anything, so whenever I had a question about a class or where something was located or what I should do, how I should take care of financial aid, any type of question I had--like on the way to the elevator, I had to pass her door, so I'd just stop by, knock--her door was usually open, or if not, I'd just knock and she'd help me out with any problems I had.

About his FYRST RA, Chris said:

> She was really outgoing. She made sure that we were all having fun and that we were all OK, making progress and that we never had a dull day, that we always had something to do. She was always a cheerful person; her door was always open. It made life a lot easier knowing that you had somebody to go to.

For some participants, they identified that they received such great support from their RA, that it inspired them to want to be an RA or mentor to future students. Shakira was one who expressed this:

> My applying for the RA position--it stemmed from my interaction with my RA actually. I remember several times I would be so homesick and I would go to him and it was so easy for me to go to him and it inspired me to want to apply for the position because I realized that there was so much that he gave me--just from his experience and just from him being an RA, that I just felt that I could do the same with someone else.

Anthony also added, in talking about one of the FYRST RAs:

> He was also from my country. He inspired me a lot. When I was a freshman, he

was a junior, so I saw that avenue of where I wanted to see myself going, like as far as the RA position too--he pushed me a lot too, like what avenues to take and...he was pretty influential.

This is an example of how different elements of the involvement theme overlap with one another. The experience of FYRST participants interacting with their Resident Assistants overlaps with the experience of getting involved on campus. The RAs encouraged the involvement of the students in activities and organizations.

Another example of overlapping themes is seen when considering how many of the participants reported having conversations with their resident assistant about academic issues. While I have chosen to present this data in the involvement theme, it does overlap with academics, and particularly the sub-theme of interaction around academic matters. Joshua shared, "One of the RAs was a business major, so I would ask her advice on a business school or a business class." And Shakira also shared a major with her RA. She said that he provided guidance to her academically. "He was able to talk about the classes he took and which ones he found were better." Eduardo also recalled getting advice from his RA on a lot of topics, including academic issues. He remembers having long conversations with her, when he'd get "A lot of advice on what classes to take, what services were available...on campus....She answered a lot of questions that I had about university life and study habits...She just made me feel comfortable." This notion of role modeling is a significant component if the RA is to be effective in encouraging student development (Miltenberger, 1996). The power of the peer influence is strong, particularly because as touched upon earlier, new students tend to surrender some control to the peer group (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). If an RA is able to role model and foster positive academic habits, this can impact the students' academic

lives in the residence halls.

Hema also felt her RA was supportive of the FYRST students academically:

> She would come in and just chat with us. And we would just go to her room and discuss anything and she'd be up anytime….Anything, I mean anything related to school and to classes…she was very supportive and she really gave us good advice….Don't be weak, be strong, you can do it as much as anybody else. And that's what we needed--we needed someone who went through it and who we can rely on and someone we can see as a strong figure, you know someone who turned out to be very strong and graduated--someone successful, you know you want to see that.

Participants also spoke about the interaction they had with the FYRST mentors. These mentors, as explained earlier, were students who lived in the hall and volunteered to serve in a mentoring capacity with the FYRST members. Many of them had previously been FYRST members themselves. Because these were other peer leaders, their influence on the students, given the literature on peers previously shared, could be expected. Kevin explained the role mentors played in supporting him and other students:

> Support…it definitely came from the mentors. Like any athletic event, if you showed up, they were there supporting you, both at that event and also because they wanted you to do well academically, they would come and make sure you're studying…like if they see you just wasting time, they'd ask shouldn't you be studying? Don't you have something to do? So, [the mentors] were people that I thought were really important, because when you really had a serious problem…they would sit down…and you could tell them your problem and they would go out of their way to help you.

Shakira shared her experience in being influenced positively by one of the mentors. Her mentor lived in the same suite as she did:

> One of the friendships that meant a lot was with this girl from Puerto Rico….She was different in her personal life--she was very spontaneous, very enthusiastic. She is not a quiet person and I think at that time I was very quiet, so we were able to bond in a different sense. I shouldn't say different, but different because we were different. But we had so many conversations about life at home, which was comforting for me. We talked about life at home and the difference between there and here and family, and all of the things that we treasured in our life. Actually

she is still my very close friend…she had an impact on me.

Kevin also shared a suite with one of the mentors and was influenced greatly by his presence. "He was from Africa. And that was just, almost a life-changing event. Not life changing, but it had a huge impact on the way I saw myself." A further explanation of Kevin's interactions with his mentor and his other suitemates is shared in the later identity theme, where Kevin describes how his personal beliefs about who he is as a Black male were challenged. The overlap of these two elements in the involvement and identity themes resulted in a very significant learning experience for Kevin, as to be described later.

Eduardo, who also shared a room with a mentor, recalled the support the mentor offered right when everyone moved in:

> I remember my roommate at the time was a mentor for the FYRST program. A bunch of us…printed out all our schedules, and he showed us where all our classes were going to be located, so I had no fear about getting to my classes the first day, that I wouldn't be able to find them the first day, because I already knew where they were, so that was nice.

He also added about his roommate, a mentor:

> He gave me all sorts of advice and was just a really, really nice guy. [He] helped me out a lot. Any questions that I had about school, about papers, about anything, he was always there to help and we got along great.

These positive interactions with peer mentors seem quite significant, given the research previously discussed regarding the impact of peers on retention.

A few of the participants also remarked that other staff members in the residence hall were helpful to them. In particular, the Residence Life Coordinator, a full-time professional managing the building, had an impact on many of the participants, through her involvement with the FYRST program and as an instructor for one of their sections of

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the Freshman Experience Class. About his contact with her, Anthony said:

> She had so much energy and so much life; it was interesting. Because like me personally, as easy as I am [able to] make friends....I was an introvert. And seeing how much life and how much energy this lady had was really different. She was unforgettable.

He went on to explain how he was influenced by her energy and enthusiasm and what he learned:

> Even though you might not care about it, once you're going to do it, you put your best foot forward and put your all into it. And that is probably something I will take on through rest of my life.

Chris also found the Residence Life Coordinator to be supportive of him his first year:

> I got to know Patty. She was cool. She invited us to a lot of get-togethers. She'd see you and talk to you, and get to know you as a person. And while she was like staff, she was also like a friend and helped you.

Isabelle expressed a similar sentiment:

> I loved working with her. She was awesome. I was kind of scared of everyone who had a position in Housing---like they're the big dogs, you know, but she was very down to earth and she just made you feel super comfortable in her class.

This residence life staff member, as participants described her, helped students feel at home and supported. This allowed them to seek her out too for support or assistance when they needed help. Given that Upcraft and Gardner (1989) indicate that freshman success is enhanced when they have a significant support system, this type of interaction with staff is certainly beneficial to students.

Interaction with faculty. The third sub-theme in the involvement theme is interaction with faculty. This refers to the students' interaction with faculty both in and out of the classroom. The FYRST program did not have a formal linkage with faculty at

the time the participants were involved in the program. During the interviews, only 1 of the 10 participants mentioned a particular faculty member or a particular experience with a faculty member. When specifically asked how they viewed faculty that first year, most students commented briefly that they were helpful. Shakira said, "They were accommodating actually....I felt comfortable talking with them on a one-to-one [basis]."

Amanda was the only participant who specifically mentioned her experience with faculty. When asked about her support system at FIU, she talked about the support she received from faculty and staff in the Honors College:

> I had a really good support group here from the advisors from the Honors College. Because before I actually came up to FIU, I just picked schools at random. Picked from my major. Like Berkeley, California, FIU, UM, and UF. So I chose FIU, and I got into the Honors College and they e-mailed me this one thing. And the woman who e-mailed me, her e-mail was just so friendly and so I e-mailed her like right after and she--every single day--she began to look for them because I had all of these questions.

Amanda further explained how this communication with these individuals continued. She considered them a big source of support for her during the first year, and reports that she still maintains very regular communication with them.

With student-faculty relations being the second most potent source of influence on student growth (Astin, 1993), it was no surprise that this experience was so meaningful for Amanda, but unfortunately this type of experience was limited among participants. Given the belief that freshman success is enhanced when a campus climate promotes student-faculty interaction (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989), I felt the absence of this interaction should be noted in describing these students' experiences. This issue will be further examined in Chapter V.

Interaction with other students. The fourth sub-theme in the involvement theme is

interaction with other students. This refers to the planned and unplanned opportunities students have to engage with one another in a meaningful way.

Peer interaction in the FYRST program was significant. For many of the FYRST participants, the interaction that the program fostered among students was one element that they spoke about most frequently. This aspect is obviously connected to the sense of community that was described earlier. In addition, the interaction among students on academic matters is talked about in more detail in a later section. In reality, the interaction among the students is really the foundation for so much of what happened in the program; after all, it is the interaction in part that characterizes a community of learners.

Many of the participants spoke about the interactions that happened among students through informal conversations and gatherings. Shakira shared an account of how students began to talk about common experiences with one another:

> I think it was actually very early on, like the first semester. We would just congregate in front of our rooms. We would sit there and talk about...life and studies and school and relationships. That happened quite often....Or we would talk about how we would view our life after school, what we wanted out of life.

Jasmine also talked about the late night conversations that the students had. She said, "I think we talked a lot about our families--past events in our lives, I guess future aspirations, boyfriends, girlfriends...[those were] the general things that we...talked about--goals."

Chris shared his perspective on how he thinks this interaction and ultimately the relationships between participants formed:

> Through a lot of the programs and the Freshman Experience class, even--you heard about a lot of people's interests, what they're into, and what they've been

through before, so you kind of gravitated to the kind of people you wanted to deal with. And from there, you met their friends, and you got to be friends with those people…and just roaming the halls and meeting new people--going from room to room, that's how I met a lot of people.

Some participants were able to look back and reflect on things that they learned through interacting with other students. Joshua learned much about himself and described his experience as follows:

> The thing that I learned the most was that I became more sociable. I learned more about myself in terms of that I thought I was a shy person, and I realized I can be shy--and I can also be [outgoing]…I am good at adapting to different situations and…I learned that through all my different interactions with everyone--interacting in a small group, in a big group, studying in a group--all those little things--they may seem minor, but they make your first year experience. I would have to say that that's what the first year really taught me--it just taught me to open up. And to realize I can be anything that I want to; I shouldn't be confined to anything. A lot of people say, "oh that doesn't suit you" or "that isn't Joshua." No, Joshua can be anything that Joshua wants to be. It's just a matter of finding who I am. I think it's helped me identify myself, realizing I can be sociable and I can be reserved. It's OK to be wild and goofy, and it's OK not to be.

This is a clear example of the process a new student goes through. Similar to the vector developing competence discussed in Chickering and Reisser (1993), Upcraft and Gardner (1989) say that students must develop identity. That is, they must make some progress toward understanding and defining themselves more clearly, as they often are faced with struggles related to their identity during their first year. For Joshua and others, their interaction with peers helped them in establishing their own identity and answering the question of who am I really? It is interesting to note here too that Joshua, while not older in age, was one of the two participants who came into FIU, with prior college experience. His fellow students in FYRST looked up to him, yet Joshua was developing as an individual himself. Through the interactions with his peers, he gained more confidence in his own abilities.

Another example of this process of identity formation is from Hema, who reflected on how the interaction with other students helped her. For her, the interaction helped her to become more comfortable in expressing her own ideas:

> I think it was just exposure to everyone else and how everyone else thought and the RAs always…did icebreakers so you could express yourself and talk with them in groups and not feel shy about it. I think that was a big thing when you were forced to get out there and say what you wanted to say--just give input, contribute, you know you never felt shy about doing anything. It was always about helping others….It helped because I would always be the shy one in the classroom. All of a sudden when I thought of something, I could actually say it.

For some students, getting accustomed to this interaction among the students was difficult at first. Joshua described an experience he had early on when he was questioning whether he wanted to be part of this close interaction among group members:

> I remember someone knocking on my door and I didn't answer. And it was about [7:00 in the evening]. I was just reading something, and didn't really feel like going out at the time. I guess that was probably around the time I had just moved in--like the third day. And I wasn't really feeling like any interaction; I just wanted the degree and to leave here.

Joshua really believed at first that he would go through his college experience and not need the interaction or involvement with others. His introverted nature contributed to this approach. He recalls though feeling a bit of regret that night when he wasn't with the group. He said:

> I later remember finding out that everyone had gone to a movie and everyone came back…you could hear when you're in the room and it was so quiet at night, you could hear when a crowd of people came back. I remember going up to the peephole and seeing a crowd of people coming back, or just hearing a crowd of people coming back and then the next day hearing that everyone went to a movie--I felt like I missed out on that a little bit, but at the time, I was just like, I don't want to see anyone.

In Amanda's case, she really chose not to be a part of the group in the beginning and had little interaction with her peers in the program. She later realized the impact this

had on her. Amanda admits that her connection with her peers came much too late in the year. One night, she recalls, many of the students were in the lounge all playing Monopoly when they couldn't sleep. It was during that experience, that she really got to talk more in depth with many of her peers and realized how much they did indeed share in common. "They were like me and when we started talking, they were talking about things that they had done, and I was like--where was I? It was too late." She added:

> I came here to make friends, but I ended up getting together with friends that I had known from home that were up here already and that kind of swayed me away from the campus life and the housing life that I had in my spring semester, so I didn't really get a chance to know or meet or get involved in the housing or campus aspect of FIU, until my second semester, when I did a complete 360, because I had failed my first year--my first semester and my dad had told me, "you're there…get involved, do everything you can do. We're paying too much money for you to be there…" so, I decided to get involved and the ball just started rolling from there.

For students like Amanda and Joshua, they came into the program not believing that interaction with their peers was so important. Their own unique circumstances caused them to rethink that perspective. For Joshua, it was very early on, but for Amanda, it wasn't until the second semester.

Striving for balance and focus. The fifth and final sub-theme in the involvement theme is striving for balance and focus. The college experience provides FYRST students with many options for involvement and interaction. Many experienced the challenge of achieving a balance in what they were doing and the need to focus on what their priorities and goals were as a student.

When asked what kind of advice he would offer to new students, Chris said:

> Make sure you balance time with study, because a lot of people--it's their first time away from home, so they forget that they need to study too. And as long as they keep a schedule--balance partying with schoolwork, they'll get through it.

Having a lot of friends to help you, form little study groups, get involved…it helps a lot.

For some students, there was a realization early on for the need to remain focused on their purpose for being in school. This potentially posed a challenge, given their desire to be involved both in and out of the classroom. Also playing into this was the fact that the FYRST participants, like many freshmen students, were working on developing their social and academic competency (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). So, their new experiences of forming relationships, getting along with roommates, getting involved, and meeting academic demands, really challenged at times their ability to stay balanced and focused. Eduardo, a very involved student now, was one participant who felt that the FYRST program actually assisted him in achieving proper focus:

> I think when I look back on the FYRST program, from my perspective today----right now I have a 3.5 GPA, within my major I have a 3.9. I don't think I would have been as successful, both in academics and in extracurricular activities, such as student government or fraternity involvement, had I not been in the FYRST program. So I think it laid a good foundation for me and it really got me into campus life and into my studies. It kind of made school my life…I had a clear focus, whereas if I had been living at home at the same time, I think I'd still be hanging out with my high school friends which I don't think would have been positive at all because I see where a lot of them are now and they're either still going to junior college or dropped out of school completely. I don't think I would have achieved my academic goals had I not [been in the program]. And also it got me involved in extracurricular activities that I would have never imagined joining.

Eduardo thought about why this was the case and also added:

> I think I've read studies that show that students who live on campus have higher grades. The purpose of a university is to learn of course, and to get good grades, so when you're living at a university,…there's constant reminders that…you can't step away from…a large emphasis is put on your grades when you're living on campus in general--and in the FYRST program, I think academics are pushed as well as getting involved in campus life, so I think it kind of gave me direction.

Eduardo's comments are somewhat supported by the work of Pascarella, Terenzini and

Bliming (1994), who report a summary from numerous studies done comparing residential and commuting students. While higher grades was not a consistent finding in the studies, the authors do indicate that residence hall students benefit from other academic gains, such as a higher rate of persistence and graduation.

Hema was another participant who talked about the need to achieve a sense of balance, and the lessons in time management she learned through FYRST:

> You have to learn how to deal with stress...especially with a bunch of classes...and you have your clubs you go to, or societies or associations and everything else you have to deal with--like for those who work, there's so much you have to deal with, that you have to make a time plan....you have to say, OK, this time is for this and this time is for that, and that definitely helped because we learned a lot of that in the FYRST program.

