EXPLORING LIVING-LEARNING COMMUNITIES THROUGH STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

A thesis presented
by
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to the
Graduate School of Education
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education
In the field of
Education
College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
March 14, 2016
Abstract

This study was designed to explore the lived experiences of students at a private university during their first year of college while members of a Living-Learning Community (LLC). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to examine the experiences of eight students which sets the study apart from the larger context quantitative studies which have focused on the outcomes of LLC membership. Social Identity Theory served as the theoretical framework. The findings suggest a close link between the development of the LLC group identity and the personal growth each participant experienced throughout the year with reference to that group. While participants had various levels of connection to the larger LLC group, the group served as the catalyst for every student’s individual personal and intellectual growth. Participants constructed both emotional and intellectual families within the LLC which were able to fulfill the individual needs of each member, connecting them to the LLC as well as to the larger university environment. Recommendations for practice include ways in which the connections forged through LLC membership could be applied to other students within the university environment. First generation students, students struggling academically, as well as students beyond their freshman year of school could all benefit from the intellectual and emotional family generated through LLC membership.
Table of Contents

Abstract......................................................................................................................................................2

Chapter One: Introduction to the Study and Theoretical Framework

  Background and Context..................................................................................................................4

  Theoretical Framework ......................................................................................................................7

Chapter Two: Literature Review............................................................................................................18

Chapter Three: Research Design and Methodology..........................................................................39

  Participants and Data Collection ......................................................................................................46

Chapter Four: Analysis..........................................................................................................................56

Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications for Practice....................................................................102

Appendix 1: Interview Protocol...........................................................................................................127

References.................................................................................................................................................128
A steady decline in the number of high school graduates and potential college freshmen, coupled with a call for increased accountability from the consumer – both students and parents, has forced universities to reevaluate their ‘business as usual’ (Love, 2012). As universities look for new alternatives, they have turned to Living-Learning Communities (LLCs). LLCs have been found to increase student academic success and student engagement as well as raise student retention rates (Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006; Frazier & Eighmy, 2012). Despite the multiple positive effects of LLCs, little is known about the actual LLC student experience.

Statement of the Problem

The primary goal of a LLC is to integrate first-year students into the academic and social life of their university. The concept of learning communities is not new, as its foundations can be found in the residential colleges of Oxford and Cambridge (Edwards & McKelfresh, 2002). Although there is a wide range of LLCs, the common component to all is that they seek to engage the students in their larger university community, both in and out of the classroom. LLC students are grouped according to their area of academic interest and live together in a designated part of a residential hall. Along with out of the classroom activities, LLC students share in a common academic experience. This academic experience can range from students sharing a single common class, to a core of classes that are team taught by faculty, to actual faculty members living in the residential hall (Cross, 1998). Regardless of the type of LLC, when looking at grade point averages, retention and degree completion as well as overall student
satisfaction with their college experience, LLCs have been found to be enormously successful (Golde & Pribbenow, 2000).

The majority of current LLC studies have focused on the outcomes of LLC participation. Traditionally, this is measured in terms of student grade point averages, retention and graduation rates and overall student engagement with the university. The major seminal LLC studies have been quantitative. Researchers such as Inkelas have utilized The National Study of Living-Learning Programs (NSLLP), a large national survey with 23,910 student respondents from 297 LLCs on 34 institutions throughout the country (NSLLP, 2007) as their primary data source (Inkelas, Vogt, Longerbeam, Owen, & Johnson, 2006; Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007; Inkelas, 2008). The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is another national survey of 80,479 students on 365 university campuses employed in studies by Axelson & Flick (2011), Beachboard, Beachboard, Wenling & Adkison (2011), and Zhao & Kuh, (2004). The use of these large national surveys is not without drawbacks. While these large quantitative studies have been useful in establishing many positive aspects of LLCs, their extensive breadth can make it difficult to draw generalizations about particular sub-groups within the larger study, especially with regards to specific types of schools and/ or majors, or courses of study. Additionally, the large, outcomes based quantitative studies look at trends and movements amongst large numbers of students but do not look at individual students in specific programs. Specifically, the emphasis on outcomes or results of being in a LLC circumvents any analysis of the individual traits and lived experiences of students within a particular LLC.

The lived experience of LLC students is a major missing link in much of the current LLC literature. This study will look at the experience of individual students while they are actively participating in the LLC. It will capture the way in which they make sense of the total LLC
experience while they are participating in the LLC, rather than examining the LLC experience by studying its outcomes. The goal is to capture candid snapshots of students creating meaning within their LLC, and, in turn making sense of their freshman year experience. It is the researcher’s hope that such a study will help not only her own institution but also other institutions enabling them to construct LLCs that are the most effective for the students involved.

An effective LLC relies upon the combined efforts of both academic and student affairs (Inkelas, Soldner, Longerbeam & Leonard, 2008). LLCs serve as a kind of connective tissue within the body of the university. Faculty and members of academic affairs, residential advisors and members of the residential life staff must all work together on one common project. This study can benefit these otherwise disparate departments as institutions look for ways in which to refine their LLC programs. Additionally, campus administration can benefit from the study as a starting point for developing their own LLC programs. As institutions work to continually improve their LLC programs, it is ultimately the future LLC students who will most benefit from this study’s results.

**Research Central Question and Sub-questions**

**Primary Research Question**

How does participation in a LLC affect a student’s first year experience?

**Sub-questions**

How do students within a LLC interpret the effectiveness of the community?

What are the factors which influence a student’s perception of their LLC?
Theoretical Framework

Living learning communities are group based. The emphasis within a LLC is on the entire unit and not, necessarily on each individual within the unit. Therefore, an analysis of the dynamics of identity within a LLC should have as its genesis the unit as a whole. Henri Tajfel’s Social identity theory offers a framework which focuses on identity as it is formed through group membership. This study examines the manner in which participation in a LLC affects a student’s first year college experience. The researcher posits that a large portion of the LLC experience is in its establishment of a group identity.

The foundation of social identity theory lies in the belief that one’s social identity is developed through group membership (Cinoglu & Ankan, 2012). The theory was developed in Britain by Henri Tajfel in the 1960’s. His work was part of a larger European movement in social psychology that focused on “social factors in perception” (Hogg, Terry & White, 1995). Tajfel used the social identity theory as he sought to discover the social forces behind beliefs such as discrimination and racism. In order to find the roots of such behaviors and beliefs, he looked to social groups and their role in establishing one’s identity. This study examines the establishment of students’ self-identity through their attachment to and/or relationship with a specific living learning community. Social identity theory’s focus on group membership offers the perfect lens through which the relationship of self and group can be analyzed and understood.