For many students, there is also that realization that with their new independence, comes some responsibility for staying focused; no one is going to be there to make sure things are getting done. This coincides with the notion Chickering and Reisser (1993) discussed of moving through autonomy toward interdependence. Jasmine recalled how she learned that first year that she just needed to spend the time and do what was required of her academically, because no one else was going to make her. Even though her family was very close (in Miami), she was still the one who needed to make things happen. She said:

> I learned that you just have to do it. I mean, when it comes to that time to make whatever happen, you just have to get out there, sit down at the computer and write the paper, study how many hours it takes. You just have to do whatever you feel is necessary to get you to that point....You're probably never going to find someone to help you accomplish whatever you're going to do, and at times you just have to pull within yourself to just make it happen in an honest and good way...I'm a procrastinator so we'd always just be going out, watching TV, laying around, just doing whatever, then it would come to like--man, I have a paper due tomorrow, and I haven't read the book; I haven't done anything...nothing! And maybe my roommates...didn't have anything to do at that time, so they'd be like,

"Oh, you want to do something", and I'm like, "No! I need to do this right now!"

Jasmine admits that her procrastination was initially a problem. She wasn't used to

having to monitor her own schedule and tasks. She described:

> When it came to that time when I had to get it done, no one was going to help me
> because probably they had their own stuff to do or they wouldn't help me period!
> So, I just learned that you just got to make it happen. I could sit there and
> complain all night and cry...but that wasn't going to write my paper, so I had to
> go do it. If it takes staying up until 3:00 in the morning, so be it. That's what I
> learned.

Jasmine's example illustrates how this sub-theme of striving for balance overlaps

with elements of the identity theme. Jasmine was used to having someone (a parent) push

her to do what she needed to do. Part of her process of becoming more independent

meant that she needed to take more responsibility for her own motivation, in order to

ensure that she kept a proper balance and focus with her studies.

Amanda learned after her first semester, when she didn't do so well academically

and was not engaged with her peers, that she needed to regain focus. In terms of how she

learned that lesson, Amanda said:

> I'm smart...(laughter) They talked to me one time and I know what to do....I
> don't know I'm very mature--I can be mature and immature, but I just know right
> from wrong. I know what I want out of my life. I had figured that out at a really
> early age. And if I want what I know I want, then I have to work hard. So, if
> studying and not going out one night was what I needed to do to work hard, then I
> was going to do it.

Amanda's actions her first semester resulted in her parents expecting her to be more

financially independent as well.

> By the second semester, I had done all the partying I needed to do because in the
> first semester it was every Thursday, Friday, Saturday night. I literally blew all
> my money on partying. And in the second semester I had to get a job because my
> parents told me, they're like, "It's ridiculous that we're paying for your education
> and we're paying for your party life and you're failing", so they told me flat out,

"You're going to need to get a job". It was the first job in my life.

Joshua's situation was somewhat unique in that his initial focus was so academically focused, that he really did not believe there was room for involvement. He said that through conversations with others in FYRST, he began to realize that other people were getting involved and going to activities, so he should be able to manage it too. Still, it initially concerned him that his grades might suffer. He said:

> I think initially after going to a lot of programs and going to the movies on campus and spending late nights in [the student union at parties], I felt like I was falling behind in my school work, but the grades didn't really reflect that, only because I was so used to putting in all of that effort and all my time into a project that's two pages or, I remember spending hours on a freshman experience paper when everyone would do it five minutes before it is due early in the morning or they would all be doing it the night before and I had finished mine a long time ago and it's one page--a journal, about your week or an experience you had or a program you went to and I would spend an hour doing a paper like that....It wasn't affecting my grades--it [getting involved] definitely wasn't affecting my grades, because my grades kept going up.

Although Joshua didn't see any negative impact that involvement was having on his grades, he still remained concerned at times about whether there would be negative consequences. He added:

> I remember at a couple of points, I felt like I'm not really putting in all this. When I started to take a couple major classes, I thought to myself, maybe I need to put in more effort. Maybe if I didn't go to [the parties]--but then when I got the grades, I was getting the same grades I was getting back from before. To myself, I felt like I should be reading the newspaper and learning more about the industry, but then there was...the movie to go to or there was something else and not reading that paper didn't really affect my grade, as long as that paper wasn't even on the test. Even though it was general knowledge, I didn't spend that time reading the paper, instead I was sitting in the hallway, but I was, for the most part I was very disciplined with my schoolwork, so I would never let that involvement interfere with my school work.

Joshua, it seems, was struggling with achieving a comfortable balance, in part, because he was also trying to get a sense of what was expected of him academically and what he

needed to do in order to be successful. This illustrates how this sub-theme of striving for balance overlaps with the sub-theme of developing academic competency within the academics theme. Like many college students, Joshua was having to figure out how to manage all of the things going on and all of the choices he had for involvement, while also trying to determine how much time and effort he needed to apply to achieve his academic goals.

Identity

The identity theme is used to describe the students' process of development, and the personal growth they went through as a result of their experiences. The sub-themes under identity theme are (a) making the transition: beginning college, (b) developing self-reliance, (c) developing mature relationships, and (d) exploring values and beliefs.

Making the transition: beginning college. The first sub-theme in the identity theme is making the transition: beginning college. This sub-theme is used to describe the participants' feelings and events associated with the start of the freshmen year.

The start of college is filled with such mixed emotions for students. The participants, in looking back on their freshmen year, remembered feeling nervous and anxious about beginning their college experience. Chris described feeling, "kind of disoriented" at coming to a new country and being totally on his own. He was, as he described a "homebody", so coming to Miami from Jamaica without his family was a big adjustment. For Hema, she remembers thinking, "Oh my god, I don't believe I'm doing this!" She describes her first year as being "very scary" because she was away from her family in Guyana for the first time. Jasmine remembers how confident everyone else was in her ability to succeed, but remembers questioning that herself:

I think that I was always told, oh we don't have to worry about you, you'll do just fine; you have it all under control. But I thought at times that I didn't have it under control. And I guess, even though everyone around me was saying, oh yeah, we know you're going to get out there and do this and do that, but I wasn't sure, maybe I would encounter something that would make that impossible.

Jasmine was from Miami and never felt the same sense of homesickness experienced by the international students. She was worried about making it and whether she could handle all that would be asked of her.

Kevin remembered the nervousness he felt his first day coming to FIU:

I remember being very nervous, because even that morning, I wasn't sure if I was coming to FIU. I had applied and told my dad I was going, but I needed a ride to get to Miami...and he kept on, I don't know exactly what he was saying, but he kept making general comments that scared me into thinking that he wasn't going to take me...so...up to that morning when we left, early that morning--I wasn't definitely sure that he was going to take me.

Kevin remembered too how he felt when he drove onto the campus that day and moved into his new room:

So, when we finally rolled up into Panther Hall, it was a relief....I loved the room; it was clean, and it was beautiful. My older brother had gone to college and their dorms were very small and the whole floor shared a bathroom, it was bunk bed style. So, I was very happy to be there. My stepmother or father brought holy water or oil and started placing it over the doors and everywhere. We prayed and I think they left right after that.

No one was there in the room; I was there pretty much by myself. I spent the first day just unpacking and really just getting settled and every once in awhile someone would come by and introduce themselves. So, that was pretty much my first experience, my first day at FIU.

Amanda also described her feelings about leaving Guyana to attend college, and the mixed emotions she can still easily recall:

I was very excited coming to FIU, being first in the family to be able to attend university and especially out of my country. However, upon arriving here I realized that I took for granted at home--Mommy, Daddy being there and them doing everything for me, so it was kind of hard at first.

For Anthony, the emotions most noted during this time were those of his parents. He was a few years older than his peers in FYRST. Coming to the United States from Trinidad was difficult, but for him he was more concentrated on how this would help him reach his goals. His parents were rather emotional about this move though. He describes what he remembers most about the first day when he moved in:

> My mother crying...then my father started crying, and then I kicked them out of my room. [They were crying] because I am the first; it was like a stepping stone. My parents never went to college, even though they are very successful and own their own business. So, I was the first in my family.

The sentiments expressed by the participants as they recalled coming to college seem quite typical. Arnold and Kuh (1999) report that two of the top things students are most concerned about are fitting in and doing well academically. The FYRST participants were no exception. For many, their transition was filled with anxieties about roommates and making new friends. Shakira recalled how odd it felt the first day to be going places with her roommates, people that she didn't even know. "That first day, I remember meeting my roommates and thinking that it was going to be very difficult to have to live with three other people."

Hema also recalled similar feelings about leaving all of her family in Guyana to come study in Miami:

> The first day, I didn't really like FIU very much. Of course it wasn't FIU, it was just being alone--that was the whole thing. But the first day, I mean meeting so many people, that kind of balanced everything out. I was kind of scared, but then I was meeting everyone so I didn't feel that alone.

Chris recalls that his biggest fear about starting college was related to making friends and meeting people, particularly because he left everyone behind in Jamaica. This

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is characteristic of the research presented by Chickering and Reisser (1993), which indicates that students', in their developmental process, must first develop competence. This competence refers, in part, to social competence. Students are first working on developing social skills so that they have the confidence to succeed in a new environment. Chris said:

> Where I was from, everybody was from that place. You pretty much knew everybody, and coming here and knowing that everybody would be from a different area, probably from a different part of the world, I was trying to figure out if I'd want to make friends or if I wouldn't make friends.

Chris had to work through social competency issues. At home he was used to knowing everyone, so coming to college, especially being very introverted, made him quickly realize that he would have to extend himself socially if he was to make new friends.

Joshua provided an example that illustrates the insecurity many freshmen feel when starting college. He explained that for many students, that first trip to the student union to buy books and visit other offices can be intimidating:

> You see all of this interaction [in the union] and a crowd of people....These people seem so settled in their lives right now and then walks around little ol' you with your schoolbag slung over your shoulder and even though no one is paying attention to you, you feel like all of the eyes are watching you....Even when I spoke to other people and even when I talk to freshmen now, they find that the last thing they want to do is be in [the student union] alone. And later on when they become accustomed to the traffic and they know a couple of people, they would actually go to [the union] and sit in a corner alone. Because now they feel comfortable. Now they feel comfortable with it and they don't really care what anybody says.

The start of college, as these FYRST students recalled, was also marked with concerns about making it academically. These examples of insecurity or concerns about being unprepared academically are certainly characteristic in the identity development of many college students. That is why they are contained within the identity theme. There is,

of course, overlapping between this sub-theme and that of developing academic competence. Additional examples shared later in that theme may seem to have some similarities, as a result.

Students often wonder if they are sufficiently prepared for the college experience. Jasmine recalled being nervous about classes. "Would my classes be hard? Would I find out I'm not really all that smart?" Eduardo recalled that this was really his biggest concern his freshmen year. He felt that he could adjust well socially, being that he was already pretty extroverted, but he wondered about the academic rigors he would face:

> I remember coming to FIU a little bit nervous about what college was going to be like. I was very concerned about whether I was going to be able to keep up academically. [In] high school I graduated with a 3.0 GPA, and really didn't know too much about what to expect from college, so my main concern was really academics.

> I had heard people say that college is the best years of your life, so I was excited because of that. But I just remember being overwhelmed by nervousness and really wanting to make sure that I succeeded and passing my classes was by far my largest concern. I was moving onto campus, so I was a little bit worried about how to fit in, but I consider myself a social person so my primary concern was whether I was going to be able to keep up academically and hack it.

Isabelle shared similar concerns. She had made a last minute decision to come to FIU, passing on going to another state university where all of her friends would be. She wondered if she was even ready for college.

> I remember going, like, "Wow, I'm in college!" It's so weird…it was just a really weird experience. It was just like, am I ready for this? Am I not ready for this? Do I want to be here or do I not want to be here? I don't know, I heard a lot of people say, "Oh, take a year off." I know that if I did that, I would never come back, but in a way, I don't know if I was ready to go away to a four-year college, right off the bat. I think if I had gone to a community college for a year, then eased my way--I had no transition. I think a better transition was needed for me, my personality, my style of thinking, of breathing, of being. I'm very close to my family; I needed a transition. I didn't get that, so it was just like, here you are!

Isabelle was questioning her academic preparedness, but at the same time questioning her choice of colleges, probably more so because of the friendships she left behind. Isabelle didn't develop close relationships immediately, which left her questioning the decision of backing out of going away to school with her best friend. She recalled:

> The day I most remember was the first day of school, which was that Monday and me and my roommate had class--it was General Chemistry...and I called my best friend [who was at another school]....And I kinda wanted to cry because if I would have been there [with her], we would have been having our first day together.

For some participants, they found a need to quickly refocus on their purpose in being at college. Shakira remembers being so wrapped up in the transition issues of her move to FIU from Trinidad, that she began to lose focus of her purpose in going away to college:

> I think when I first came here, I was so overwhelmed with having to adjust to so many things that I...forgot this was what I really wanted...I think that the transition was so smooth that eventually I was just able to get into the whole school aspect of it and not worry about all of these other things, so I was able to concentrate on what I really wanted and appreciate what I had, which was to come to this school. [This] was a blessing for me.

Developing self-reliance. The second sub-theme in the identity theme is developing self-reliance. This sub-theme describes the process that participants experienced as they begin to experience life "on their own". It includes the things they begin to do for themselves, as well as their process of becoming more interactive and social and generally taking more responsibility for their own actions.

Many of the participants talked about the experiences related to now having to do things on their own, to become more responsible for themselves and their actions. Chickering and Reisser (1993) refer to this as developing competence, with some perhaps

moving through autonomy toward interdependence, as they become more self-directed and engage in independent problem solving. Isabelle described her experience as an only-child and never really having to compromise or to do much for herself:

> I never had to…wash my own clothes, take out the trash, share chores….My parents [did that]….[Then at college], home was just an hour away. I'd go back every weekend; I'd wash my clothes and I never even washed my clothes on campus.

For Isabelle, she felt as if she never fully experienced the self-reliance and growth independence that she should have, given her continued dependency upon her parents; they were close by in Florida and she saw them often. She reports that now as she is looking at law schools, she and her parents are both committed to her "going away" so that she does fully realize this independence.

Jasmine believed that being at college really made her think about how responsible she was now for her own actions. There was no one around to tell her to study, to stop watching television, or to bail her out when things weren't going right:

> Here, my mom and dad weren't around. So, no one was looking over me in that same sense, where someone is going to pull me out before I get myself into something that I can't pull myself out of, so I had to be able to look and think about what I was going to do before I went ahead and did it because if anything happens, I'm the only person that anyone would come to.

This is consistent with Chickering and Reisser's (1993) vector of moving through autonomy toward interdependence. In this vector, students become more independent emotionally, with less need for continual reassurance or approval. Jasmine realized that she needed to do things on her own, and to rely less on those around her for reassurance. For Jasmine it could have been easy for her to assume she could fall back on to her parents who lived in Miami. However, she realized that living on campus meant she

needed to be responsible for her own behavior.

For some students, there was a sense that they were already fairly independent, but coming to college caused them to be even more self-reliant. Eduardo shared that he really didn't have too many rules governing his behavior at home, but once he got to college, he found that he became even more independent. While his parents were close in Miami, he was even more on his own now:

> Once I came on campus, I had even less rules. And I think I became more independent, a lot more self-reliant...Living on campus forced me to make my own food, pay for most of my expenses....Also having my own place gave me a lot more independence as to who my friends were and who I was dating, because I didn't have to bring them home.

Eduardo also recalled the sense of freedom he felt living away from home:

> When you're living on your own, I think you can just pick up and go. One of the things I decided to do...was deciding to go on a trip to Mexico and I think my parents found out like a week before I left that I was going and they were a little shocked, but they were supportive and had I been living at home, they probably would have known about the trip earlier, but it just gives you a level of independence.

Like Eduardo, Amanda came to FIU also believing that she was already an independent person. She said that that was one of the reasons her parents didn't mind her coming to the United States to study. She shared though that she quickly realized that there were things she was going to have to learn to do on her own:

> What I didn't know--like the things that were taken for granted was like when you wake up in the morning and...there's cereal and milk and you expect it to be there. So one morning I woke up here and there was the cereal but no milk. [I called home] and I'm like mommy, there's no milk and she's like, well I can't exactly do the groceries for you.

Amanda recalled several such experiences in her daily living, where she realized how much she had taken for granted. She also recalled when she realized that she had to

become more responsible financially:

> Balancing my budget. That was like the biggest thing in my life! Because at home I never had cash. Daddy had a charge account to everywhere--to the gas station. You pull in, they had the pump attendants there, they would fill my car and then come with the voucher. I would sign on Daddy's account, so I never had to pay. So I come up here and...my Mom thought she was going to be smart....She said, OK, you're getting $100 a week and there's 16 weeks in the semester. She left $1600 in my account....The first week I spent like 300 dollars...the first week of being in Miami!

Hema had shared that one of the reasons she chose FIU--to come to school far away from home, was that she wanted to become more independent. She had always been very close to and dependent upon her family in Guyana. She describes her transformation toward self-reliance as very "drastic."

> I mean it was so drastic that I really didn't know I was capable of doing anything on my own--just like simple things like being on [my] own, like keeping [my] room tidy, the things that you always relied on your mom or housekeeper [for]. All of a sudden everything was [my] responsibility and I was forced to do it no matter what. So you could choose to do that sloppily or properly. You still have your responsibility of doing it. So I thought that was a really big thing. I mean it can be really small details--everything you have to take care of by yourself. You are responsible for everything you do and if you do it in a bad way, you see that it affects you because you see that it's what you've done and that's what's reacted. So, I thought, OK, I better pull my socks up and get my things done.

Similar to these other examples of participants developing by becoming more autonomous, Kevin recalls with some pride, how his fellow FYRST participants took note of his independence:

> I know that like in group projects and stuff, I was definitely more willing to take the lead or even do an entire group project by myself, because people in the FYRST program would always compliment me, like, "Wow you're so independent, I can't believe you're doing this. Your parents live so far away, you're paying your own way, you're doing everything on your own--I could never do that." Because I wouldn't even call my father, somehow I would figure out a way to make it by myself, so yeah, I took a lot of pride in that--of being independent and being alone, so when I went to school and in classes, if there was a big project, if there was a situation where I had to do something on my own, or

had to speak on my own, I had the confidence to just go and do that.

This independence and self-assuredness that Kevin recalled, was a new experience for him. He talked about how he previously had not had a great deal of confidence:

> Before I know that I wouldn't have done that, because I was so unsure of myself. I would never have taken a project on by myself. I would have found the smartest people and said, "Please let me work with you guys so we can get through this", but I don't know I just had so much confidence; I felt like I could do anything....That probably stemmed from all of the support I was getting from the FYRST program, all of the people--I don't know how directly, but I know generally it definitely helped me out a lot.

Kevin also discussed how he had so many people telling him that he would not succeed, that he wouldn't make it. He talked about how this really caused him to lose respect for some people's opinions. "I just felt like it was all up to me, and if I succeeded, it was because of myself and if I failed it was because of myself. I didn't place any blame on anyone else." Clearly Kevin was becoming less dependent emotionally on others. Again, this is a descriptive example of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) description of moving through autonomy toward interdependence. He talked about how having the approval and reassurance of others became less important to him.

For some participants, self-reliance also refers to the establishment of new relationships, and the need to become more outgoing and to take initiative in developing new relationships. This is consistent with what Chickering and Reisser (1993) report, that students need to develop confidence to manage their new social surroundings. Kevin talked about how he was anxious to leave his "old image" behind and start over again by "reshaping" his new image. He felt that he hadn't easily made friends in the last place he lived, so he looked forward to being more successful in this area at FIU. Chris, admittedly rather shy at first, recalled how the FYRST program helped him take more

initiative with forming new relationships:

> I was the kind of person who would always stay by myself, had a few friends, I was never really outgoing…and the program really allowed me to meet a lot more people, be a lot more outgoing, and enjoy new situations and new experiences and just generally…breaking out my shell.

This, he said, happened as a result of the constant interaction that was fostered through the FYRST program.

Jasmine had a similar experience, as she worked on developing her own social competence. She remembers how she came to college not feeling very outgoing. Initially she spent most of her time in her room with her roommates. As she began to see familiar faces from FYRST around the hallways and at programs, she became more comfortable with saying hello and initiating conversations. It was not something that was easy for her though, as she looks back on it now. Hema also believes that FYRST helped her to develop the relationships. "I myself am such a shy person, so if I wasn't [in FYRST], I wouldn't have made the effort to actually go to each and every person [and meet them]."

Developing mature relationships. The third sub-theme in the identity theme is developing mature relationships. This sub-theme is used to describe how participants formed more mature and significant relationships with peers, roommates, and sometimes family or other individuals in their lives.

During the first year, students go through the process of establishing greater independence and responsibility for their own actions (Chickering and Reisser, 1993). For some of the participants in this study, there eventually came a refocusing on relationships, to realize that being independent for oneself doesn't necessarily mean that relationships are less important. In fact, many students experienced the movement toward

greater interdependence. Kevin described his experience with this very well:

> Well, after the independence part, enough of my friends and classmates told me that I was a very cold person and very unapproachable, so I tried to mold myself like different people. When I was working on my independence, I became very cold and very unemotional and apathetic about things…because I felt like I couldn't let things bother me because if I got upset or sad, that would stop me from accomplishing what my ultimate goal was, which was to succeed in college.

Kevin attributes the interactions he had with other students as helping him to grow personally in how he viewed himself in relation to others. This is another example of how the identity and involvement themes can overlap. Kevin said:

> After meeting dozens of people in school, they kind of let me know that you can be independent, but you can be open and emotional and be independent at the same time; it doesn't have to be either or. I eventually tried to balance that; I'm still working on that, but I think I've opened up a lot in the four years that I've been in school.

Joshua also shared an experience that illustrates this sub-theme and the notion of moving through autonomy toward interdependence. Joshua had been so focused on his own studies and adjustment initially. He was one who didn't think he wanted or needed the interactions with others; he was here to pursue his degree. Soon though he changed. He described how he took a special interest in the welfare of his suitemate:

> My suitemate…he was very sheltered, I guess more sheltered than I was. He wouldn't come out of his room much. Initially it wasn't a big deal; there were many people who didn't come out of their room. But eventually people would ask me, what's wrong with him, why doesn't he come out of his room? And eventually I started talking to him and trying to get him out and to the gym to play basketball or come out in the hallway at night or into the lounge to study. And I… was learning to have patience with him because one day I would invite him out and he would come out and the next day he wouldn't talk to me. I don't know, it was crazy; he wouldn't talk to me or say anything. He'd slam his door, so eventually I think I was learning to have more patience with him than I did have initially.

Joshua provided this example, as he reflected on how his views shifted from being very

self-centered to more concerned about those around him. He added:

> Initially maybe I thought OK, that's his life--he's worried about his own life, now why do I need to care about him. I guess initially when I came in I was more of a selfish mindset. I'm just here to study and get my grades and get a good job, and meet a few people while I'm at it. But eventually I started caring about him and I started experiencing a lot of friendships and developing a lot of friendships, meeting people and going to different places and I would come home and see him not doing those things and...I felt that he was missing out on those things. So for me, I guess I took it upon myself to try to get him to come out of his room. I think I developed the patience to deal with him and also...I started caring about him when not seeing him to do all of the things I was doing. I guess I started thinking about other people as much as thinking about myself.

Chris was impacted by the support he received from his RA. She encouraged him to interact with others and to be positive, and in turn he said, "I made sure that I tried to help other people with the same thing….Making friends and having a lot of friends makes it easier to get through life." Several participants described examples like this, as they recalled how their initial challenge was to become more independent. Along the way though, they realized the value of the relationships and connectedness with others. While this relates to the sub-themes of peer support and interaction with other students, this sub-theme emphasizes specifically the development of the more mature relationships, those that go beyond casual interaction. It also emphasizes of course the more interdependent nature of the relationships.

For many participants, the roommate relationship was their first experience with having to share their living space. This relationship experience was another way in which the participants were challenged to develop more mature relationships. As Isabelle explained:

> I am an only child. I never had to share my room with anyone. I never had to be woken up because someone else's alarm clock is going off, or they're [bringing guests over]. I never had to deal with any of that stuff.

For Isabelle, the start to her roommate relationship was difficult. She and her roommate rarely spoke and got to the point of avoiding one another. It took her going to the RA to request a room change, for her to realize that she needed to talk the problem through with her roommate. She describes what happened:

> And then one day it was just like enough! And I called her on it...and said "I'm going to move. I can't deal with it. I can't deal with this, and I just despise what's going on",...and she said, "No, I don't want you to move. You're my roommate, you're the one I was assigned to and we're going to make this work."

Isabelle described how the two of them tried to work out their differences:

> I don't know if it was just that we talked to each other and we assumed that what we were feeling--we felt that we hated each....We know what makes each other tick, so now let's work around that and try to make it work. You know...we're two completely different personalities from two different worlds, but towards the end, we were like awesome. We were doing things together like that whole first semester never happened. We needed that [confrontation] to happen, because if it didn't happen, it wouldn't have led us to where we were.

About the confrontation, Isabelle said, "I was just so proud of myself afterward...I took the initiative and I went and I talked to her." Isabelle referred to this situation as one of her biggest learning experiences that year. It taught her, she said, more about what she values in relationships and how to manage emerging conflicts. Chickering and Reisser (1993) included in their model of psychosocial development, the vector of managing emotions. Isabelle's example illustrates this. It is typical that, during this stage of their development, students are learning to manage their feelings and developing appropriate ways for expressing them. Isabelle learned that in a complicated relationship, such as that of roommates, learning to communicate needs and expectations, and to offer one another feedback about the relationship was very critical.

Chris also shared examples that described his movement toward developing more

mature relationships. He talked about the compromise skills he learned, which he felt also helped him to continue to be successful as a student:

> Even though I didn't pick the people I lived with at first, we all got along from the very start, and that helped me get along with other people....[Just seeing] how other people didn't get along with their roommates and how they had to deal with it, all the trouble they went through....[I] tried to be a little more conscious of what [I] did around other people to make sure that everybody lived in peace. That made me a little more conscious of...everybody's [limits].

Several of the participants echoed this type of sentiment, saying that their roommate relationship or relationship with others in the FYRST community, often challenged them to be more tolerant of differences. For many, they realized this was the first time they thought about true compromise and tolerance in relationships. The literature indicates that this experience of participants is typical. Chickering and Reisser (1993) characterize this as a stage of development where individuals develop mature interpersonal relationships. This vector addresses the idea that one's relationships with others contributes significantly to the development of a sense of self. The tasks associated with this vector include developing more tolerance and appreciation of differences, and forming relationships characterized by greater trust, independence, and individuality. In their roommate relationships, participants were having to exercise more tolerance and trust especially.

Hema recalled her very positive roommate situation, one which she now realizes helped her to adjust to being at college. She relied upon her roommate for the type of support that she might previously had received from her family, with whom she was so close:

> My roommate and I got along immediately. She was from Dominican Republic and [there were] so many things about her that I didn't know. She was really

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pleasant; it seemed like we were meant to stay together for that first year....I got to meet her family as well and they were very nice because I didn't have mine, so I kind of looked at her family as though we were related.

Hema also shared how her roommate helped her to deal with her own emotions:

> Every time I went home and I was like stressed out from the first semester of dealing with classes and dealing with the social aspects of things, [my roommate] was there and we would talk about things. Even when I would get emotional about my family...I could tell her about my life and what was bothering me....We had some good times together.

In this example, Hema benefited from being able to establish a greater sense of her own self and her emotions, by interacting in the important roommate relationship she had.

Exploring values and beliefs. The fourth and final sub-theme in the identity theme is exploring values and beliefs. This sub-theme is used to describe the experiences FYRST students went through as they questioned, explored, and reestablished or reaffirmed their personal values and beliefs. This included expanding their perspectives, becoming more tolerant of others' viewpoints, and assuming a greater world-view perspective through their interaction with the diverse cultures present in the program and at FIU.

For many of the FYRST participants, their first year in college was really the first time that they had experienced so many different cultures, and for many, experienced a culture very unlike their own. This is a typical experience of college students, who often find themselves for the first time, relating to others who are different from them (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). This experience certainly facilitated students expanding their perspectives. Shakira recalled the transition from Trinidad as being "culture shock", particularly as she adjusted to the dominant Hispanic culture in Miami:

> Being exposed to...their mode of dress, and the music, and what was fashionable

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and even how you dress for school and stuff like that. That was different, because I think it is a more laid back attire at home in Trinidad, so it was just an adjustment.

Chris also experienced leaving his culture behind and adjusting to a new one:

I'm from Jamaica and the lifestyle is really laid back--take your time, later on do stuff and here you just have to kind of get out of that attitude and get to work, study, go from class to class and it took a little getting used to.

Chris added that the experience of being around so many different people in FYRST really helped him to develop a value for those friendships that came out of interacting with those who are different from oneself:

I was always a person [who] was a loner--a person who liked to be myself, maybe had one or two friends that I really hung out with and then when I started to get to know more people, found out how much it was worth to have friends that were from different parts of the world, to see different perspectives--this built my self-confidence. I started to value friendship a lot more and gradually became a lot more outgoing in terms of meeting new people, starting to talk to new people, and generally having a lot of people around, making new friends.

Hema also shared what the transition was like for her to come from Guyana to Miami:

Where I come from in Guyana, the population is a lot of Indians and there are a lot of African Guyanese, people who have moved from there, so [there weren't] that many Americans or [Latins]....[At home I would] meet people from so many different cultures...but here [it was much more]....I mean the Latin thing was completely new to me...people from so many different places---Venezuela, Dominica....And I like that, I mean...I didn't even feel like--it wasn't even scary to get to know all of these different people, it was definitely a good experience....I was really interested in diversity, so I think it...was a good experience for me.

In FYRST, these participants benefited from the interaction with one another, in such a way that they were able to share and learn from each other and about culture. It wasn't merely an environment where these differences co-existed. Rather, by being a community where interaction was fostered, students learned about the differences from

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one another. In this case, elements of this theme of identity overlap with elements of involvement and community.

Many of the examples shared by participants also illustrate Chickering and Reisser's (1993) belief that as students develop mature interpersonal relationships, these relationships contribute to the development of their sense of self. Participants described how their new relationships helped them learn more about who they were. Kevin recalled a most significant experience he had his first year. He credits it now with playing a tremendous role in who he became and how he thought of himself. Kevin said, "It was an incredible learning experience for me, just being around people from different countries and cultures." Kevin had lived in the United States and until he came to FIU, he had not been exposed to such diversity. Kevin was particularly influenced by the diversity present in the individuals with whom he shared a suite:

> My entire room was Black, and it was just interesting seeing the diversity between the four of us. My roommate was just like me, even though he was Jamaican descent. His mother couldn't tell the difference between us on the phone. We thought alike. If I started saying a sentence, he would finish it for me and visa versa--we were very close. So, I was very surprised that people from different places could be just like me, and just meeting people from the Caribbean, it changed the way I saw myself. I definitely started seeing myself more as an American than an African American. I started seeing the difference between different Black people. It was just interesting; it changed the way I saw Blackness, I think.

In particular, Kevin recalled how his experience with his roommates challenged some of the things he'd grown up believing about his own identity. He said:

> Being African American, you kind of grew up with these certain standards that you think applies to being Black--certain stereotypes--you're not Black if you don't do this. You have to act a certain way, talk a certain way, or listen to this certain type of music. But, my mentor was from Nigeria. He was educated in the British school system, so he had a British accent, but the way he spoke, the music he listened to, it was different. But you know, he's from Africa! You can't argue

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with someone that he's not Black when he's from Nigeria. It made me question my personal beliefs about what it is to be Black and these stereotypes I'm holding on people.

Like, also…some of my roommates listened to like the Spice Girls and Jewel and I mean blasting it like it was the greatest thing and I was just shocked. I'm listening to the hard-core rap, hip-hop and they're blasting Spice Girls and they were comfortable with it. That was probably more--they were comfortable with it.

Seeing their comfort helped Kevin be more comfortable expanding his own sense of who he was. He explained:

They didn't feel like they had to fit into these neat categories about what it is to be Black, so it opened me up to new things and it made my feel like I didn't have to live up to those expectations either. I could just be myself….I just realized, when I thought about Black people before, I always thought the African American. It escaped me that Black people from other parts of the world don't act the same way, don't have the same values or belief systems. When I finally had thought, oh yeah, there are other Black people and they live differently, all the pressures, being a certain way just left and I just felt comfortable with being myself.

So for me that was very, very significant--especially because I went to a White school and I always felt pressure from the Black community [telling me], "You speak too proper, you should use more slang", so that was something I always grew up with since I was a kid, so coming to FIU and realizing that Black people don't have to speak a certain way …it completely changed the way I saw myself in the world. It just helped me be more expressive and be comfortable with myself. I don't know if I contribute [this learning] to the FYRST program or just being at FIU, but [the program] definitely helped because it kind of forced us to come together.

Kevin's example shows the relationship that exists between involvement and identity. Kevin's learning, and the development of his values and beliefs, were obviously connected to the interaction he had with other students in the room. Their mere presence as individuals co-existing in a room would not have fostered such significant learning. Their day-to-day living and the interactions that grew out of that experience contributed to the learning.

Joshua, like Kevin and so many of the other students, in looking back now,

attributes the exposure to diverse cultures as being one of the greatest learning experiences his first year. It wasn't an easy adjustment though at first. For Joshua, coming from the small island of St. Lucia to Miami and FIU presented some challenges. Joshua recalled:

> Initially it was very hard because everyone was so social and friendly. People that you didn't know, just coming up and introducing themselves, which was very odd--people giving you a hug and you don't even know them, or touching your hand or slapping your hand; it was very informal. And even though I'm very used to that in the Caribbean, that's only after you met someone or gotten to know someone. I guess people are very social, especially in the FYRST program and the RAs were very friendly, so it was odd. Many times I'd think, am I that important? Why are people knocking on my door? Don't they have their own friends...(laughter)? Seriously, those are the thoughts that would cross my mind....But it's really and truly, they just want to meet me.