Social Identity Theory and Environment

Social identity has less to do with an individual’s personal characteristics and more to do with the group to which the individual belongs (Heere & James, 2007). One’s social identity is established by their perception of belonging they feel to a particular group (Ashforth & Mael,
What makes social identity theory unique is that the focus is not solely on the group itself as much as it is on the group’s relationship with its environment including other groups. The importance of Tajfel’s work is in the importance it places on the group and its environment. By looking at the context in which a specific group functions, social identity theory is able to explore the origins of group prejudices. The theory is especially helpful in situations where a group may not have a strong leader or in cases where the origin of the bias is not clear (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Brown, 2000).

The importance of social identity theory for this study is that it does not consider identity as something stagnant but, rather, allows for flux and change. According to Turner (1975), there is no such thing as an isolated group. The theory constructs social identity so that it can respond immediately to various social contexts and milieus (Hogg & Terry, 2001). The theory’s dynamic nature allows the identity of the group to change and transform over time. The theory does not look at the relationships within the group as much as it does the relationship between groups for it is within and between those relationships that the identity of the group, and, therefore, of the individuals within the group are borne. Social identity theory looks not only at how one’s identity is formed through this comparison but also at the consequences of such categorization (Stets and Burke, 2000). Tajfel’s initial study was an attempt to understand the origin of discrimination and prejudices. The tension between the in-group and the out-groups is where he felt the genesis of such behaviors and beliefs could be found.

**In-groups and Out-groups**

The foundation of social identity theory is its outward approach. Rather than examining the relationships within one particular group, it looks outward and examines the groups which comprise the environment. One’s social identity is formed through “intergroup relations” that is,
an examination of how an individual views the member of one group in relation to members of another (Stets & Burke, 2000). An individual will stay with a group, will identify with a group as long as they see positive outcomes. It is not necessary that the individual agree or like everyone in the group, but they must like everyone in the group more than they dislike others in the out-groups. The emphasis is not in intra but, rather inter group relationships. For example, Joe is attending a private university and majoring in culinary arts. Unfortunately his university does not have a LLC for culinary arts but they do have one for hospitality majors and another for business students. Joe chooses to join the hospitality LLC but in order for Joe to identify with the Hospitality LLC he must believe, or come to believe, that he has more in common with the hospitality students than those in the business LLC. In short, while he may not fully identify with the hospitality students, he identifies with them more than he does the business students and in that way he settles into the hospitality LLC as his in-group and views the business LLC as an out-group. The focus on in-groups and out-groups is a distinguishing characteristic of social identity theory. According to Tajfel (1971), a group member does not need to agree with their group as long as they disagree more with the other groups.

One’s identity is formed as attitudes and beliefs are cultivated which bring the individual closer to the group position at any given time. Abrams, Wetherell, Cochrane, Hogg & Turner (1990) found that individuals will work hard at distinguishing their own group from other groups around them. The norm for in-group behavior is found by observing other members of the group. In this way social identity theory can be described as essentially being the glue that holds the individuals within the group together (Amiot & Aubin, 2013). The glue is found not as much from what is common between the individuals within the group as it is from the commonalities between the group as a whole versus another out-group (Brown, 2000). Individuals strive to
make their groups different and distinct from others (Brown, 2000). In this aspect social identity theory could also be viewed as a theory of differentiation. The theory’s foundation is grounded as much in comparisons and differences between groups as with similarities between groups.

**Creation of Social Identity and Depersonalization**

As soon as one becomes aware of the group, of being part of a group, they will act accordingly in order to continue to associate themselves with that group (Cinoglu & Ankan, 2012). As one identifies themselves with a group one is also simultaneously identifying the groups of which they are not a part. With the emergence of in and out-groups comes the principle of depersonalization. Depersonalization occurs when one’s membership within the in-group takes precedence over specific aspects of the individual members’ personality. The level of depersonalization may vary from individual to individual within a particular group. This can be the result of varying degrees and stages of commitment on the part of the individuals and, therefore, how much they need or are willing to give up of their individual traits in order to maintain group membership. Some group members will be willing to sacrifice more parts of their own personality, undergo greater depersonalization than others (Ellemers, Kortekaas & Ouwerkerk, 1999). Once an individual identifies themselves with the in-group prototype, their social identity is activated (Hogg, Hardie, & Reynolds, 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000).

Individuals who voluntarily become members of a group have a greater degree of commitment than those who are assigned to a group (Ellemers et al., 1999). Their level of commitment will, in most cases, result in a greater degree of depersonalization. The concept of depersonalization is vital in the understanding of a one’s social identity because it marks a point at which the behavior of an individual will be dictated by what they perceive as being for the good of the group as a whole (Haslam, Powell, & Turner, 2000). Their actions become both
shaped and initiated by what they view as the best interests of the group. Stets & Burke (2000) have analyzed the role of personal choice in the process of depersonalization and have divided it into two elements, structure and agency. In terms of the environment or overriding structure of the group, there is a limited amount of personal choice readily available to the group members. As a whole, individuals do not have a great deal of control over the structural factors which surround a particular group (Cinoglu & Ankan, 2012). However, as long as the group members remain within the boundaries of the structure, there is a greater amount of creativity and freedom of choice available to them.

**Salience and Fit**

Depersonalization can be further broken down into the concepts of salience and fit. Salience refers to the point at which a social identity is activated. Social identity theorists use the term to describe when a specific identity has been initiated within a particular context or situation (Stets & Burke, 2000). Ashmore, Deaux & McLaughlin-Volpe (2004), note that salience can have many levels which are associated with varying degrees of connection between the individual and the group. Factors which influence salience include how close an individual may feel to the group and how much they may care about the group’s future. Whether or not an individual feels that their fate is aligned with the group will have an effect on their level of salience as well as their perceived level of interdependence. Salience is not static and one’s salience or perception of salience with a specific group may change over time and is dependent upon the context (Burford, 2011).

Degrees of salience are often described in terms of fit. There are two forms of fit; comparative and normative. Comparative fit is best described through contrasts. An individual will be comfortable defining themselves in terms of Group A as long as the differences between
members in Group A, in reference to a specific topic or category, are perceived to be smaller than the differences between members of Group B with reference to the same topic or category (Haslam, 2000). The notion of comparative fit is another facet of Tajfel’s in and out groups.

Normative fit, on the other hand, has to do with the nature of the differences perceived between the groups. The perception of the individual here is based on the “content of the match between category specifications and the stimuli being represented” (Haslam et al. 2000, p. 325). Normative fit is also linked with self-esteem such that Joe the culinary arts student will gladly align himself with the hospitality LLC in areas where he is proud of the LLC’s accomplishments and feels that aligning himself with the group will increase his status amongst others.

There are a number of ways in which fit can be measured. The first is to examine the degree to which the individual feels a sense of interdependence with the group. Interdependence in this context is connected with the fate of the individuals within the group being tied together. An individual may not necessarily feel that they are dependent upon the others but they do feel that their fates are mutually related or tied together (Ashmore et al., 2004). A second measurement of fit is social embeddedness. Social embeddedness pertains to how involved the group is with the individual’s daily life and relationships. Behavior involvement as the last measurement looks at the degree to which the individual acts in ways that are directly connected to the group identity. These various measurements bring an awareness to the study of social identity. The various levels will ebb and flow relative to the specific environment in which the group finds itself. That dynamic nature of the social identity theory is captured in the varying levels of fit found in these measurements.

**Self-categorization and Social Identity**
Established in the 1980’s, self-categorization theory is attributed to John Turner, a protégée of Henri Tajfel. Social categorization and social identity theory are often regarded as synonymous constructs or two heads of the identity coin. Self-categorization builds upon the foundation presented through social identity theory. It moves a step beyond social identity theory in its consideration of social identity’s contribution to self, rather than group, identity formation (Onorato & Turner, 2004). While both theories rely on contrasts in the formation of identity, self-categorization entails a ‘me’ versus ‘not me’ rather than the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ seen in social identity theory (Onorato & Turner, 2004).

In self-categorization theory, the emphasis is on the development of a personal identity. In this way the self-category into which the individual places him/herself has specific implications for their actions (Haslam et al., 2000). The movement from social identity to self-categorization is a movement from group to self-identity. The theory offers another venue for self-perception and examining one’s sense of self (Turner, 1975).

Prototypes are an integral component of self-categorization theory. Self-categorization theory focuses on prototypes as a way in which individuals cognitively characterize the fundamental qualities of the group to which they belong (Hogg & Terry, 2001; Wells & Aicher, 2013). One way to consider prototypes is that they form a type of Platonic ideal or conception of the group’s primary features. They are not clearly defined, Hogg and Terry (2001) refer to them “as fuzzy sets” (p.123). Within a prototype lay all of the characteristics or elements of a specific group. Within self-categorization theory, the prototype is a conduit through which a group member’s uncertainty can be reduced through adherence to the group prototype. A salient group is more likely to have members which personify the in-group prototype. In groups with a large number of prototypical members, there is a high degree of social attraction (Hogg & Terry,
2001). Of course this is not always the case and some groups will experience aprototypical members who move toward the out-group or exist on the margins of the in-group. In large numbers, such members can jeopardize the overall integrity of the group, thereby causing members to reassess their social and self-identity.

**Social Identity Theory: From Laboratory to LLC**

Tajfel and other social identity theorists used a minimal group paradigm for most of their studies (Ashmore et al., 2004). Under this paradigm, arbitrary identities were randomly assigned to two groups, often with no interaction between the groups (Rabbie, Schot & Visser, 1989). The thought was that the study would start with the bare minimal amount of traits normally associated with groups. Tajfel’s hope was to gradually add specific characteristics to the two groups until prejudices and biases were observed. The initial result was surprising. Even with minimal amount of characteristics participants were found to favor members of their own in-group will simultaneously discriminating against members in the out-groups (Dobbs & Crano, 2011). In this way, Tajfel discovered that even the most provisional labelling was enough to form a collective identity within the groups. This same paradigm continues to be used by many researchers when examining social identity theory (Rabbie, Schot & Visser, 1989). The vast majority of the studies analyzed by this researcher consisted of groups within a laboratory being randomly and artificially labelled and then the results and group dynamics being analyzed (Abram et al., 1990; Amiot & Aubin, 2013; Dobbs & Crano, 2001; Ellemers et al., 1999; Fielding & Hogg, 1997; Hogg & Grieve, 1999; Onorato & Turner, 2004; Simon, Pantaleo & Mummendey, 1995; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy & Flament, 1971; Van Vugt & Hart, 2004). It should also be noted that all of these studies were quantitative in nature.
The reality is that life outside of the laboratory is rarely so cut and dried. Group members will find themselves juggling multiple prototypes and even amongst those who agree that they are part of the same category there may be disagreement as to the labelling and/or the importance of one specific category over another (Ashmore et al., 2004). Thus the application of social identity theory to the ‘real’ world is something that involves more shades of gray than has been seen in many social identity studies. In moving from the laboratory to real life scenarios, Ashmore et al. (2004) suggest that participants be asked a combination of both open and close ended questions. The open ended questions allow the group members to describe the group identity in their own words. In this way the participants are able to design their own unique category labels. The close ended questions take into account that some group members may not be aware of or may be hesitant to subscribe to a specific category. Thus the close ended questions ask participants to choose from a selection of pre-named categories. The combination of open and close ended questions is utilized in this study as it allows for the individuals to express their own feelings about their LLC while simultaneously helping those who may not yet be cognizant of their group characteristics.

Additionally the vast majority of social identity studies have focused on a snapshot in time. Groups are arbitrarily assigned, placed in a predetermined environment and then questioned. The application of social identity theory to LLC allows for a deeper analysis. Instead of examining a snapshot of social identity development, this study allows for an exploration of social identity development over the course of time. This allows the researcher to survey how social identity will change and flow over the course of a school year. The LLC is a construct that exists outside of the confines of the study. While some social identity studies have been conducted in workplace organizations (Fielding & Hogg, 1997; Haslam et al., 2000; Hennessy &
West, 1999; Hodgkinson, 2003; Hogg & Terry, 2001; Korte, 2006), the LLC allows for an exploration of a group of individuals who became members voluntarily and who also live together.

Tajfel’s social identity theory offers a dynamic approach to the analysis of a LLC at a private university. It allows for an examination of the LLC group through its interactions with other groups as well as with their environment. The creation of the social identity is not regarded as static, instead it is seen to react to changes both inside and outside of the group and to modify and be altered over time. Tajfel, along with Turner’s self-categorization theory, offers a paradigm for the study of the movement of the individuals within a specific group through the concepts of salience, fit and prototypes. Thus a strong theoretical framework is established for examining students’ experiences in a LLC.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Higher education is increasingly under scrutiny. As college tuitions continue to rise, families are looking for a promise of value for their money. Students are looking for reassurances of future job placements, employers are demanding qualified workers and universities are searching for new ways in which to engage their students. In this context it is not surprising that institutions of higher education are searching for new models and strategies for student success. It is within this milieu that living-learning communities (LCCs) have begun to grow and blossom. LLCs are not without their challenges and the study of LLCs also has some obstacles to overcome.