Joshua shared how the diversity taught him about cultures and social class:

> Before I came here, I didn't understand the difference between different social classes in the States. I guess I didn't really understand the difference between a White person and a Latin person....I just though that a White person in America is classified as a clear skinned person. I started to learn more about the classes; students started to refer to each other with names. And you start to understand that there is segregation and even though I'm in the United States--I thought that coming up here would be a little different, because in the Caribbean there is a lot of discrimination--I learned that it's pretty similar. Those are the things that struck me.

Anthony, who came from Trinidad, also learned many lessons from his exposure to diverse cultures. One example he gave was related to having a suitemate who was Muslim and from Israel. This suitemate was also younger than the rest of the students on the floor. Anthony indicated that all of these factors encouraged him to be tolerant of the differences around him. It also taught him a lot. Anthony said:

> Him being Muslim, we got a different view than we were accustomed to...a view of how things are being shown to rest of the world. Even though I'm from a different country, I'm still in the Western hemisphere, so I'm very influenced by American culture.

Students also were beginning to explore their own beliefs and values. For many, they had been raised with a certain belief system. Like with so many college students, they now had the opportunity to explore those values and question them. For some, this helped reinforce their values system; for many, they began to question certain beliefs they held and gradually became more open to the opinions of others. According to Perry (1968), this type of questioning is consistent with students' development as they are moving from positions of dualism to multiplicity. They begin to recognize that things are not so black and white, and they are more open to considering other possibilities. Jasmine reflected on how she began to open up to considering other viewpoints. Jasmine was raised in a very religious home. Her parents were rather strict and clear about what she should and shouldn't do. She said that being away from them her freshmen year really gave her the opportunity to explore what she believed for herself. In some cases, the beliefs she began to own were ones that her parents had taught her, but in some cases they was different:

> I think mostly for me, I went through a lot of change in perspective--how I saw the world and I think I probably was a lot more close-minded about certain things ....I just got the opportunity to see other people's lives and who they were...and not to feel that I was better or,...I should say, that my life would turn out better because I don't engage in this or I don't do that. And I guess it just allowed me to be more accepting of others and not...have that attitude of piety...you know, some kind of saint from heaven. I think that's what it gave me--just to be more understanding and accepting of others. I think...my mind had to change, and that's what I had to go through my first year.

Kevin also described how he became more open his first year; he was more willing to consider views different from his own. He remembered how that experience impacted him:

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I just think that I am more open to different ideas--ideas that I might not necessarily agree with, but I'm not going to condemn just because they are different. I appreciated what I learned that first year, so I was more willing and open to hearing what people had to say. I liked to debate after that, because I felt like debating with someone forced them to speak and defend a topic and that's what I wanted to hear. I didn't want to just hear..."I believe in Jesus Christ"...well, why? And a lot of people wouldn't do that, unless you got in their face and started debating with them. So, even if I agreed with you, but I didn't know how to defend my argument, I would take the opposite side and debate you just to see how you would defend the argument so then I could use that if someone ever questions me, I can do the same thing. So, I was definitely more open to hearing what people had to say.

Kevin gave an example of when he attended a program on diversity. It was, he said, the first time he heard people get so passionate about issues regarding diversity and oppression. During the exercise, some of the students were laughing, as facilitators discussed examples of oppressive incidents that had occurred, or common stereotypes held about certain groups. The facilitators got upset by the laughter, he said. He realized that if people were getting so upset by the laugher, maybe these issues of diversity weren't funny. He remembers thinking that maybe he did indeed need to really think about these issues of oppression and stereotypes. Kevin's sentiment, like that of many of the participants, highlights the influence peers had on the way he viewed something; the reaction from some peers led him to think that this was an issue he needed to further explore. This seems consistent with what Astin (1993) referred to in his study about how college affects students. In talking about the peer group, Astin said, "Student's values, beliefs, and aspirations tend to change in the direction of the dominant values, beliefs, and aspirations of the peer group." As Kevin heard more students challenging stereotypes and discrimination, he too gave more consideration to his own behavior and comments. This example highlights the overlapping nature of the themes. In this case, Kevin's

identity was being shaped through his interactions with other students, and his peers were very influential in how he perceived issues of diversity. The themes of community, involvement and identity are all overlapping in this situation.

For Joshua, he recalls that he grew by becoming more aware of the judgments he placed upon his fellow students:

> One of the lessons I learned [my first year] was to try to be a little more open minded--about race, about sex, whatever else came up--about study habits and working styles. I would think that I would need to study five hours for something, and someone who just studied for one hour was dumb or just didn't deserve to be in college--those were just some of the things that I had in my mind before I came. So that was one of the major things I learned--because after you start to develop these thoughts in your head about other people, you don't really give them a chance. That was what I was doing initially, was thinking that someone shouldn't be in college, why does that person have a scholarship and I don't and look at his grades and look at my grades.

His exposure to so many people in FYRST challenged these perceptions he had. As he explains, he became more open to the fact that people were different from him, but that that difference shouldn't be judged as bad.

> Eventually I got past [my false perceptions] because I would see the number of people who were able to study a little bit or the number of people who would go out at night and come back, and just because they went out on a weekday didn't mean that they were bad people and that they didn't deserve to be in college and they were throwing away their parents' money--that was some of the things I had in my mind before I came. It helped because the FYRST RAs facilitated that, and the programs we had, my friends in the hallway facilitated that transition. I never let people see what I thought, but in my mind I had these perceptions. I became a little more open minded.

A great number of the participants also talked about how experiences and programs associated with FYRST gave them an opportunity to challenge their own beliefs about homosexuality. This was particularly noted by the international students, most of whom said that the subject of homosexuality was simply not openly discussed in

the Caribbean. Chris described his experience:

> Well I think one of the biggest things is that in Jamaica the gay lifestyle is not really accepted---it's really frowned upon, and they're...considered outcasts, so you never really know who is gay and who is not. So coming here and seeing everyone really open about it and talking about it, it got to the point where it was a little scary at first, then you got used to the idea, and realized that it wasn't a big deal; that was their lifestyle and there was nothing wrong with it.

Many of the students gave an account, such as Chris's or Joshua's, that illustrates how when they first began at FIU in FYRST, they had some very rigid perspectives about what they viewed as "right" and "wrong." As Perry (1968) suggests, students begin this intellectual development process as being very dualistic. Things are seen in black and white, right and wrong, good and bad. As they advance, they begin to question things and will be more open to considering other perspectives. Several participants were able to reflect on how their perspectives were challenged and altered through their involvement in FYRST, primarily as a result of their interaction with others and their involvement in the activities. Again, this demonstrates the overlapping nature of the themes.

Academics

The academics theme refers to the intellectual development of students and their interaction around academic issues. The sub-themes that are part of academics include (a) developing academic competency, (c) the Freshman Experience class, and (c) interaction around academic matters.

Developing academic competency. The first sub-theme of the academics theme is developing academic competency. Students in the FYRST program engaged in processes and experiences to gain an understanding and skills essential to succeeding academically. This often included the development of effective study habits, the recognition of college-

level academic expectations and their becoming aware of different testing and grading methods.

For many of the participants, the first year was really full of exploring their own abilities academically. It's not surprising that this would emerge as a theme among participants, given that the development of academic competency is cited by Upcraft and Gardner (1989) as being an essential element to freshmen success. Many of the participants expressed how initially in coming in, there was a feeling of anxiety about whether they would really be able to perform academically and whether they would be successful. Chickering and Reisser's (1993) vector of developing competence encompasses the notion that students need to develop intellectual skills so that they have the confidence to cope with what comes their way and the skills to achieve whatever they set out to do. For many, the confidence and competency wasn't there initially, but it developed over the course of the year. This often included needing to develop skills for studying, time management, preparing for exams, and writing more extensive papers. Workshops offered to FYRST students and lessons taught in the Freshman Experience class addressed these areas to some extent. Eduardo described how he remembered feeling that first year:

> I think that when I came to the University I just realized that it was a different level and that I really had to get my stuff together and I had to get through it. I was kind of scared. [I had been told] it was going to be a lot different than high school. Papers to write and the tests of course were going to be much harder. So when I came, so many people--high school teachers, parents, everyone had told me that college was going to be so tough academically that I was going to have to dedicate about ten hours at the minimum a week to studying, so I came in prepared to do that, very focused and nervous.

For Isabelle, the transition from high school to college was challenging. She

hadn't been well prepared as to what to expect academically and she came in with some assumptions that it would be similar to high school, where she was able to do well with little effort. She describes her experience now as she looks back on her first year:

> I really let my grades slide. It wasn't about the grades; it was about getting involved. And I mean, I'm not saying it was bad, but if I could do it all over again, I would do it completely different. If I knew then what I know now, kind of thing--cliché, but it's true. Not that I regret it--I would have done it, but not to the extreme of the involvement, of the not caring. [In high school] I always got good grades and I never had to study so I always thought, oh, you know this is going to be like--that's how it is in college! I'll never actually have to study....And also in high school I was in a class of like 12 people--professors who were kind of biased towards us...we were AP students, they were very biased towards us and they wouldn't give us a bad grade. You know, we were like the cream of the crop kind of thing.

What Isabelle realized though, was that she didn't feel that same personalized attention and things were not as easy as in high school. She added:

> And here you're just like--freshmen year especially, my first class was a general chemistry class at 9:30 in the morning, and I remember when I walked in, I was like oh my God--an auditorium with 200 people! And even though I'd been hearing things, up to that point, I heard, oh college, you're going to see some big classes and all that--when I actually walked in and saw that, I was like wow! You know, put your student number---student number, student number, student number...that student number was like, that's all I am! It's true.

The fact that many participants struggled with the different level of academic expectations in college is consistent with what is present in the literature. Upcraft and Gardner (1989) say that most students come to college expecting to prepare for a career by getting good grades and graduating, but they soon find out that they have to learn how to learn. They need to be able to synthesize, integrate, criticize and analyze what they are learning in the classroom.

For some students, the realization that success was possible was important. Kevin came in without a great deal of support. Many people had told him that he didn't have

what it would take to succeed academically. He recalled that early on he remembers

realizing that others weren't doing so well, but he was. He said:

> It definitely helped my confidence a lot, seeing that compared to my peers, I was doing very well....I was doing a lot better than people assumed I was going to be doing, so that definitely encouraged me to keep going, be more positive, and that I could make it through four years of college. That was a major thing for me because I was just so unsure of myself when I came to FIU.

Similarly, Jasmine recalled feelings related to her own self-confidence, and the

relief felt when she realized she could succeed. She recalls:

> I guess after I was here for...after the first month or so, and I got used to my classes and what it was like being here I was like, oh, OK this is a piece of cake, it's not that hard, as long as you know what you have to do and go ahead and do it. There's nothing more to it than that. So I guess just a fear of not knowing what to expect probably made me feel that I probably wouldn't make it but when I finally saw what it was all about, then it wasn't a big deal anymore.

For Eduardo, his recollection of his very first class is still so vivid. He recalled

how his first class was probably one of his toughest, but it helped him put things in

perspective and see what he needed to do in order to succeed. He explained:

> My first day of classes, [I] was nervous....I wasn't able to sleep the night before, just out of sheer nervousness. I always have problems going to sleep before the first day of class....But I went to class and my first day of class...it was probably one of the toughest classes I have ever taken in college--and it just so happened that my first class on my first day was this very tough class so it kind of showed me that I was really going to have to apply myself and after the first class, I realized that the rest of the classes were not going to be as tough as the first one, just by looking at the syllabus, and so that eased my mind a little bit.

Several of the participants discussed how the differences in cultures or

educational systems in the United States as compared to those in their home country,

gave them some challenges in figuring out what was expected of them academically.

Rong and Turk (1994) have developed a comparison of culture shock issues between

American and international students. They point out that while both American and

international students face academic challenges, the international students also face unfamiliar teaching and academic styles. Almost all of the participants who came from another country, expressed feelings of anxiety related to trying to figure out the academic expectations at FIU. Many took note of differences in teaching styles, grading and testing methods, writing expectations, and more. Anthony, who had been in a business school in Trinidad before coming to FIU, remembers how there were differences to which he had to become accustomed:

> Here it is different. I mean it was the same as in studying wise, but the structure of the learning facilities here were a lot different than what I was accustomed to..... The structure itself of how knowledge is presented is different. How I was taught before is that you have a subject for the day and you [study] that for the entire day. Where here, you might have 3-4 classes in one day, different people with different teaching styles. There I had one professor for the day--the same class for the day and you were gearing up for an exam--a professional exam, whereas this is just for your GPA. So a lot of things that you might take for granted, you didn't dare. Before I was studying to reach a certain level. Once you pass a certain level, you've passed. Here you have to deal with grades.

Chris explained how the differences both challenged and made it, in his opinion, "easy" to do well in his classes. His adjustment to the academics was perhaps a bit smoother than that of fellow international students. In talking about his first year, Chris offered:

> Well, I remember math was really, really hard because I had taken about four years off after high school so I forgot most of the math. That was really challenging trying to get back into remembering all of the stuff that you had to do for math. I remember English, I thought, was really easy because the caliber of stuff you have to write or do in the Caribbean is way above what you can hand into a professor here in English, so that made it a little bit easier in terms of one subject but a lot harder for the other. Math took me awhile to remember everything. I found most of my classes were easy going, not that hard. I did have to study, but I didn't have to study as much as high school. They were all pretty interesting classes. I learned a lot.

Joshua struggled with figuring out the new expectations he encountered. He

recalled what it was like for him to make the transition from a junior college in Barbados to FIU that first year:

> What I learned was…I'm used to studying a lot of material and…trying to cover too much material for a certain class. Where all the professors really tested on was the concept and not really everything behind that concept. And I know what I'm used to studying, and that a lot of Caribbean students have the same struggle. We're used to preparing for exams where we would write our answers out. They would give us paper and we would write our answers out. And over here it was more circle the correct answers, so the answers are more direct and initially I remember in my first exam, I didn't do too well because I had tried to cover all this information and he really asked specifics. I didn't know the date of this and I didn't know the composition of that or how much money a company made. I knew about the company and I knew everything.
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> How I learned that initially was by not doing good on my first exam and thinking what did I do wrong, I knew all of the material. I remember eventually going to the professor's office hours and the professor told me, try to concentrate on these major points. And I remember going back studying for those major points and doing better on another exam for a different class.

Joshua gained this better understanding of the academic expectations from his initial experience and talking with his professor. He also was able to learn from his RA, a fellow international student. He said:

> I remember asking Kamala [my RA]--because she had studied in Jamaica as well and she knew both systems. She also explained to me a little more…that, you know, professors over here don't really care. They just want to know that you know the certain points of their class and that's enough for them and that's enough to get you that A and you don't have to know the book inside and out. You know, when you buy a book from the bookstore,…that doesn't mean you have to read the whole book--maybe just two chapters in the book.
>
> Now sometimes I don't even buy the book. I just focus on the lectures and I still do good in the class. The book is just a reference. To me, the book was everything. So, I think that's how I learned more---just talking to people, not really the residents around me because they had studied over here and that's what they had been doing in high school as well--is learning those key points the night before the exam. So it wasn't really a matter of me going to them, it was more a matter of the RA or the professor, or me going to a professor's office and asking, "How can I better prepare for the other exam? I thought I had everything under control; obviously I didn't."

Joshua shared that as he developed better study skills, his grades went back up to the high level to which he was accustomed. His interactions with his faculty and his RA, who both offered him advice with his approach to studying, demonstrate how the involvement theme overlaps with this theme of academics. Shakira also shared that she remembers at least thinking that the expectations were much higher, as compared to those in Trinidad. "I think there was a little bit of fear. I spent a lot of time on essays and projects--more than I really had to, because I thought so much more was expected of me because I was in college."

Amanda also talked about the differences she experienced, and even how these differences impacted communication with her parents about their expectations of her in school. Amanda gave an example when talking about how she had to teach so much to her parents about college life:

> The first thing I had to teach my parents was how to figure out that a 90-100 was an A and that 80-90 was a B. Because in Guyana, you made the honor roll in school, once you got a 70 average and up. And it was a big thing. Every term the whole school would go into the auditorium, they'd read the class for 1A and these are the people that got over 70--they'd read the list, 1B, 1C. So it was the biggest deal. Every term I would get over 70 and then coming here and 70 is a C and my mom would be, "are you insane? You can't be bringing Cs home". Just because of the American culture and Guyana--As and Bs were the smart kids, but C is average, but for me, I'm like it can't be an average, because it's like a 70! So that was like a big drama.

This example with Amanda highlights what Arnold and Kuh (1999) assert in discussing what matters to students. In their example of a mental model of resident students, they suggest that whether parents and family are important depends on the individual student, but ethnicity and family experience with higher education are mediating factors. In Amanda's case, similar to several other participants, she was the

first to attend college. Her connection with her family was important to her, but also to them as they sought to understand what she was experiencing.