LLCs will be investigated from the student’s perspective in hopes of adding to the current literature through the addition of a unique methodological approach. This literature review explores numerous components of the problem of practice including the role that LLCs play in student satisfaction, retention rates and the part which the university plays in each of those elements.

The review is divided into three main themes. The first theme is one of definition and context. Defining characteristics of LLCs are discussed and a context for modern LLCs is established after looking back at their founding history. The second theme consists of successes and challenges. The praise and criticism of LLCs are explored and explained. The final theme is methodological. An analysis of the current LLC studies allows any gaps in methodology to be revealed which, in turn, helps to articulate options for future studies and to lay the groundwork for this study.

Defining Characteristics of Living-Learning Communities
At their most basic level, living-learning communities are simply an integration of a student’s academic and social life on a college campus. Although there are a plethora of types of LLCs, they remain connected in their primary goal which is to create a smaller, intimate community within the larger university environment (Daffron & Holland, 2009; Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow & Salomone, 2002). This goal is accomplished in a number of ways. First, students within living-learning communities live together in a designated section of a residence hall (Inkelas, 2008). Additionally there are specific academic and/or social extra-curricular activities that are designed only for the members of the LLC (Daffron & Holland, 2009). Involvement with faculty outside of the normal confines of the classroom is integral to most LLCs (Rohli & Rogge, 2012). The ultimate goal of LLCs is to link the students with their faculty, other students and to the university as a whole (Zeller, 2008). Tinto describes this as “shared knowledge, shared knowing, and shared responsibility” (2003, p. 2).

Currently many institutions of higher education are facing a myriad of problems, high tuition rates coupled with low retention, smaller numbers of available high school graduates along with parents and students demanding increased accountability (Ellett & Schmidt, 2011; Inkelas, 2011; Johnson, 2001). LLCs are seen not as a response to one of these problems, but, rather to all of these problems (Love, 2012; Pasque & Murphy, 2005). Much of the literature on LLCs mentions “blurring the lines” between students’ academic and social lives on campus as being a major component of LLCs (Frazier & Eighmy, 2012; Inkelas et al., 2006; Rohli & Rogge, 2012; Wawrzynski, Jessup-Anger, Stolz, Helman & Beaulieu, 2009). The hope is that the creation of a seamless environment will help students become engaged not only with their academic work but also with the university overall (Lichtenstein, 2005). Fundamentally, LLCs facilitate students’ integration into college life. They counteract what can, essentially, be a series
of individual acts by connecting students to each other and to their institution (Grills, Fingerhut, Thadani & Machon, 2012; Longerbeam, Inkelas & Brower, 2007). Certainly the goal is that the engagement of students with their institution will help to offset the many challenges which higher education faces today.

**History of Living-Learning Communities**

The concept of living and learning communities is not a new one. Origins of this concept can be found in the residentially focused colleges of Oxford and Cambridge upon which colleges in early colonial America were based (Edwards & McKelfresh, 2002; Inkelas, 2011; Penven, Stephens, Shushok, & Keith, 2013). In these residential colleges faculty and students lived together under the same roof, sharing all aspects of their academic and social lives. Faculty, within this context, was very much in *loco parentis* (Penven et al., 2013). In the late 1800s, American higher education began to shift away from the communal style of education moving, instead, in the direction of the research based models of German universities. With the establishment of distinct academic disciplines, the Germanic model offered a more regimented and segregated approach to education along with an emphasis on vocational specialization and professionalization (Inkelas, 2011, Penven et al., 2013).

It was in response to the Germanic model that Alexander Meikljohn designed the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin in 1927, widely accepted as the first modern version of a living and learning community. The Experimental College sought to connect all aspects of students’ education. The academic and social aspects of college life were interconnected and new teaching techniques were employed (Inkelas, 2011; Stassen, 2003). The classics were studied in the freshman year and were then applied to the study of contemporary American society in the sophomore year (Talburt & Boyles, 2005). Courses were interconnected
and faculty lived in the resident halls with the students. Although the college itself only lasted five years, Meikljohn’s experiment serves as a guide for many of today’s living and learning communities.

**The Boyer Commission.**

In 1998 the Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University published a report that was initiated by public criticism of higher education. The Commission’s work was a response to complaints about the role of undergraduate students at large research universities, primarily that there was a separation of students from their education as well as from their educational institution. The Boyer report came out at a time when higher education was under fire for a number of different issues. Customers (both students and parents) were demanding more value for their money (Love, 2012). As tuitions rose, the pressure to insure that students were able to find jobs upon graduation also rose. This was seen on campuses of all sizes. Within this environment of discontent it is not surprising that institutions began to look for alternative methods of engaging their students and helping to insure their future success. Universities were urged to look at educating the whole individual rather than simply pushing them through courses in a degree mill. The Boyer Commission was particularly concerned with students’ first year experience. They urged institutions to focus on active learning and collaborative teaching methodologies (Ellett & Schmidt, 2011; Inkelas, 2011). The Commission suggested that large institutions establish a new educational model for their undergraduates, a model which would separate the undergraduates from the rest of the university so that freshman in particular could engage in a “holistic learning experience” (Golde & Pribbenow, 2000, p. 27). The Commission’s report forced institutions to reexamine student engagement on their campuses, both academically and socially. This examination led to LLCs being incorporated on
campuses throughout the country. LLCs have since become widespread, a part of the current campus environment. Of the colleges that participated in the 2002 Policy Center on the First Year in College survey, 80% had some form of learning community on their campus (Penven et al., 2013).

**Types of Living – Learning Communities.**

It would be wrong to think of LLCs as a single, unified concept as they come in all shapes and sizes and cover a vast variety of interests. On average, each LLC has approximately fifty students who live together on one floor or in one section of a residential hall (Brower & Inkelas, 2010). The common denominator of all LLCs is residential life. That is students participating in LLCs live together in a residence hall. Outside of a communal living situation, LLCs are too disparate with too many wide variations between them to make any kind of accurate comparison between them meaningful (Inkelas, 2008). Most often the LLC is designed around a particular subject area. The following is a list of subject areas for LLCs throughout the country as discovered through Brower and Inkelas’ longitudinal study of LLCs in 2010.

- Civil and social leadership
- Disciplinary
- Fine and creative arts
- General academic
- Honors
- Sophomores only
- Cultural
- Leisure
- Political interest
- Residential college
- Research
- Upper division (juniors or seniors only)
- Reserve officers’ training corps
- First year transition
- Umbrella (many themes under one banner, such as foreign language halls)
- Wellness or health
- Women (p. 39).

While the list is certainly not entirely inclusive, it does give a sense for the wide breadth of topics covered by LLCs. Golde and Pribbenow studied over 600 different LLCs and found dozens of different types of learning communities within their sample (2000). Schussler and Fierros suggest that an institution should consider incorporating more than one type of LLC as various types will appeal to different students (2008). In fact LLCs have proven to be so effective that some institutions are implementing them onto campuses without the residential component. Commuter colleges have found great success with learning programs for part-time students that focus on linking together freshmen course work (Cross, 1998; Pike, Kuh & McCormick, 2010; Stevens, 2000).

The initial categorization of LLCs is often by subject matter, but they can be further classified by the educational models they employ. The educational approaches used in LLCs include linked courses, learning clusters, freshmen interest groups, federated learning communities and coordinated studies (Cross, 1998; Eck, Edge, & Stephenson, 2007; Smith & Hunter, 1988; Stassen, 2003). In the linked courses model the cohort shares two classes, one
which is content based and the other skills based. Faculty from each of these classes work together to provide a smooth transition between content and application. Learning clusters are similar to linked courses but usually involves four, rather than two courses. Freshmen interest groups are usually found at large universities and are similar to the linked courses with the addition of a weekly seminar held to discuss common themes. Federated learning communities include a foundation of three or four themed courses but with the addition of a master learner. The master learner is a faculty member, outside of his/her discipline who takes all of the courses with the students and leads a weekly seminar to help students synthesize the week’s themes and lessons. Lastly, coordinated studies are similar to the Meiklejohn model. Classes are team taught throughout the year grouped together through common themes.

These models all require intense curriculum work on the part of the faculty. A strategic plan for the implementation of a LLC must consider not only the subject area for the group but also the teaching methodology which the learning community will employ (Smith & Hunter, 1988). According to Tinto, the most effective LLCs are those that are able to “change the manner in which students experience the curriculum (2000, p.4). The manner in which LLCs are able to alter the way in which students experience their curriculum is discussed in the next section.

**Successes and Challenges**

**Student Engagement and Persistence**

A theme that runs through much of the literature on student engagement is that of connectivity. In order for students to be fully engaged they must be connected to their university on both social and academic levels (Frazier & Eighmy, 2012). LLCs are seen as the link which draws together students’ college experiences, connecting the academic and social components of college life and securely setting the student firmly within the greater college community. Carini
et al. believe that it is through student engagement that institutions can “add value” to student learning (2006, p.23). Overwhelmingly the literature concludes that LLCs are highly successful in engaging students with their institution (Pike et al., 2010). Axelson & Flick define student engagement as how connected students are to learning, their classes, their peers and their institution (2011). This definition is echoed by Krause and Coates who discuss student engagement in terms of the relationship between students, their institutional activities and the surrounding conditions (2008). The literature is in agreement that student engagement applies to both the academic and social life of students and is positively affected by those who participate in a LLC (Carini et al., 2006; Inkelas & Weissman, 2003; Johnson, Soldner, Jeannie & Alvarez, 2007; Kezar & Kinzie, 2006; Lichtenstein, 2005; Pike et al., 2010). In fact, even after factors such as “first generation status, gender, race and ethnicity, high school grades and prior high school academic engagement” were taken into account, students who participated in a LLC during their first year of college were found to be more engaged with their respective universities than those who did not participate (Cole & Korkmaz, 2010, p.50). This engagement led to increased persistence amongst students living in a LLC (Edwards & McKelfresh, 2002). Although student engagement can happen on many levels, the essential component of LLC student engagement is the deep interactions students have with their faculty (Pike et al., 2010). In an era when colleges scramble to maintain their students, LLC’s may provide a solution as they touch upon a myriad of elements within a student’s first year experience. This makes LLCs the perfect venue through which institutions can offer students a true sense of belonging to their university (Wawrzynski et al., 2009).

Zepke and Leach mention 4 aspects of student engagement, 1. Motivation to learn, 2. Contact and relationships with other students and faculty, 3. Overall support from the institution
and 4. Importance of social and demographic factors (2010, p. 168). Axelson & Flick simply break down student engagement into behavioral, emotional, and cognitive (2011). No matter how the faculty-student interaction is dissected and defined, that connection is vital to increasing student engagement on campuses. The LLC environment provides students with a unique opportunity to engage with faculty, something which their non-LLC peers do not experience (Haynes & Janosik, 2012). Additionally, the LLC students report that it was their relationships with faculty that helped to ease their transition into college life and to meet the academic expectations of their college course work.

Student engagement can, however, be a double edged sword as it depends not only on students being active participants in their education but also requires that the institution be actively involved in the academic lives of their students (Axelson & Flick, 2011; Johnson et al., 2007). LLCs serve as an important link between students and their institution as they serve to connect all of the various facets of the university experience. LLCs are based upon interactions with everyone involved, faculty, and other students and staff members. The onus is not just on the student to become engaged, but also on the institution to offer opportunities and an environment in which engagement is possible (Axelson & Flick, 2011; Zepke & Leach, 2010). While there are a variety of reasons why students leave school before graduation, studies have shown that they are more likely to stay at colleges where they feel that others are interested in their success (Friedman & Mandel, 2009; Hoffman et al., 2002; Johnson, 2001). Students’ sense of engagement to their university is vital if they are to persist to graduation.

Academic Achievement

LLCs have been found to have a positive effect on students’ academic achievements (Baker & Pomerantz, 2000; Frazier & Eighmy, 2012; Golde & Pribbenow, 2000; Pasque &
Murphy, 2005). The academic achievements of LLC participants transcend their Grade Point Average (GPA). LLC students have been found to exhibit a greater amount of intellectual curiosity than their non-LLC peers (Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Browne, Headworth, & Saum, 2009; Grills et al., 2012). Certainly some of LLCs’ academic success may be due to the caliber of student electing to enter a LLC. However, the achievements also reflect the integration of study groups and academic counseling that are fundamental to the course work of many LLCs (Arboleda, Wang, Shelley, Whalen, 2003; Love, 2012). It should be noted that the effects of LLCs are seen most markedly on students who come into college labeled “at risk” (Johnson, 2001).