The FYRST program also helped participants develop skills that would be useful to them in the classroom, as well as out of the classroom. Many participants spoke about how FYRST helped them to become more assertive, encouraging them to be more willing to speak up in the classroom. Other participants attributed some of the skills learned in the Freshman Experience class, such as time management, to helping them overall academically. These examples and others were more fully detailed within the description of other themes. Hema spoke about the leadership skills she gained in the program, which she believes helped her to be a better student in the classroom:

> [FYRST] gives you a little bit of leadership qualities as well, and that's very, very essential. I mean if you have to work with a group, if you can manage that group really well, that's really important, if you can get things done. In FYRST we got things done…that's important working with groups, working with teams because there's always group projects, there's always group meetings you have to attend, there's always classroom interaction and if we didn't have them, we'd probably be a student sitting in the back of the class and never asking questions and never learning more.

For some students, the first semester or first year proved to be a wake-up call academically. Amanda talked about how, by not doing well the first semester, she really had to do a "360" to turn things around spring semester. Isabelle's realization came after her first year. She reflected:

> Now applying to grad school, going away to law school, I'm going to walk in with this totally different outlook [than I had my freshmen year]. Totally different. Maybe I had to get the low GPA and not study my first year in undergrad, so that in grad school,…I know what I need to do and I know that I can't pull this undergrad crap that I did, because right now, looking back, it's too late to go back to my first year and take all of those classes that I got Cs in and try to take them all over again; there's no way. What's done is done, but you can learn from your experience and make what you have to come better because of what you did.

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Because of what you learned through your experience, so I think it's totally valid....I learned the hard way....Now I'm trying to kick butt to get my GPA up because of what I did my first two semesters....Back then, I didn't think about it; I just thought the grades were going to come.

The freshman experience class. The second sub-theme of the academics theme is the freshman experience class. This sub-theme is used to describe the experience FYRST students had through their common enrollment in the University's required Freshman Experience class. This includes items related to the acquisition of important knowledge and the experience of students being in class with others with whom they live.

The Freshman Experience class, a required one-credit hour course for FIU students, was offered to program participants right in the residence hall. Only FYRST members were permitted to enroll in these sections, in order to foster a collaborative learning environment for FYRST members. The class was held on Friday mornings in the residence hall lounge. The class covered items relevant to a first year student's success, but was unique in that the forum also allowed for interaction around subject matters between the classroom and the living environment. The Freshman Experience class is similar to many offered at other colleges and universities, with the overall objective of most courses of this nature being to orient students to the university's resources and to help students understand the meaning of higher education as it relates to them personally (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989).

The data from the interviews clearly suggests that the fact that participants were in the Freshman Experience class with fellow neighbors and friends, along with the fact that it was right in the residence hall, made a difference to students in terms of their comfort level in the course. Amanda offered this explanation:

I don't know, it was just different to have a more comfortable, a more relaxing yet learning atmosphere, as compared to the classroom where there's a professor [who]…is just teaching--you're not…wanting to learn. I'm sorry; I don't want to learn anything. Like math, I don't want to learn about math. But this--I really wanted to learn about what the whole freshman thing was about….I was just more relaxed and that made it so much more different.

Hema added that having the class right in the study lounge right in Panther Hall where the students lived, really made it more personal. She remembers:

You didn't feel like it was a class. You could actually be more open; you could be more responsive. In a class environment,…you feel kind of nervous even interacting with the class….It was more comfortable.

Chris also commented on the "friendships and bonds" that formed from being in class with the same people with whom he lived on the floor. "It was fun…[we] just walked to class in the building….especially if your roommates are in the class, you'd all walk down together….It was really a lot of fun." This is an example of how this sub-theme of the freshman experience class overlaps with community and involvement; Chris describes a classroom experience that was enhanced by the closeness with others and the interaction with fellow students.

Jasmine responded to a question about whether the class discussions were different than in other classes. She said:

I think with time, yes, it made a difference, because as the weeks went by, I guess you got more--you were comfortable with each other, so…it made it where nobody had to be shy about what they felt about whatever or talking about themselves because it wasn't all these people that you only saw like maybe once a week and that you just met in this arbitrary place once a week. It's people that you saw almost everyday and it just, it wasn't this uncomfortable people, it was just a whole bunch of people--people I lived with basically. It wasn't difficult to talk about how you felt, whatever the issue may have been, whatever the discussion was about. That's what it did.

Isabelle added that it was very good to have her peers in her FYRST Freshman

Experience. "I felt more comfortable to talk and express my opinions."

Lenning and Ebbers (1999) indicate that "Learning communities that emphasize collaborative learning and that serve both academic and social purposes for students will become a primary avenue for improving the education of undergraduate students, with effective collaborative learning crucial." The previous statements by participants all speak to the comfort level felt by students, in the learning environment of the classroom. This was fostered by the fact that the students also had a social relationship outside of class. This is an example of how this theme of academics overlaps with the theme of community. The proximity of the students living in the same area in which they took their class also fostered opportunities for conversations to happen outside of the classroom. Shapiro and Levine (1999) talked about one benefit of small learning communities being that students are more likely to integrate their in-class and out-of-class activities. This seemed to be true with FYRST participants, many of whom spoke about how they remembered conversations that started in the class, but they continued in the hallways, in the residence hall rooms, or during informal gatherings among students. For example, Joshua recalled a time when the class topic was victimization and sexual assault. Peer educators were brought in and did some role plays. He remembered:

> I remember we also had one [class session] where a girl...came in and acted out that she was raped and what her friend thought and her other friend and it was this whole skit. And everyone in the class thought that it was real. And there was a lot of...as soon as the skit was over, everyone had this stuff to say and then we found out that it was not real; it was a role-play. But even afterwards there was a lot of conversations, even when we went up the elevator that day....Even when we went up and we went to McDonalds afterward, everyone was still talking about that same skit--"I can't believe it"....So,...the interaction in the classroom was definitely there and even when we left, sometimes people would continue talking about it....I remember those conversations.

Shakira also said that, "Just having the opportunity to [have the class] with the people that I was living with made it even better. Because we spent the hour talking about those issues, but then we were able to carry it on afterwards."

Aside from the benefit of the interactions among members in the class, the content of the course was invaluable for many of the participants. Some realized it then and some didn't perhaps realize it until later. Amanda was one of the students who noted that, particularly as an international student, learning about college life and what to expect, was a valued component in the Freshman Experience class. Amanda said:

> It was just different being there. It's more comfortable, more relaxing and then I actually was learning something because this was a class that people take for granted when they're already from America or already from Miami or they have actually had family or friends in college. See, everything that I was learning in this class was something new to me and then when I called my mom...I had to teach the whole family...what it was like to be going to college because...no one had ever gone, so everybody was like waiting for me.

Jasmine remembered about how the class helped orient her to the University:

> It was a very good thing because it helped you if you had a problem or if you wanted to get involved,...you always knew what to do, so I think it was very helpful in that sense where it give you the opportunity to get familiar with the University and the services and programs.

Joshua echoed this sentiment:

> Through the freshman experience class I remember we had a lot of lectures, a lot of people from outside organizations who came in, and that really helped a little bit. You know there is always that intimidation. People always say,...go to this office and they'll tell you all about it. There's always that intimidation of going to that office or just not putting aside the time to go to that office. Having those people come to our Freshman Experience class was helpful because we got to learn a little more about the University.

Some students, like Eduardo, realized the value of the course more so after his first year. He said:

I remember at the time thinking, wow, this class is easy and pointless...and I remember learning about a variety of services offered to us on the campus. And now looking back in perspective, I can see...how the class was useful and that because of the class, I found out...what services were available for me. And at the time it seemed like...I don't need to take class to learn this stuff....Now, looking back on it four years later, it served several purposes. One, it got me acquainted with the services available to me on campus, I did get to meet a lot of other students through the class and it did help boost my GPA since it was an easy class, like it got me off to a good start academically.

These comments from participants about the class and the content matter gained, seem to indicate that participants were able to increase their familiarity with the University and their understanding of the academic expectations of the University through the course. For participants, their learning in the class was also enhanced by the opportunity to be within a comfortable group--their FYRST peers; this allowed them to be more open and more expressive.

Interaction around academic matters. The third and final sub-theme of the academic theme is interaction around academic matters. This sub-theme refers to the experiences that FYRST students had interacting with one another in and out of the class, on academically related matters. It included their engagement in discussions about courses and class content, their formation of study groups, and their support for one another in achieving academic goals. This theme is quite relevant when examining the experience of students in a residential learning community, given that the belief exists that so much of learning occurs in students' daily living (Pascarella, Terenzini, & Blimling, 1994), and so a focus of learning communities is to bridge the in-class and out-of-class activities (Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

Examples of this are seen in a program such as FYRST, where participants integrate their studies and academic interactions into the residence hall community. For

some of the research participants, they believed the FYRST program encouraged them to study together and discuss academic issues. This, of course, is fundamental to the concept of a community of learners. As has been identified in the discussion of other themes, the sub-theme of interaction around academic matters overlaps with elements of other themes. Specifically, the participants' words will highlight examples of hwo this sub-theme overlaps with the sub-themes of interaction with other students, shared experiences and a close-knit community.

FYRST participants engaged in a lot of informal conversations, often late at night in the hallways or spending time in one another's room. This type of interaction was described as characteristic of their close-knit community. On the topic of conversations related to school, Kevin said the group discussed "classes and teachers and professors and exams and…which courses we wanted to take together."

Chris shared that by interacting with other FYRST members, he found people to assist him academically:

> When you face an exam and you know you didn't do too well, you don't get down too much because you know if you study a little harder for the next one, or you go and talk to some other people and see what their advice is on like how to approach the subject or whatever you're having a problem with, then you get some advice from somebody else who has been through it before or has done something like that--so that helped a lot.…
>
> For a lot of people, it was the first time they were taking some of those classes so it was like--everyone talked about how they studied for it to see what worked and after the first exam, then everyone would discuss who was a better professor, or study techniques, different points--and you'd try to get help from somebody who was getting it a little easier than you were, so it helped just talking with everybody, getting new ideas and new points.

Jasmine said that students talked a lot with one another about classes, particularly when they had some courses in common:

I know the first year, a lot of people came here wanting to be biology majors and a lot of people were taking biology. I don't know, everybody wanted to become a doctor....All of the classes are difficult, but just helping each other, they could identify with each other and just understanding what that person was going through...you know, you could sometimes help each other.

Jasmine, an accounting major, considered herself to be pretty good in math, so she offered her support to other students.

The other thing was college algebra. Everybody had problems with college algebra. I went around and helped a couple of people with homework...because that class was not necessarily difficult for me. Just that encouragement...we could help each other, motivate each other, be like--you're going to pass, you just have to do XY and Z and you can still make it. You may not pass with an A, but as long as you pass with a B or C, at least you'll make it past that hurdle and move on to the next class.

Jasmine added that these types of conversations really helped students to keep things in perspective too. She gave the example of feeling doomed that because of doing poorly on one assignment, feeling like she would be doomed in the class:

Perhaps by just talking to someone, and that person saying, "Hey, look this grade is probably worth a certain percentage of your overall grade and you still have this much left out there", the other student might encourage her to keep applying her efforts and to stick with the class.

Joshua shared the perspective that it wasn't usual for students to "just sit down and talk about school." He thought that they were more likely to be interested in talking about other students or relationships, and more. Yet, he added:

There were times when people would sit outside their rooms and do homework together. Or there were times when...someone would sit down and help someone else do a problem.

The FYRST program encouraged students' academic success by providing them with the opportunities to interact with one another about academic issues. Aside from Freshman Experience, many participants reported having some FYRST students in many

of their other classes. This provided an instant connection for those students and they often went to each other for questions or assistance with the class. For some, the effort was even made to schedule future classes together. Anthony said:

> Any class I had, I had a FYRST member in it. For the spring semester, we tried to arrange our classes so that as many FYRST people would be in the classes as possible...Even my roommates and I had the same classes so [I] knew when to wake up on time.

Participants reported that being in FYRST often gave them the chance to compare themselves academically to other students. Through conversations and any shared classes, they came to know how other students were doing and often compared themselves to their peers. Eduardo explained how this occurred and, in doing so, is really explaining how this theme overlaps with elements of the community theme:

> Just by talking since it was a tight knit community, I mean you'd go to people's rooms and they'd be like, oh I flunked this test or I skipped class today or I got straight As...you would just pretty much know how everybody else was doing. Plus you took the Freshman Experience class with them so you could see what kind of study habits they had by how they prepared for Freshman Experience, which was a fairly easy course but still I think some people managed to get not so great grades in it just because they wouldn't do the work or because school wasn't their priority, or because they were more concerned about other things or for a variety of other reasons. But I think you didn't know exactly how everybody else was doing but you got a general sense of where you stood in the group and you knew if you were doing all right and you know how everybody else was doing.

This comparison between students even impacted participants beyond their first year. For some, it gave them a steady group to follow, monitor, and use as a benchmark for comparison. Kevin, a Business major said:

> After that first year, when I saw I could make it, and I was doing well, and I realized people I was in school with and in the FYRST program with, weren't doing as well as I was---they were on probation or some of them were kicked out of school because of their grades--that's when it became more, not competitive, but more in comparison--how well relative to rest of the people I was doing. Because the assumption was that all of us are decent students, are good students.

If I could keep up with the pack, then I'm doing OK, but especially now that we're graduating, I think that's really when [the comparison came in]...alright, how well are you doing? Are you going to get a job? Are you graduating on time? Are you going to be OK?

I remember for me it started when people started picking their major...That's when we really started following each other, because before then you're just taking core and you just choose whatever you want to do, so it's hard to compare because people are taking different levels and different classes but when people started choosing a major, OK, the business people started hanging out more with each other and then the hospitality people were clicking up. I guess definitely comparing with each other within like the Business school—"OK, how are we doing? What did you get in this class?" We started using each other as resources...And it always came back to like the FYRST people...like if I saw [Anthony], if I saw [Shakira], and they're in the FYRST program, I'd say, "how are you guys doing?" And even if they said I have a 3.8, well, I can't compare to that, but as long as I know that I'm close, I felt--I'm still--I'm OK.

Hema, a Management Information Systems major, added that the friends she made in FYRST ended up being ones she kept and turned to for advice about classes:

[In FYRST] you got to know so many people, so that definitely helps. You ask your friends about what classes should I take, who is a good teacher...that really helps. You get the contacts later and, I don't know, you just don't realize it then, you realize it now.

The examples participants recalled about their interactions with peers around academic matters are consistent with the goals of residential learning communities, as expressed by such researchers as Lenning and Ebbers (1999), Shapiro and Levine (1999) and Scroeder and Mable (1994). However, this is one area where the program could be enhanced with more purposeful efforts. This issue will be addressed further in the following chapter, as conclusions and recommendations are made.

Summary

This chapter contained a description of the setting and participants, and a presentation of the data. The setting for the study was the FYRST program, located in

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Panther Hall at Florida International University. The participants included 10 junior or senior level students, who had previously participated in FYRST during their freshmen year at FIU. The themes of community, involvement, identity, and academics were used to present these findings. These themes and other sub-themes had emerged from the data and were selected as a way to best capture the perspectives of the participants. The themes were described as overlapping. Data was used to explain each of these themes, with quotations from the participants serving as descriptive examples.

The community theme is used to describe how students perceived the environment to be. It includes the three sub-themes of (a) peer support and influence, (b) shared experiences and (c) a close-knit community. Participants in FYRST most valued the relationships they formed with their peers and the impact of these relationships on their satisfaction and development. They felt supported by being among others who were going through the same experiences, and characterized their community as being close, one that helped them feel a part of something.

The involvement theme is used to describe the students' participation in campus life and their interaction with other members of the University community. It includes five sub-themes. They are (a) participation in activities and organizations, (b) interaction with residence hall staff, (c) interaction with faculty, (d) interaction with other students, and (e) striving for balance and focus. Participants thought that the FYRST program encouraged their involvement, and as a result, they benefited from participating in the life of the campus and engaging with others in the University community.

The identity theme is used to describe the students' process of development, and the personal growth they went through as a result of their experiences. The sub-themes

under the identity theme include (a) making the transition: beginning college, (b) developing self-reliance, (c) developing mature relationships, and (d) exploring values and beliefs. Participants experienced mixed feelings about coming to college and many were not confident in their ability to succeed. Over the course of their experience, they became more independent, developed more meaningful and mature relationships and were challenged to explore their values and beliefs. In all, they became more independent in their daily living as well as in their thinking.

The academics theme refers to the intellectual development of students and their interaction around academic issues. The sub-themes that are part of academics include (a) developing academic competency, (b) the Freshman Experience class, and (c) interaction around academic matters. Participants were faced with the challenges of college, many unsure if they could succeed academically. They were enrolled in a common course that provided a supportive forum for them to learn more about the University. Their interactions with fellow program participants included informal study groups and tutoring, and discussions about courses and academic related matters.