The literature is clear that mere membership in a LLC is not enough to increase one’s GPA. Instead, the increased academic achievement may be due to the often alternative approach LLCs take to their course work. In many institutions the LLCs offer a platform for experimentation in nontraditional instructional methods (Dodge & Kendall, 2004; Zepke & Leach, 2010). The foundation for LLC instruction lies in collaborative learning, in students working together to construct their understanding of a subject rather than waiting for it to be explained to them (Cross, 1998). Thus it is not altogether clear if the LLC itself is responsible for increased academic engagement or if that engagement is a result of the application of newer instructional techniques. Cross suggests that higher academic achievement may be due to something as simple as the smaller class size found in LLCs (1998). Brownell and Swane suggest that LLCs help students to develop their own identities as learners (2009). Overall, the literature finds that for students, success is found in an increase in confidence and a supportive learning environment in which students begin to take responsibility for their own learning (Beachboard et al., 2011; Love, 2012; Moir, 2010; Tinto, 1998; Zhao & Kuh, 2004).
Increased academic achievement may also be a result of faculty members who are reenergized and enthusiastic about their role within the LLC. Many of the faculty members involved in LLCs have noted that the experience has challenged their teaching skills which have improved as a result (Dodge & Kendall, 2004; Ellet & Schmidt, 2011; Golde & Pribbenow, 2000; Haynes & Janosik, 2012). Additionally, some faculty members believe that their interaction with LLCs has helped with their interactions with their fellow faculty members (Frazier & Eighmy, 2012; Golde & Pribbenow, 2000). Although the literature agrees that LLCs have an overall positive effect on students’ GPAs, there are many factors to which that can be attributed and further studies need to be done in order to find the source for LLC student academic achievement.

Social Influences

While LLCs may help to increase one’s academic self-confidence, the literature also finds that they can help students feel more comfortable with gender issues as well. All male LLCs were found to help male students with their gender identity, allowing them the comfort and acceptance to focus on things other than traditional college male stereotypical behavior such as excessive drinking and disengaging (Jessup-Anger, Johnson, Wawrzynski, 2012). Students in all male LLCs reported feeling an increased freedom in the ability to just be themselves (Inkelas, 2011). LLCs have also had a positive effect on female persistence to graduation (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983). Inkelas found that all female LLCs in traditionally male dominated subject areas, such as STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) studies helped female students with their academic self-confidence resulting in higher retention rates (2011).
LLC membership can have a large influence on students’ social life, especially with regards to binge drinking. Numerous studies have found that students in a LLC are less apt to participate in binge drinking than students outside of a learning community (Boyd, McCabe, Cranford, Morales, Lange, Reed, Ketchie & Scott, 2008; Brower, Golde & Pribbenow, 2000; McCabe, Boyd, Cranford, Slayden, Lange, Reed, Ketchie & Scott, 2007; Schroeder, 2002). Although in some cases LLC students reported drinking as much as their peers, they felt that within their residential hall they were not exposed to the effects of others’ drinking as their non-LLC peers (Schroeder, 2002). Other studies have shown a decrease in the amount of binge drinking done by members of LLCs (Boyd et al., 2008; Brower, Golde, & Allen, 2003). McCabe et al., 2007 posit that this may either be because students who do not drink to excess choose to live in a LLC or that the ready availability of alternative social activities within the LLC detracts from binge drinking.

The positive effects of a LLC have great depth and breadth. The positive impact of a LLC is found not only within its own members but also amongst other students in the same residential hall (Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Longerbeam et al., 2007). Longerbeam et al. suggest that this may be due to a general atmosphere of social and academic support which is created through the LLC (2007). Perhaps more surprising is that the positive effects of a LLC were found to remain even after students were finished with their freshman year. Love found that the influence of belonging to a LLC may be seen in the student’s second and third year of college even if they are no longer part of a learning community (2012).

Critiques/criticisms of Living-Learning Communities
Not all of the literature sees only positive attributes of LLCs. Talburt & Boyles (2005) suggest that the relatively insular nature of LLCs may hinder students by separating them from the rest of the university. They worry that LLC students may be slower to develop important social and professional networks and to cultivate a sense of their own identity outside of the LLC. Additionally, the somewhat segregated nature of LLC students has been shown to lead to the formation of cliques resulting in a student versus instructor environment (Beachboard et al., 2011). Daffron and Holland posit that some of the negative social aspects of LLC are simply the result of a cohort of students spending too much time together (2009). While Jaffee suggests that it is not only that LLC students are spending too much time together but that they are spending that time with students who are too much like themselves and not interacting with any older and more mature students (2010).

Another challenge of LLCs is their cost. Funding a LLC can be costly, as not only residential staff but professor salaries are often included in the price. Additional expenses can include hiring additional staff such a program director, someone to make admissions decisions regarding the LLC and, at some campuses, building special classrooms and/or faculty offices in the residence halls (Shushok & Sriram, 2010). Many schools will find it difficult to construct a strong environment of LLCs solely due to financial concerns. The expenses associated with LLCs have led some to wonder if it makes sense that a relatively large number of resources are being directed at a relatively small number of students (Friedman & Mandel, 2009; Grills et al., 2012).

**Faculty and Staff Engagement**
In order for a LLC to be successful the entire university community must take ownership of it (Frazier & Eighmy, 2012). This means that faculty, administration and residential hall staff must work together. Some faculty are hesitant to join a LLC at its onset, when it may still be considered experimental and tenure tracked faculty may not be willing to participate in LLC programming if they are not given credit for their work as part of the promotion process (Browne et al., 2009; Golde & Pribbenow, 2000; Gordon, 1974; Kennedy, 2011). In institutions where research is emphasized, the work faculty contribute to LLCs may be undervalued (Golde & Pribbenow, 2000). Kennedy suggests that perhaps universities should begin to look at LLCs as a source for research material and in that way faculty members participating in the LLC would be able to get credit towards promotion or tenure (2011).

While LLCs may help students become engaged with their university, the success of a LLC is equally dependent upon the staff and faculty being engaged with each other (Daffron & Holland, 2009; Ellett & Schmidt, 2011; Penven et al., 2013; Shushok & Sriram, 2010). This type of cross departmental engagement is unique as traditionally faculty have been involved in students’ intellectual growth while residence hall staff have taken a more holistic approach to a student’s life on campus, concentrating on their experiences outside of the classroom (Browne et al., 2009). Successful LLCs depend upon residential life staff and faculty working together to create a new space one that is not quite a classroom and not quite a typical residence hall (Arboleda et al., 2003; Daffron & Holland, 2009; Soldner & Szelenyi, 2008). Typically, faculty has little knowledge of the work of residential staff members, and will often not understand the time it takes for worthwhile results to occur within the residence halls, they can become frustrated when students are not immediately joining in study group sessions and out of class discussions (Browne et al., 2009). In such instances, student affairs staff can offer advice and
help as long as communication between the two groups is left open. Golde and Pribbenow found three areas of tension that often arise between faculty and staff: faculty not understanding the role of student affairs’ staff, student affairs members not understanding the role of faculty members and conflicts in the expectations of each department in the role that the other would play (2000). Browne, et al. classifies the challenges between student affairs staff and faculty members as consisting of cultural historical barriers, bureaucratic structural barriers, and leadership barriers (2009). Just as LLCs present students with a new way of looking at their education, they also present faculty and staff members with a new outlook on their roles within the university and between departments. Faculty who traditionally work alone, are now, as part of the LLC, being asked to work as in collaboration with a much larger team (Hilliard, 2012). While for some the results are exhilarating, for others, the new expectations and demands of a LLC can be frustrating and exhausting.

Perhaps the largest criticism of LLCs has less to do with the LLC itself and more to do with the manner in which LLCs have, to date, been studied. The next section of this literature review will examine the nature of the studies done on LLCs and from that analysis construct a platform from which this study can be launched.

**Methodological Analysis**

Since the 1980s, a plethora of studies have been done on LLCs. The data collected has helped to shape the future of LLCs and aided universities in their search for increased student retention, academic achievement and engagement with their schools. There are some common threads running throughout the current LLC research. In terms of methodological frameworks, there is substantially more quantitative, rather than qualitative research being done. The data trail for many studies can be traced back to the National Study of Living-Learning Programs.
(NSLLP) (Inkelas et al., 2006; Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007; Inkelas et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 2007; Soldner & Szelenyi, 2008) or the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (Axelson & Flick, 2011; Beachboard et al., 2011; Cole & Korkmaz, 2010; Krause & Coates, 2008; Pike, 2012; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). These studies are large surveys given to students throughout the country.

The NSLLP survey, which started in 2003, is the larger of the two. The initial survey included 5,437 students from four different institutions (Inkelas et al., 2006). Non-LLC students were included to provide a comparison group. By 2007 the survey included 600 LLCs, all predominantly white, large public research universities, with only one private institution included. Over half of the LLCs in the survey had only been operating for 2-4 years, and 17% were in their first year as a LLC (Soldner & Szelenyi, 2008). The survey is given to first year freshmen and graduating seniors and seeks to gauge the level of student participation in various educational activities throughout the campus (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). The 2007 survey had 1,500 four-year students and 22,000 first year students as participants (Soldner & Szelenyi, 2008). While such a vast survey supplies researchers with some basic trends amongst college students, there are some strong flaws in relying on the NSLLP to offer concrete information as to the strengths and weaknesses of LLCs on college campuses. The survey questions make it difficult to differentiate between those students who are actively involved in a LLC and those who are not. The primary survey question regarding involvement asks students if “they have participated in or plan to participate in a learning community before they graduate” (Zhao & Kuh, 2004, p. 127). Thus, although the survey is being used to study living-learning programs, within the confines of the NSLLP survey itself there is no way of distinguishing participants who are actual members of a LLC or those who might only want to become a member. Additionally, the
enormous breadth of the survey makes it difficult to make any kind of distinctions between the various types of LLCs (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Only large research institutions were included in the study and there was no attempt to distinguish LLCs from each other in terms of their individual goals or missions (Inkelas et al., 2006). Additionally, the survey’s focus on large research institution make its results difficult to apply to private and/or smaller institutions.

Inkelas was responsible for much of the construction of the NSLLP survey (Inkelas, Dreschler, Szelenyi, Kim, McCarron, Soldner & Mainieri, 2007). An extremely prolific researcher, she has used the data collected from the survey in virtually all of her articles and studies many of which are included in this literature review. While it is clear that the survey has helped define and articulate trends in student engagement on college campuses (Inkelas, 2008; Inkelas et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 2007; Soldner & Szelenyi, 2008). It should be equally clear that the overarching themes of the survey, and consequent studies based off of that survey have some serious gaps. One of those gaps is the survey’s emphasis on outcomes rather than processes. Inkelas herself admits that the survey is in its infancy and while it can be used as a gauge of LLC effectiveness, it has been unable to keep up with the tremendous growth of LLC and offer detailed assessment and evaluation of the programs (Inkelas, 2008).

The NSSE survey is given to LLC and non-LLC students alike. It consists of 70 different items which are meant to gauge the amount of time and energy a student is engaged in activities that are “educationally purposeful” (Carini et al., 2006, p. 4). The survey divides student engagement into five institutional benchmarks, academic challenge, active learning, interaction between student and faculty members, enriching educational experiences and overall supportive institutional environment (Krause & Coates, 2008; Pike, 2012). The survey is given online and there is no corresponding control group (Inkelas et al., 2006). The NSSE survey views student
engagement as a result of student behavior. Engagement is something that can be observed, it is a specific activity in which the students participate (Axelson & Flick, 2011). In this way the NSSE places the onus for student engagement completely on the student, removing the institution from the equation entirely.

Defining student success should consist of more than adding up the number of interactions which a student may have with their faculty members. Instead the quality of those interactions should be examined (Garrett & Zabriskie, 2003; Rocconi, 2010). It is the quality of the interactions which will define the success of any one particular LLC (Wawrzynski & Jessup-Anger, 2010). Lichtenstein (2005) found that comparisons between LLC and non-LLC students did not show a great disparity in terms of student engagement, while comparisons between quality LLC and non-LLC students did.

Certainly the NSSE and NSLLP surveys are not the only sources of quantitative studies being done on LLCs throughout the country. There are many other survey based studies. For example, Boyd et al.’s survey of binge drinking on a Midwestern campus included 2,502 student participants (2008). While this is certainly one of the larger studies, it is not unusual for other studies to average 200-500 respondents (Brower et al., 2003; Pike, 1997; Pike, 2002; Rocconi, 2010). This is certainly not to say that quantitative studies are flawed or that they do not offer the researcher, and the field, a myriad of useful information. But there are some road blocks in a purely quantitative study of LLCs that should be addressed. Many of these studies look at one institution over a very short period of time, a snapshot of LLC activity at their institution (Brownell & Swane, 2009). In the case of the surveys with freshman participants, it is possible that those students have not had time to fully process their first year experiences before being
asked to analyze them. Love found that the impact of a LLC experience may not be felt immediately, but rather may increase over time and be evident years later (2012).

**Self-reports and Self-selection**

The very nature of a survey means that the results are the product of students’ self-reports. Pike’s, admittedly informal, look at academic journals in 2006 found that 60 percent of articles published on LLCs made use of self-report data from surveys (2011). As far back as 1999 Pike noted that consistency in results was difficult with self-reports as it was not entirely possible to know if results were skewed by the respondents’ possible confusion as to the nuances/differences upon which they were being asked to comment (2011). While Pike saw self-reports as offering an overall sense of achievements over a large “bandwidth”, he felt they did so “at the cost of precision” (1996). Krause and Coates (2008) believe that studies that rely solely on student self-reports “lack suitable outcome measures” (p. 494). Overall, the majority of these quantitative studies are founded in surveys which are outcome, as opposed to process, driven. They look at the results of being in a LLC and not what the process of such involvement can mean to the students who participate.