The data provides the basis for several findings and recommendations. These are presented in Chapter V.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter summarizes the major findings from the study and provides

recommendations for both practice and research. The first section summarizes the

purpose, methods, and findings from this study. The second section summarizes the

responses to the initial research questions that were used to guide this study. The third

section summarizes the researcher's conclusions of the study, based on the data collected.

The final section covers recommendations. These recommendations are based on the

participant data and include recommendations for implementation by higher education

administrators working with residential learning communities, as well as some

recommendations intended to suggest areas for further research.

Summary of the Study

Increasingly, there is a strong emphasis for institutions to attend to the needs of

first year students, with the goal being to aid in student success and retention. The

development of learning communities for first year students in a residential setting is one

initiative underway at many universities. By creating small communities where students

are clustered together as part of some educational program, students can benefit from a

learning experience that ideally transcends any perceived boundaries between their in-

class and out-of-class time. This research examined the perspective of the student

participants, with the belief that higher education administrators and faculty need to be

aware of this perspective in order to most effectively develop and implement such

programs aimed at enhancing first year student success.

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of what participation in a first year residential learning community meant to students 2-3 years after their involvement in the program. Various theories including environmental, involvement, psychosocial and intellectual, were used as a framework for this case study. A qualitative design was used as the methodology. Ten participants were chosen. Each participant was a junior or senior level student at the time of the study, but had previously participated in a first year residential learning community, at a multi-campus, large, public, research university in South Florida. The researcher held two semi-structured interviews with each participant, and collected data sheets from each. The participants were purposefully selected to provide a variety of viewpoints. Assistance was sought from staff members working with the program to identify students who had been active participants in the program.

The narrative data produced from the interviews were transcribed, coded and analyzed to gain insights into the experiences and perspectives of the participants. Member checking was used after the interview process. A peer reviewer was utilized to offer feedback during the data analysis. This analysis resulted in the development of four major themes: (a) community, (b) involvement, (c) identity, and (d) academics. Sub-themes were also developed for each theme.

The community theme is used to describe how students perceived the environment to be. It includes the three sub-themes of (a) peer support and influence, (b) shared experiences and (c) a close-knit community.

The involvement theme is used to describe the students' participation in campus life and their interaction with other members of the university community. It includes five

sub-themes. They are (a) participation in activities and organizations, (b) interaction with residence hall staff, (c) interaction with faculty, (d) interaction with other students, and (e) striving for balance and focus.

The identity theme is used to describe the students' process of development, and the personal growth they went through as a result of their experiences. The sub-themes under identity theme include (a) making the transition: beginning college, (b) developing self-reliance, (c) developing mature relationships, and (d) exploring values and beliefs.

The academics theme refers to the intellectual development of students and their interaction around academic issues. The sub-themes that are part of academics include (a) developing academic competency, (b) the Freshman Experience class, and (c) interaction around academic matters.

The Research Questions

There were six questions presented in Chapter I that were used to guide this study. The questions were intended to aid in developing an understanding of what participation in a first year residential learning community meant to students 2-3 years after their involvement in the program. Findings from the data already presented in Chapter IV were used to address each of the exploratory questions.

Likes and Dislikes

The first question asked was, what did students most and least enjoy about being a part of the FYRST program? Based on the interview data, it was clear that the single thing that students most enjoyed about the FYRST program was the relationships that they developed with other participants and the sense of community that existed. Every single participant commented fully on these aspects. Joshua said:

Probably the thing I enjoyed the most was…having the opportunity to meet all of those students and interact with them. I still hold dearly all of the friendships I developed in the first year.

Jasmine echoed this sentiment saying, "What I enjoyed most was the friendships, the people that I got to meet and all the friendships that I was able to develop." Hema most enjoyed this same aspect, and points out that many of these friendships will be "lifelong friendships." Eduardo added that the support and reassurance that came from living with other freshmen was what he most enjoyed.

As far as what they least enjoyed, the answers here were varied. Some of the participants least enjoyed the immature behaviors exhibited by some members, particularly behaviors of gossiping or vandalism. Joshua pointed out things like shaving cream and debris left in the hallway, behavior he viewed as "just unnecessary." Noise, he pointed out, could also be a problem. Eduardo said that the gossiping was the aspect he least enjoyed. "Everyone knew what everyone else was doing."

Other participants responded to the question about what they least enjoyed about the program, by talking about the mandatory nature of some of the programs and activities. Jasmine also felt that the workshops were more beneficial the first semester, but by the second semester having to meet the mandatory attendance at workshops was not as much fun because the programs were not as essential, now that she felt more settled in. Shakira said that she now realizes the benefits of all of the programs and workshops, but at the time she worried about all she had to do.

When asked about what she least enjoyed, Hema said she felt that there should have been more encouragement for participants to plan some activities. Too much responsibility, she felt, rested with the staff when it came to actual activity planning.

Interestingly, several of the participants (Kevin, Chris and Isabelle) indicated that they could not think of any aspect of the program that they did not enjoy. Each identified personal struggles their first year, whether academic, roommate or other types, but when asked what they would identify as something that they least enjoyed about the program, they said that they could not identify anything. They felt that all aspects of the program contributed positively to their experience.

Experience Compared to Expectations

The second question asked was, how did the experience of the program compare to the expectations they had of the program? Based on the interview data, participants believed that their experience in FYRST exceeded what they had expected. Some had certain expectations that were met and they were surprised at all of the other benefits they gained, and some participants admitted that they didn't really know what to expect coming in. As Chris explained:

> I didn't know what to expect, but…I was never really outgoing and the program really allowed me to meet a lot more people, be a lot more outgoing, and enjoy new situations and new experiences and just generally…breaking out of my shell.

Joshua was unique in that he came in expecting that there would be a lot of interaction, but really hoping he could just study and get his degree. He wasn't interested in the interaction. His experience turned out very different than these expectations, as was described earlier. He soon realized the benefits of interaction and involvement and really maximized his opportunities in the FYRST program.

Other participants believed that the program would help them make friends. Most participants though, indicated that the level of community and interaction, the amount of support they received, and the degree of learning and growth experienced, was far greater

than they expected. For example, what Anthony experienced exceeded what he anticipated. Being that he was older than most of the other students in the program, he didn't expect to "fit in" and was surprised when he did. Shakira described how the experiences exceeded her expectations as well:

> I did not expect so many benefits from it. I expected a lot of people just living on the same floor. I didn't expect so many programs geared toward us. I didn't expect the friendships. I didn't expect the constant interaction--the homey feeling--I didn't expect that. I knew that I was going to live with people my own age, but I didn't expect that comfort level.

Impact on First Year

The third question was, how do they feel involvement in the FYRST program impacted their first year experience? The participants identified a variety of ways in which the FYRST program impacted their first year experience. In a general sense though, all of the participants responded to this question in a manner that spoke to the way in which the program helped them to feel connected to the University; FYRST allowed them to feel affiliated with FIU. This was accomplished through the sense of community and emphasis on interaction and involvement.

Jasmine felt the FYRST program and the experience she had is the reason why she came back to FIU a second year:

> It felt like home…and that's why I've been here the last two years, because I like being here and I think the reason why I like being here is because when I came here my first year, it was a very good experience, so I wanted to do it all over again.

She went on to explain that had she not been in FYRST, she probably would have sat in her room all day, studying and watching TV. She doesn't imagine that she would have become more outgoing in the manner that she did. Hema and Chris both shared

similar sentiments, noting that the activities designed to bring students together helped them to interact with others, something that they would not have had the courage to initiate on their own. Eduardo added that he didn't think he would have been "integrated into the community as well." Anthony noted that the program helped him to meet and interact with people not just from his own country, something he suspects would have certainly happened, had he not been in FYRST.

Isabelle credits the program with impacting what she did her first year as well. Particularly, she saw that the program helped get her involved in the University community. Shakira had a similar comment, saying that her involvement in FYRST and the encouragement for her to be involved impacted her first year. "I don't see that my level of enthusiasm would have been that high, had I not been there."

Events and Activities

The fourth question was, which specific FYRST events or activities do they feel helped shape their first year? The participant data indicated that there was a real variety of events and activities that shaped the students' first year. In general, these events can be characterized into two categories, with the first being particular interactions with peers, and the second being the freshmen experience course.

As for particular interactions with peers, many students reflected on specific roommate situations as being something that really shaped their first year. For Eduardo, Hema, Kevin, Isabelle, and Amanda, they all commented on roommate situations—some very positive and some that challenged them, as being the particular events that really helped shape their year. These experiences often taught lessons in tolerance, compromise and communication, and ultimately contributed to their own growth and awareness. Other

particular events included specific programs that participants remembered as having a significant impact on them. For Chris it was the ropes course, where he and other members learned about teamwork and working together. For several participants, it was a diversity awareness program that helped them experience what it was like to be less privileged.

As for the freshman experience class, the experience of coming together to learn things in the company of ones' peers and neighbors, and in the comfort of their "home", seemed to be the common thread that pulled together a lot of common experiences, conversations, and lessons that first year. The significance of the learning and interactions in this course were highlighted in the freshman experience class theme presented in Chapter IV.

Impact on College Experience

The fifth question was, how do they feel involvement in the FYRST program impacted their experience at FIU? Participants provided many examples of how they believe the program favorably impacted their overall experience at FIU. For some, it helped them to develop immensely in an interpersonal way. Hema points out that the program helped her to be more outgoing, and that this alone impacted her behavior in the classroom. "I would always be the shy one in the classroom--all of a sudden, when I thought of something, I would actually say it." Chris too added that by being more outgoing, he learned the importance of opening up himself to friendships. This helped him get through the more difficult times he experienced at FIU. Kevin reflected on the confidence he developed while in FYRST, that helped him to succeed at FIU.

For several participants, they saw that the lesson they learned in becoming more

open-minded really assisted them throughout their time at FIU. Joshua was one of the

participants who identified this lesson in open-mindedness as having the most significant

impact on his overall experience at FIU. He credits this lesson learned in FYRST as

really impacting the way he viewed other people during his experience at FIU. Joshua

shared:

> I learned to be more open-minded. The RAs facilitated that and the programs we had, my friends in the hallway [all helped me become more open-minded]....I think one of the things that changed it was meeting all of these people from different parts of the world and meeting a student in the hallway who was gay-- that had a lot to do with it. I was closed minded in terms of almost everything I could think of, like race or sex or background--anything I could judge people by, I was judging people by. But after I had a chance to meet everybody in the hallway...and after I got to go to programs with them or go out with them somewhere, then I started understanding where other people are coming from and I started thinking maybe I kept to myself too much and allowed my own thoughts to cloud my head. I didn't really listen to other people and find out about other people in my past. And maybe that has lead to me developing these perceptions in my head about certain people. I definitely changed a lot in terms of being open- minded.

Other participants credited the FYRST program with helping them to feel a sense

of home at FIU. Jasmine said:

> I think being part of the program was a very good thing for me because now...I can say I know a lot of people who live in Housing....It opened that door. Even though I got involved in other parts of campus or other activities on campus, a lot of the people that I do know are the people who live here and those faces that I've seen and gotten to know and now I don't feel like I'm in a strange place anymore.

For Eduardo, he focused on two lessons he learned his first year that impacted his

overall experience at FIU:

> I think when I look back on the FYRST program--from my perspective today--I don't think I would have been as successful, both in academics and in extracurricular activities, such as student government or fraternity involvement, had I not been in the FYRST program. I think it laid a good foundation for me and it really got me into campus life and into my studies...it kind of made school my life.

Several of the participants agreed that the program helped set the groundwork for their continued involvement in the University community.

Looking Back

The sixth question was, how do they feel now about the program? The participants were quite reflective as juniors or seniors. They were able to look back on their experience in the program and to view it from a different perspective. All of the 10 participants indicated that they viewed it now with very fond memories. Eduardo, for example, said, "I remember it being a good and positive experience….I think it was a very positive learning experience…and probably one of my most fun years in college." Kevin said, "It was just a very good year--a fun and happy year….I know that I made the right choice being in the FYRST program." Some participants seem to be able to understand and articulate the benefits of some of the programs and activities, some in which they did not realize while in the program. Hema was one student who reflected on the difference in how she perceives it now as compared to then:

> Then you didn't realize how important it is, but now you realize how important--how very important it is looking at the big picture. Then it was so many mixed emotions, like, "Oh my god, I don't believe I'm doing this"….Now you realize…FYRST made things so much easier---the transition from high school to college and making friends. Everything was just done easily; it made life so much easier.

Other students credit the program with laying the foundation for some significant learning to occur. Amanda described her involvement in the program by calling it, "the best learning experience I've ever had in my life." Jasmine looks back on her FYRST experience now and reflects on how much she grew that year:

> I look back on my first year as…the year I finally began to mature, really mature.

Accepting responsibility for my own actions, and...the changing of my mind and my perspectives....That was the biggest thing--that was the door that opened--that probably changed everything for me.

Anthony agreed, noting that when he and friends from FYRST get together, they frequently exchange stories and talk about how far they've come. The transition, he said, is very evident. Shakira wishes she could more vividly recollect what it was like to be a freshmen. She said:

I wish that I kept a journal, actually, so I can have a crystal clear image of the times I spent in that program, because I'm remembering it, but I wish I could look back and see it on a day to day basis because you can sense the difference from being a freshmen to now, but I think if I had a diary or something, it would be more substantial.

Conclusions

The findings from the data were examined and several conclusions were drawn. These are based upon my interpretation of the findings. The major conclusions of this study are:

1. FYRST participants were most motivated to join the FYRST program in order to live with other students going through the same experience. Most all participants described their decision to apply as being motivated to live with other students similar in age or those "in the same boat". Looking back, they recall the notion of fitting in as one of their two greatest concerns. This is consistent with psychosocial development theory discussed (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), indicating that students must initially develop social competence; this is certainly connected to fitting in. This concern about fitting in drove their decision to apply to the FYRST program. This aspect is important for administrators to be mindful of when planning for the recruitment of students into this type of program.

2. The Freshman Experience class provided a connection between the participants' in- and out-of-classroom experience, a common element of learning communities, as reported by Shapiro and Levine (1999). Students were comfortable interacting in the class more openly, because they were among their peers in the program. Subject matters discussed in class often carried over into conversations among members in the residence hall. Similarly, there was an opportunity for issues that emerged in their living environment to be introduced into the classroom environment. Clearly the common enrollment of students in the Freshman Experience class helped facilitate the collaboration and seamless learning that was discussed in the reviewed literature. Participants viewed the class positively, and often saw the value of it even more so 2-3 years later, when they were able to reflect on how they had applied things they learned in the course, and how that aided in their success as students.

3. In their junior or senior year, participants most valued how FYRST fostered a strong sense of community among residents, resulting for them in a strong sense of connectedness to the University and to fellow students. This is not surprising, given that students need to feel that they are part of something, that they are included (Minor, 1999). This connectedness and sense of identity as being part of FYRST is something the students carried on through their college experience. Many of the relationships lasted the duration of their college career. For many of the participants, their peers in the program still serve as good friends, strong supporters and even benchmarks for comparing academic progress. This is certainly consistent with Astin's (1984, 1993, 1996) theory of involvement

previously discussed, which advocates that student success and satisfaction is enhanced through their involvement. In FYRST, students were involved and felt a sense of affiliation to their community.

4. FYRST participants who were international students struggled with issues related to academic expectations. Looking back 2-3 years later, they see the reasons, based on the differences they see in the educational systems. Rong and Turk (1994) describe this as an element of culture shock that international students experience. As freshmen, many participants questioned their abilities or easily grew frustrated at the challenges they encountered. Their ability to develop competence, as Chickering (1969) describes it, is essential for students to have the confidence that they can succeed academically. Many participants, especially those who were international students, struggled with this during their first year.

5. FYRST students were significantly impacted by the experience of living in a diverse community. While an impact may be expected when one experiences any exposure to diversity, I believe the impact was more significant in FYRST because of the close-knit community and the numerous opportunities for interaction that were facilitated by the structure of the program. All participants identified the growth they now realize they experienced as a result of living with individuals from such diverse backgrounds. This growth resulted in them becoming more open-minded during their college experience, particularly in their willingness and interest in establishing relationships with a wide array of people. As has been described, students became less dualistic in their views of others, and eventually more open to others' perspectives and differences.

6. There did not exist a well-defined academic culture among FYRST participants. The Freshman Experience class was an invaluable linkage among FYRST students, and many participants reflected on the interactions they had with peers around academic matters. However, there was lacking a more defined linkage with faculty members and the consistent engagement of students in other academic related matters. Their interaction with faculty was primarily limited to the classroom; there was no formal connection with faculty to the FYRST program. As well, there lacked intentional efforts in the program and residence halls to foster an academically focused environment, as advocated by Schroeder and Mable (1994). As Lewin (1938) indicated, students' behavior is a product of their interactions with the environment. Because the environment did not strongly emphasize academics, this was not as central to the students' experience as perhaps it could have been.

7. FYRST participants were encouraged to be involved in the housing and campus community. This initial engagement resulted in the students' commitment to being involved beyond their first year, not surprising given Astin's (1984, 1993, 1996) research on student involvement. Participants credit the encouragement provided in their first year, with developing the confidence and desire to seek out leadership positions and greater involvement in the University. This involvement contributed to their sense of connectedness to the University throughout their college experience.

8. International students experienced life in a residential learning community in much the same way that the American students did. There has not been anything

in the literature on learning communities that has specifically studied the experience of international students. In this study, 7 of the 10 participants were international students, all from areas in the Caribbean. The only differences noted in their experiences is the issue previously discussed about how they sometimes struggle with adjusting to the educational expectations of the American educational system. In other ways, their experiences as they described them, were similar to those reported by the American students.

These conclusions evolved from the responses of participants and my interpretations of the data. On the whole, it can be said that the participants valued greatly their participation in FYRST and look back on it 2-3 years later with very fond memories. In describing their experience, they most recall the sense of community that existed, the personal growth they experienced, the academic development process they went through, and their involvement, both with other people and with activities in their community. The structure of the FYRST program provided them with the environment to experience this growth and make a smooth transition to the University. Their experiences in FYRST assisted them in multiple ways throughout their college careers and their achievement of success as students.

<div align="center">Recommendations</div>

Based on the findings from this study and the conclusions drawn, the following recommendations are made. They include recommendations for practice and recommendations for further research. Those intended for practice are offered as a result of this specific study. While they are most appropriate for this specific case, it is anticipated that some may also be used by higher education administrators working with

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the development of learning communities and residential environments.

Recommendations for Practice

1. Make efforts to shape the student culture within the FYRST program into one that is learning-centered. In FYRST, participants benefited from enrolling in a common course together, and engaged in study groups and discussions around academic matters. However, this could be maximized with more intentional efforts applied toward creating an environment that focuses on learning. Aside from the class, the interactions that did occur seemed to happen naturally because of the sense of community and common experiences of the students. The staff played a minor role in engaging students in discussions regarding their courses, but there existed an absence of structured programs and experiences that could help shape the student culture into one that is more learning-centered. This recommendation can be said to encompass a variety of efforts, many of which are outlined in other recommendations below. In general though, efforts toward shaping the culture should involve the integration of faculty and higher education administrators, the guidance of peers in purposeful activities that foster positive peer influence, and the offering of experiences that are consistent with the University's academic mission. While the participants studied in FYRST were successful students academically, this focus on a more learning-centered culture could benefit all students in the program, including those who perhaps were not as successful as these participants. This recommendation seems to be the foundation talked about by Pascarella and Terenzini (1994), when they conclude that the greatest impact on student learning may stem from the students' total level of

campus engagement, particularly when academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular involvements are mutually supporting and relevant to a particular educational outcome.

2. Foster faculty involvement to further enhance the potential of a residential learning community. In this study, only 1 of the 10 participants related experiences of having had meaningful contact with faculty outside of the classroom. While students did not indicate that they wish they had more contact with faculty, this recommendation is driven, in part, by what is in the literature. Astin (1993) concluded from the many empirical findings from his research that the relationship that exists between students and faculty is the second most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years. Having a faculty that is highly student-oriented contributes significantly to student success and retention.

One of the concerns on many campuses is that faculty do not have enough contact with students outside of the classroom (Love & Love, 1995). At many larger institutions, their contact is even limited inside the classroom. Participants in this study often said that they viewed their faculty favorably, but reported having little or no contact with them outside of classroom instruction. Faculty must focus on being an intentional presence in students' academic lives. By developing these relationships, they can explore what the students are learning and what norms and values are being promoted in that powerful peer group. The absence of this faculty involvement, unfortunately, only reinforces among students the myth that their learning is an activity confined to the boundaries of a

classroom. Aside from faculty initiating opportunities for this interaction within their classroom, higher education administrators responsible for the planning and implementation of residential learning communities such as FYRST, should create opportunities for this interaction outside of the classroom. Some examples of how this can be achieved with the participants of the FYRST program include offering faculty lectures in the residence halls, providing space for faculty to teach class or hold office hours in the residence halls, developing a faculty mentors program, hosting student-faculty receptions, including faculty in efforts to recognize academic achievement in the residence halls, and providing tutoring or supplementary instruction by faculty in the residence halls. Such initiatives would enhance the student-faculty relationship in a learning community such as FYRST, and create an environment even more conducive to student growth.

3. Integrate the use of mentors, resident assistants, and other peer leaders in a way that peer influence helps to further the educational aims of the institution. The literature tells us that peers are indeed the single most powerful influence in the students' collegiate experience (Astin, 1993). Data from this research with FYRST participants supported the notion of the importance of the peer group to students in a residential learning environment. All of the participants spoke about important conversations or lessons learned from their RAs or mentors. This influence needs to be harnessed in such a way that the values and norms propagated by the peer groups are consistent with the desire for enhancing student learning. Others, such as Love and Love (1995), have pointed out that this objective can be best achieved by developing intellectual-based peer group

programs. This might include peer tutoring, or supplementary instruction led by peers, for example. With a program such as FYRST, upperclass students could be selected to serve in a mentoring and tutoring role, with emphasis being placed on direct contact around academic matters. This peer involvement in learning is different than faculty involvement in learning. While both are important, peers are uniquely able to model the desired behavior. Currently, much of the peer interaction within FYRST focuses on support and integration to the University. These aspects are also extremely critical for first year students, but reflect only part of the areas in which peers can contribute and influence positively in a residential learning community.

4. In recognition of the fact that educational systems vary from one culture to another, provide international students or even those who may not feel confident that they are as knowledgeable about what to expect, with an opportunity to be oriented to the academic environment of the institution. In this study, the majority of international students discussed how expectations of FIU's educational system (grading, testing, class structure, teaching styles, etc.) were different than those to which they were accustomed in their own countries. Efforts should be made to help these students to gain an understanding of the expectations and standards inherent in the educational system, the academic support resources available, as well as the methods commonly used for teaching and grading. This can be integrated into an existing orientation program or offered as a series of workshops for FYRST participants. Once classes begin though, structured opportunities should be available for students to seek out advisement about questions they have

on issues they are experiencing in the classroom. Ideally, peer mentors can be trained for this role or an on-site advisor made available. This would give students the chance to gain information that ideally will result in their increased competence and confidence in their ability to succeed. The literature reviewed is clear that students need to develop a sense of confidence in their ability to do well academically (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

5. Develop a means for transitioning students into a new community after their first year experience. This was not available for those FYRST students and they spoke of the sense of loss felt when the year concluded and everyone would go in different directions. Those in first year residential learning communities typically exit that program at the completion of their freshmen year. In order to assist them with their transition into their sophomore year and to maximize the benefits inherent in the community that has been developed, it is recommended that institutions provide opportunities for students to move into other learning communities, where there continues to be an emphasis on learning in a supportive environment. The needs of the individual institution will help frame what this experience should be. In the particular program studied, students can now transition into a leadership experience, a wellness community or an academically based community. For example, after the first year, students often have declared a major, so having them live with others in a similar academic major can help foster a learning-centered community. These options facilitate the continuation of the sense of community developed that first year. At the time that students in this study participated in FYRST, these options were not available. Participants

expressed the feeling that it was difficult to leave the community, and their peers, at the conclusion of their experience. It was even more difficult because they weren't moving from FYRST into another group. Had they had other options, their personal transition to the sophomore year might have been eased, and the benefits gained in their community could be carried over into a new setting.

Recommendations for Research

From the analysis of the data collected in this study, the following recommendations are offered for further research in the area of residential learning communities.

1. Because the power of peer influence is so strong and given the desire to enhance the academic culture in a residential learning community, further research should be conducted to determine how this influence could be harnessed to best contribute to the educational aims of an institution. The research can help examine what particular types of interactions or activities among peers lead to positively influencing student culture and the process of learning. In particular, what conditions motivate students to interact around academic matters. This information would be beneficial in structuring programs and experiences that facilitate the desired academically related interaction among students.

2. Additional research about the experience of living in a residential learning community should be conducted and include comparisons between student participants at a variety of institutions. No two programs are alike, and so by studying participants at a variety of institutions, in a variety of programs, one can better understand how different aspects of a program impact the overall experience. Also, by conducting studies at different institutions, research will

include programs that serve different student populations, demographically.

3. More research on the experience of international students should be done. Such research should include participants from a variety of backgrounds. While this study included seven international students, they were all from the Caribbean. Students from different cultures, i.e. East Asian, Middle Eastern, African, etc. may experience a collaborative learning environment differently, depending upon their culture. That area is relatively unexplored in the literature, but can certainly assist educators who work with international student populations, in their planning process.

4. It was previously stated in my recommendations for practice that efforts need to be made to maximize the powerful potential of learning communities, by further integrating faculty into the communities. Research should be conducted to examine the nature of interactions between faculty and students in a residential learning community, with the goal to better understand how different types of interactions contribute to student learning and retention.

5. A similar research study could be conducted with students who were not as successful in their college endeavors or who did not fully participate in the program. This type of research would assist in understanding the perspectives of students who choose not to engage in the activities and opportunities offered to them. With any program, the issue of how to engage students is critical.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of what participation in a first year residential learning community meant to students 2-3 years after their

involvement in the program. This was accomplished through in-depth interviews with 10 students who were in their junior or senior year, but had previously participated in the FYRST program at Florida International University. Seven of the ten participants were international students, all from areas within the Caribbean. The presentation of this case provided insights into the students' perspectives of their first year. The four themes of community, involvement, identity and academics formed the framework for the analysis of this study. The themes were represented as overlapping, in that participants had experiences that represented more than one of the themes.

It can be concluded from this study that the perspectives of students in a residential learning community provide valuable insight into how their participation in such a program helps shape their overall collegiate experience. The findings and recommendations from this study have been summarized in this chapter and can be used, as applicable, to assist higher education administrators in marketing, developing and implementing effective programs that will aid in the success and retention of first year students.

The following definition by Alexander Astin (1985) was used to define learning community:

> Such communities can be organized along curricular lines, common career interests, avocational interests, residential living areas, and so on. They can be used to build a sense of group identity, cohesiveness, and uniqueness; to encourage continuity, and the integration of diverse curricular and co-curricular experiences; and to counteract the isolation that many students feel. (p. 161)

The particular program being studied in this research, FYRST, was organized along a common living area and one common course. As Astin described in his definition, FYRST did indeed build a sense of identity, cohesiveness and uniqueness. It also helped

counteract the feelings of isolation that many students feel. As was described in the literature review, many definitions of learning communities exist. FYRST can be said to be one type.

Students in FYRST benefited from being participants in a community that was cohesive and unique; as members, they possessed a strong group identity. Their experiences helped foster an integration of their in-class and out-of-class experiences. These 10 students have all since gone into their senior year or graduated from the University and begun their career. Each of the participants, in my opinion, are examples of success, each having navigated their way successfully through their college experience, and having started it all of in a residential learning community.

This research was most valuable in providing an insight into the student experience. This insight can be lost in the daily experiences of higher education administrators. The descriptive nature of this study provides the reader with the opportunity to get a flavor for the life of the first year student in a residential learning community, thus resulting in a much-needed heightened level of awareness and sensitivity toward the students' needs and issues.

This research also highlighted the integrated nature of a student's experience. This was illustrated through the use of the four themes, which were described throughout the research as overlapping in nature. The experience of students is dynamic and should be viewed holistically, with consideration for the many different influences and interactions that make up their experience. This relationship between the various themes also helped me as the researcher see the relationship between the various theories, which served as the framework for this study. Just as we cannot view one experience in the life of a

student in isolation, nor should we view the theories as being separate or utilize them in a compartmentalized fashion. There is a connectedness between the theories, just as there is with the themes.

University faculty and administrators must continue to recognize that not all learning occurs in the classroom. Learning occurs as students go about their daily business of living. Finding ways to continue to integrate students' classroom and residential experiences in a planned and systematic way, in a manner that supports the development of the whole student, is an important challenge for higher education administrators. Residence hall environments that are carefully shaped as learning communities can significantly enhance the educational experience of college students.

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Appendix A

Letter to Potential Participants

April 2, 2001

Name
Address

Dear:

I am writing to request your participation in a study. I am currently a doctoral candidate in the College of Education here at FIU. (Some of you may also know me in my role as Director of Residential Life.) As a partial fulfillment of the doctoral requirements, I am planning to conduct a study about students' participation in special living communities. The purpose of my study will be to explain how students' participation in a first year residential community impacts their overall college experience. Specifically, I am going to study how former participants in the F.Y.R.S.T. program perceive their first year, when they look back on it 2-3 years later.

Your participation in this study is requested because of your involvement in the program during the 1997 or 1998 year. Participating in the study would require approximately 2 hours of your time in interviews and one hour of time meeting with me to discuss my findings. The interviews will, with your permission, be taped and transcribed. To maintain confidentiality, you will not be identified by your name on the tape, nor will your name be used in my writing.

So that you have a better understanding of what would be required of you, I have attached a sample of a consent form that any participants would be asked to sign. I am not asking you to sign this now. Rather, my intention is to follow up with you by phone in the coming week to talk with you individually about your interest and to answer any questions that you may have. Following the phone calls, I will select approximately 10 students as participants. I appreciate your thoughtful consideration of my request.

I look forward to talking with you soon.

Sincerely,

Cathy Akens
(305)348-4193
akensc@fiu.edu

Confirmation Letter to Participants

April 2, 2001

Name
Address

Dear:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research study for my dissertation. We are scheduled to meet for your first interview at the following time:

Date, time, location

Please plan on this taking approximately one hour. At some point in the next several weeks, it may be necessary for us to schedule one more follow-up interview. Our final meeting will occur after I have had the information transcribed and have an opportunity to review it. I will ask you to meet with me to discuss what I have interpreted as some of the themes from your interview.

I greatly appreciate your willingness to participate and look forward to talking with you soon. Please feel free to contact me should you have any additional questions.

Sincerely,

Cathy Akens
(305)348-4193
akensc@fiu.edu

Appendix C

Participant Consent Form

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

THE VIEWS OF PARTICIPANTS IN A FIRST YEAR RESIDENTIAL LEARNING COMMUNITY AT A DIVERSE, URBAN INSTITUTION

I freely and voluntarily consent to be a participant in the research project listed above to be conducted at Florida International University during the spring/summer 2001 with Cathy Akens, as principal investigator. I have been told that my involvement will require approximately three hours total of my time.

I understand that the purpose of this research is to study how the F.Y.R.S.T. Program at Florida International University helped shape the college experience of student participants.

I understand that the research procedures will be as follows: I will be interviewed on one occasion for 1-2 hours or on two occasions for approximately 1 hour each. I will be asked to talk about my experiences at FIU and my participation in the F.Y.R.S.T. program. I will determine how much information I wish to share with the researcher. I will also be asked to meet with the researcher for approximately 1 hour to later review summary information compiled from my interview(s).

I understand that there are no known risks or benefits involved in this project. I further understand that my identity will be considered strictly confidential. I understand that a pseudonym will be used in place of my actual name in the research. I understand that there are approximately ten students participating in this study.

I understand that I may withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in this research project at any time with no negative consequences. I have been given the right to ask questions concerning the procedure, and any questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that if any new findings are developed during the time that I am in this study, which may affect my willingness to continue to be in the study, I will be informed as soon as possible.

I understand that if I desire further information about this research, I should contact Dr. Janice Sandiford, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, at 305-348-3996. I also understand that if I have any questions concerning the rights of human subjects, I may contact the Chairperson of the Institutional Review Board at Florida International University, Dr. Bernard Gerstman at 305-348-3115.

I have read and I understand the consent form.

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

I have explained and defined in detail the research procedure in which the participant has agreed to participate and have offered him/her a copy of this informed consent form.

_____   _____
Signature of Witness   Date

Appendix D

Participant Information Sheet

Information Sheet—Research Participants

Name:

Summer Address/Phone:

E-mail Address:

Race:

"Hometown":

Major:

Career Aspirations:

Year in FYRST Program (97 or 98?):

High School GPA:

Campus Involvement (list past/present involvement—clubs, organizations, positions, etc.):

Sample Interview Questions

VOICES OF THE PARTICIPANTS IN A FIRST YEAR RESIDENTIAL LEARNING COMMUNITY AT A DIVERSE, URBAN INSTITUTION

Sample Interview Questions

1. Tell me what you remember about being a freshmen.
2. Tell me what you remember about your first day at FIU?
3. What was it like to be a part of the FYRST Program?
4. What did you enjoy most about being a part of the FYRST Program?
5. What did you enjoy least about being a part of the FYRST Program?
6. What did you learn in FYRST that helped you get through your freshmen year?
7. What did you learn in FYRST that has helped you get to where you are today at FIU?
8. Was your experience in the FYRST Program what you expected it to be?
9. How do you feel your involvement in the F.Y.R.S.T. Program impacted your first year experience?
10. How would your first year have been different had you not been in FYRST?
11. Tell me about a specific event you remember from your first year?
12. What experience can you recall from your first year that really made an impact on you?
13. Tell me about your Freshman Experience class?
14. What do you remember about the workshops or programs you attended?
15. Did being involved in FYRST impact your overall experience at FIU in any way?
16. How would your FIU experience been different had you not been in FYRST?
17. Looking back to your first year, is there anything you wished you'd done differently?
18. What were your relationships with other students in the program like that first year?
19. Are there any faculty or staff you met that first year that were of assistance to you?

Appendix F

Summary of Coding Procedures

Method used for Coding
- Make a copy of all transcripts
- Develop tentative list of themes
- Using themes, begin to mark transcripts, identifying information that may not fit into themes.
- Review and revise list of themes until it captures all transcript content.
- Once themes are finalized, highlight each theme by different color
- Within each theme (color), use pencil to identify sub-themes in content.

Themes for Coding

Community   (Pink)
- Peer Support and Influence
- Shared Experiences
- A Close Knit Community

Involvement   (Green)
- Activities and Organizations
- Interaction with Residence Hall Staff
- Interaction with Faculty
- Interaction with Other Students
- Striving for Balance

Identity   (Orange)
- Making the Transition: Beginning College
- Developing Self-Reliance
- Developing Mature Relationships
- Exploring Values and Beliefs

Academics   (Blue)
- Developing Academic Competency
- The Freshman Experience Class
- Interaction Around Academic Matters

Interview #1
Cathy Akens (C), "Kevin" (K)
4/19/01
11:00am

C: Can you start off by telling me what you recall about being a freshman?

K: What do I recall about begin a freshman? I recall just being very involved on the floor.... I remember staying up late in the hallway, just sitting on the floor and having conversations, meeting people—until 4:00 in the morning, 5:00.... It was very easy and I was very happy about how easy the transition was...I was very nervous about coming to school...especially about coming to Miami. I had never been to Miami before...I was very proud of myself that year---of all of the accomplishments I had made, all the friends I had made. That was one of my biggest concerns-finding people to bond with. And I did very well that first semester, comparatively to my high school GPA...it was just a very, overall a very good year—fun and happy year. I wasn't really complaining about anything. Compared to living at home, I was in heaven. I said that a lot...I'm in heaven, I love Miami.

C: I'm going to come back to some of those things you talked about, but if you can think about the day that you actually moved in and just describe for me everything you remember about that first day.

K: I remember being very nervous, because even that morning, I wasn't sure if I was coming to FIU. I had applied and told my dad I was going, but I needed a ride to get to Miami…and he kept on, I don't know exactly what he was saying, but he kept making general comments that scared me into thinking that he wasn't going to take me…so…up to that morning when we left, early that morning—I wasn't definitely sure that he was going to take me. So, when we finally rolled up into Panther Hall, it was a relief…. I remember the lines for sign-in, I saw Kamala. I wasn't aware that she was my RA, but I remember that she was the one who greeted me. We got to the room, there was a sign on one of the mattresses—I guess kinda claiming one of the beds. I was kinda upset about that, because that was the bed I would have chosen. I was upset because the person's stuff wasn't there…it was just like a pillow and a sign, it was like…come on, if you're not ready to move in, then you can't claim a bed. That was my first impression, so I was a little disappointed about that. But I loved the room, it was clean—it was beautiful. My older brother had gone to college and their dorms were very small and the whole floor shared a bathroom, it was bunk bed style…so, I was very happy to be there. My stepmother or father brought holy water or oil and started placing it over the doors and everywhere. We prayed and I think they left right after that. No one was there in the room—I was there pretty much by myself. I spent the first day just unpacking and really just getting settled and every once in awhile someone would come by and introduce themselves. So, that was pretty much my first experience—my first day at FIU.

C: You mentioned –after the first question that I asked—you mentioned some uncertainty about what to expect, particularly coming to Miami and never having been here. What

sorts of expectations did you have about what Miami or what college was going to be like?

K: I just thought it was going to be very tough academically. I wasn't sure if I was going to be able to handle the schoolwork…just from what people were telling me and their assumptions of my ac academic level and educational level. They were skeptical about whether I was going to be able to perform at a college level. Even my father…because I came and I told everyone I was going to major in Business…you know, you have to be good in math, and you're not good in math. Just a lot of people were questioning me, so I was very nervous about that. Also, I really didn't have a lot of friends at home, so in a way it was a new start for me, so I was happy to start over again and reshape my image a little bit. But then, also kinda scared that the same thing might happen in Miami that happened the last place I lived, where I wasn't able to make friends as quickly as I would wish. Expectations…I thought it was going to be a lot of partying, going to clubs…in Miami, going to South beach every night…all the time. Yeah, those were my expectations, but I really wasn't sure, because even though almost everyone in my family went to school, they really didn't share a lot of detail about what their experiences were like, so I wasn't sure exactly what to expect. It was just mostly that I thought classes were going to be tough, it was going to be a lot of studying. Like study hard, party hard.

C: What do you recall about what it was like to be part of the FYRST program?

K: Well, obviously there was a sense of community there. I remember being forced to do

programs that you didn't' necessarily want to do, but after they were over, you were kinda glad you went…that type of thing…bittersweet. When they told you you had to go, you were very upset, but afterwards, they turned out to be not so bad. I don't know…it was a lot of friends… able to talk to anyone, staying up late just talking for no apparent reason. For me, it was interesting because it was my first time being close with people from different cultures. It was an incredible learning experience for me, just being around people from different countries and cultures….Like one of the mentors, he was in my room, he was from Africa. And that was just…almost a life-changing event…almost…not life changing, but it had a huge impact on the way I saw myself. It was interesting…because I remember my…at least the fall semester, my entire room was Black…and it was just interesting like seeing the diversity between the four of us and my roommate was just like me, even though he was Jamaican descent. Like, his mother couldn't tell the difference between us on the phone, we thought alike, if I started saying a sentence, he would finish it for me and visa versa…we were very close. So, I was very surprised that people from different places could be just like me…and just meeting people from the Caribbean, it just kinda changed the way I saw myself. I definitely started seeing myself more as an American than an African American. I started seeing the difference between different Black people. I don't know…it just changed the way I saw myself…I don't know if I contribute it to the FYRST program or just being at FIU…but definitely it helped because it kinda forced us to come together.

C: Tell me a little bit more about how that experience with the roommates changed your perception of how you saw yourself.

K: It was just interesting...it changed the way I saw Blackness, I think. Being African American, you kinda grew up with these certain standards that you think applies to being Black...certain stereotypes...you're not Black if you don't do this...you have to act a certain way, talk a certain way, or listen to this certain type of music. But, my mentor was from Nigeria—he was educated in the British school system, so he had a British accent, but...so, the way he spoke, the music he listened to, it was different...but you know...he's from Africa! You can't argue with someone that he's not Black when he's from Nigeria. It made me question my personal beliefs about what it is to be Black...and these stereotypes I'm holding on people. Like, also my roommates...some of my roommates listened to like the Spice Girls and Jewel and...I mean blasting it like it was the greatest thing and... I was just shocked...you know, I'm listening to the hard core rap, hip hop...and they're blasting Spice Girls and they were comfortable with it...that was probably more...they were comfortable with it. They didn't feel like they had to fit into these neat categories about what it is to be Black, so it kinda opened me up to new things and it made my feel like I didn't have to live up to those expectations either. I could just be myself and not just from him, but people from everywhere...people from Trinidad, Haiti, ...I just realized...when I thought about Black people before, I always thought the African American. It kinda escaped me that Black people from other parts of the world don't act the same way, don't have the same values or belief systems. When I finally had thought...oh yeah, there are other Black people and they live differently, all the pressures, being a certain way just left and I just felt comfortable with being myself. So for me that was a very...very significant...especially because I went to a White school

and I always felt pressure from the Black community...you speak to proper, you should use more slang, so that was something I always grew up with since I was a kid, so coming to FIU and realizing that...Black people don't have to speak a certain way ...like I said --my mentor with a heavy British accent, but he could also speak in his native language also, which blew my mind because, I don't know...he did everything...he wore the traditional African garb when he wanted to, he ate the traditional African garb, but then he spoke with a British accent...that completely flipped me out...so yeah, it completely changed the way I saw myself in the world...it just helped me be more expressive and be comfortable with myself.

C: You mentioned earlier—you mentioned a couple of times about late night conversations in the hallways...what were some of the common themes of those conversations?

K: I really have no idea...but I'm sure sex was one of them, school, just gossip about what's going on in the halls, but I'm sure dating...like boys and girls...was one of the main topics. It's pretty hard to remember what...but I just remember they were long conversations. They wouldn't end until...like people would fall asleep in the hallway before they would actually get up and go into their room. But I definitely remember talking about relationships and gossiping about different members of the FYRST program and what was going on with them.

C: You also said that one of the things you most remember about FYRST was the sense of community. Tell me what that means.

K: Well, we just all felt that we had something in common... we felt comfortable with everyone, for the most part. I felt comfortable going into anyone's room and asking to borrow sugar or anything like that. We spoke when we passed each other in the hall. Even if we barely new each other, if we knew we were in the FYRST program, then we made sure to speak to each other. And, I guess that was a sense of community...and...we just looked out for each other and even if we barely new each other, just because we were on the same hall, we just wanted to make sure everything was kinda running smoothly. If anyone needed food...sure come over, if I have some, take it. Like some people wouldn't even ask, they'd just take it. A lot of people left their doors propped open, which I kinda miss now....so you just walk into someone's room, sit down, and just start talking. So...and even if you hadn't spoken with that person in three weeks...like, you just felt like the relationship wasn't broken, just because you haven't spoken...the next time you saw them, it was like you had just talked yesterday. It was just that very open...there was no pressure to talk to anyone, but if you want to and the door's open, just come on in and talk. That was very cool...very comforting.

C: What had prompted you to apply to the FYRST program?

K: It was probably I thought it would be easier to make friends...I was very nervous about coming, so when it said you'll be first year residents together...I thought...I just assumed it would help me to adapt to school easier. That was the hope...that I would be able to make friends easier. I didn't want to be in a room with a senior, I thought that

might cause some problems or anyone much older than me…I wanted to be with someone in my own age group. All my friends told me don't do it, but I don't know…something just…I think it was more just out of nervousness, because I didn't know what to expect, so it was probably better to be with people my own age and in my same situation than to be with someone older than me.

C: You talked a bit about the lessons learned from living with people from different cultures. That lesson---how has that lesson assisted you throughout rest of your college experience?

K: I just think that I am more open to different ideas—ideas that I might not necessarily agree with, but I'm not going to condemn just because they are different. I appreciated what I learned that first year…so I was more willing and open to hearing what people had to say. I became very…I liked to debate after that…because I felt like debating with someone forced them to speak and defend a topic and that's what I wanted to hear. I didn't want to just hear…I believe…I believe in Jesus Christ…well, why? And a lot of people wouldn't do that, unless you got in their face and started debating with them. So, even if I agreed with you, I…maybe if I agreed with you but I didn't know how to defend my argument, I would take the opposite side and debate you just to see how you would defend the argument so then I could use that if someone ever questions me, I can do the same thing. So, I was definitely more open to hearing what people had to say. Because it was more of a…the people I spent the most time with were mostly Caribbean or Haitian…I had to carry myself a little differently than I would be at home. I had to be a

little more outgoing than I was used to—them coming up and kissing you, hugging you, smiling all of the time…that was a big deal. I don't smile enough, so I kinda had to –I felt that I had to change and become more open and more happier, I guess…and just give off more positive vibes than I was accustomed to …and that wasn't a bad thing…I thought that that helped me especially with meeting new people, it's always (unclear)…first impression, so that helped me personally. I changed my major to International Relations, so that was a big deal. Just from talking to different people…that was probably the seed that sparked the interest in different countries and different cultures and how they relate to each other, so I eventually became bored with business and changed my major…so I guess that was the major influence.

C: What else would you say you learned your first year that has helped you to get to the point of success as a student where you are today?

K: I gained a lot of confidence. Like I said before, before I came to school, a lot of people were questioning whether I would survive at the college level—and they were saying, yeah, I'll be back home in six months. But after comparing myself to other people in FYRST, you know—who couldn't do laundry, they couldn't cook, they couldn't go grocery shopping, they were all learning these…and I was like, I'm ahead of these people. And even after school started, people were failing their courses, and I was doing pretty well, so it definitely helped my confidence a lot…seeing that compared to my peers…I was doing very well. Like I wasn't the best, but I was doing a lot better than people assumed I was going to be doing…so, that definitely encouraged me to keep

going, be more positive toward school and believing in myself that I could make it through four years of college. That was a major thing for me...because I was just so unsure of myself when I came to FIU. And for me, a lot of the problems that my peers were complaining about just were...it was so small...stuff that like back home wouldn't be a big deal....I don't like my roommate...and it just kinda amazed me how people would just get so upset over the smallest stuff, and so I think it made me realize what was important to me...and I'm not going to let this stuff get me upset...to me it kinda seemed pathetic that they were complaining that they wanted their room to be like they were at home so I guess that made me more tolerant of what was going on...I didn't necessarily love what my roommate ... I'm not here to love my roommate, I'm here to go to school. So, I just became very open and tolerant, very patient of people...and I think that that has helped me through...I have had some very bad roommates since I left the FYRST program, but I've never let that bother me or affect me open and tolerant, very patient of people...and I think that that has helped me through...I have had some very bad roommates since I left the FYRST program, but I've never let that bother me or affect me you know, academically or professional network, you know I deal with that person and then I...I figure it's only 4 months, I can live with anyone 4 months...so I think that started—I started appreciating tolerance and patience for people probably my first year...myself, because people in the first program would always...you know random people were complimenting me, like wow you're so independent, I can't believe you're doing this...your parents live so far away, you're paying your own way...you're doing everything on your own, like I could never do that. I mean girls said that all the time, but it really impressed me when a male, a guy said that to me...they would say, like my

parents still support me, I could never survive without my parents, I don't see how you do it. Because I wouldn't even call my father, somehow I would figure out a way to make it by myself, so yeah, I took a lot of pride in that…of being independent and being alone, so when I went to school and in classes, you know—if there was a big project, if there was a situation where I had to do something on my own, or had to speak on my own, I had the confidence to just go and do that. Before I know that I wouldn't have done that, because I was so unsure of myself. I would never haven taken a project on by myself. I would have found the smartest people and say please let me work with you guys so we can get this through, but I don't know I just had so much confidence, I felt like I could do anything. And, I don't know—academically, I wasn't as challenged as I thought I was going to be in college, so when I started going to classes—yeah, just give me the toughest one, I'll do that or if we had a choice for a topic…instead of doing a topic I knew and I could just easily do a paper on, I'd go and find something I had no idea on…I could probably get more points for doing this, so I would go and do the hardest project in the class. That probably stemmed…from all of the support I was getting from the FYRST program, all of the people…I don't know how directly, but I know generally it definitely helped me out a lot.

Appendix H

Summary of Peer Reviewer Role and Credentials

<u>Peer Reviewer Role</u>

- Offered feedback on interpretations of themes

- Reviewed draft and offered feedback

- Assisted with development of conclusions and recommendations

<u>Peer Reviewer Credentials</u>

- Doctoral candidate in Higher Education Administration

- Student affairs professional with over 30 years of experience

- Associate Vice President for Student Affairs; responsibilities include oversight of several departments including Housing and Residential Life

- Formerly held leadership positions, including Director, in Housing and Residential Life for 17 years. Responsibilities included oversight of living-learning programs.

- Chair of University's Housing Academic Initiatives Committee, charged with bringing about collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs

- Serves on Housing Strategic Planning Committee, charged with marketing the residence halls and the development of a programs and services to enhance the students' learning experience

- Expertise in student development

VITA

CATHERINE A. AKENS

December 11, 1965	Born, Fairview Park, Ohio
1987	B.A., Communication University of Toledo Toledo, Ohio
1989	M.A., College and University Administration Michigan State University East Lansing, Michigan
1989-1991	Residence Hall Director Bowling Green State University Bowling Green, Ohio
1991-1993	Complex Coordinator Bowling Green State University Bowling Green, Ohio
1993-2000	Associate Director of Housing Florida International University Miami, Florida
1996	Presidential Award for Outstanding Service, Finalist
1999	Customer Service Employee of the Month
2000	Outstanding Supervisor, Student Affairs Distinguished Performance Awards
2000-present	Director of Residential Life Florida International University Miami, Florida
2001	Presidential Award for Outstanding Service, Recipient