Another weakness of many of the current LLC studies is that they do not take into account the importance of self-selection. Students elect to join a LLC. It is entirely possible that a specific type of student chooses to participate in a LLC. Would the student who joins a LLC be a student who would relate to their faculty, their peers and their school regardless of their LLC experience (Garrett & Zabriskie, 2003; Gordon, 1974; Pasque & Murphy, 2005)? McCabe et al. wonder if LLC student drink less simply because that is a characteristic of the students who have
elected to join the LLC, not necessarily due to participation in the LLC itself (2007). The selection effect is certainly something that should be considered in future studies.

**Tinto’s Theory of Attrition**

In the mid-1970s Tinto designed the first organized, methodological approach for examining student attrition (Chapman & Pascarella, 1983). His thesis was simply that those students, who were involved in both the academic and social life at college, were more likely to persist through to graduation (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1978). His is a longitudinal model looking at a range of socio-psychological interactions between the student and their university environment (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1980). Tinto’s thesis is important because it offered researchers a way in which to analyze the interaction between individual students and their institution as a way of explaining attrition (Eck et al., 2007). A difficulty with his theory is that it put the responsibility for engagement solely on the shoulders of the student (Johnson et al., 2007). The underlying assumption is that engagement means the same thing for all students, regardless of ethnicity, gender or type of institution. Post - Tinto researchers have found that while the basis of his thesis remains true, the differences in types of institution and in the goals of the individual LLCs have a direct effect on levels and patterns of student participation (Chapman & Pascarella, 1983). Tinto’s theory does not look deeply at any external factors that may have an effect on student engagement (Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora & Hengstler, 1992). Things like type of university and student’s background before they come to the institution, relationship with peers and family, can all be a factor in his/her later ability to engage with their university.

Tinto posited that attrition does not happen at any one moment. A student’s decision to leave the university is made up of many small experiences. The combination of these
experiences is what adds, or subtracts, from a student’s overall sense of satisfaction with his/her institution. When an institution focuses on satisfaction, as opposed to just retention, the focus is on all students. It is entirely possible that a student graduates and is unsatisfied with their university experience. Altering the focus on satisfaction for all students helps the university overall by placing the emphasis of the institution on the student customer rather than solely on the desired university outcomes (Sanders & Burton, 1996).

**Summary**

The ultimate goal of LLC studies is to measure student satisfaction. Satisfied students are those that remain at the university through to graduation. Institutional retention rates are in actuality a reflection or gauge of student satisfaction with their university (Copeland & Levesque-Bristol, 2011). Measuring student satisfaction cannot be done by looking solely at outcomes, by counting the numbers of interaction between students and faculty or staff. The literature is clear that the quality of these interactions is of greater importance than their quantity (Garrett & Zabriskie, 2003). Qualitative research allows for a deeper study into the student’s sense of belonging to the university (Hoffman, et al., 2002). For this reason an interpretative phenomenological analysis which allows the researcher to focus deeply on a few students and their interactions with and perceptions of the LLC allows this study to explore what students’ success can mean at a four year private institution. Such a study will fill a present gap in LLC literature through its focus on the experience students have in a LLC, not just the outcomes.

This study uses the social identity theory as a strong framework to begin to examine and understand student satisfaction. This definition of student satisfaction is linked not to quantitative, measurable results such as GPAs, but rather, to an articulation of student
perceptions of their LLC experiences. Tinto himself agrees that institutions do not need more programs but, rather, better assessment strategies for measuring the outcomes of the programs they already have (Tinto, 2000). This study offers just such an assessment strategy.
Chapter Three: Research Design

The purpose of this study is to explore the first year college experience of students participating in a LLC. The LLC experience will be examined through the perspective of the students involved. The research questions used to lead this exploration are:

**Primary Research Question**

How does participation in a LLC affect a student’s first year college experience?

**Sub-question**

How do students within a LLC interpret the effectiveness of the community?

The primary research question allows for exploration of LLCs from the students’ perspective. It focuses on the process of LLC participation, on the students’ lived experience while they are in the LLC. To date many LLC studies have been outcomes based, focusing on grade point averages and retention rates (Inkelas et al., 2006, 2007). The primary research question for this study allows the researcher to examine the ongoing process of living in a learning community, not simply the end results or the outcomes of their experience. The first sub-question will allow the researcher to closely examine the participants’ lived experience through an examination of their perception of the effectiveness of their LLC. Together, these questions will allow the researcher to discover how students involved in a LLC make sense of their experiences. The analysis of the LLC experience will contribute to the existing literature which is, primarily, both quantitative and outcomes based (Golde & Pribbenow, 2000; Inkelas et al., 2006; Inkelas et al., 2007). It may also have implications for how to better assist students who are participating in a LLC and serve to increase the effectiveness of existing LLC programs.
Methodology

The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm will be utilized to build the study’s foundation (Ponterotto, 2005). Reality, within this paradigm, is considered to be a social construct, not an objective something which exists ‘out there’ (Johnson, 2000). Thus, the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm can be employed to explore the many meanings individuals develop to explain their experiences, with special emphasis on the manner in which a sense of meaning is developed within each individual (Creswell, 2013). Meaning is considered to be the result of interactions between participants as well as between participants and their context/environment. As a result, meaning is considered to be unique to a specific individual. This unique or lived experience is often referred to as Erlebnis. Erlebnis is a subjective construction of the individual, shaped and formed through their own unique experiences and perceptions (Ponterotto, 2005). The constructivist-interpretivist framework guides studies in which the research problem explores the meaning given by either individuals or groups to a specific social problem (Creswell, 2013).

Qualitative research falls within the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm. Qualitative research is based upon the exploration of a problem or event and its goal is to establish a deep and rich understanding of the experience through an analysis of its context and of the individuals involved (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research is interpretive (Gialdino, 2009). Thus, there is not only one way in which it should be conducted (Creswell, 2013; Gialdino, 2009). Despite its somewhat improvisational nature, Creswell (2013) offers eight characteristics of qualitative research which serve to define and articulate a general qualitative research methodology. The eight characteristics are: natural setting, researcher as key instrument, multiple methods, complex reasoning through inductive and deductive logic, participants’ meanings, emergent design,
reflexivity and holistic account. Creswell stresses that the data in a qualitative study is found in a natural setting, as opposed to a lab. The researcher is the key instrument for data collection. The data for qualitative research is not only collected by the researcher but is gathered using collection methods designed by that researcher. There can be multiple methods of data collection as qualitative research does not usually rely upon only one data source. Once the data is collected, qualitative researchers begin to organize it from the simplest categories to those which are increasingly complex. The inductive process is used as the qualitative researcher moves back and forth between the various themes until a “comprehensive set of themes” is established (Creswell, 2013, p.45). Throughout the analytical process the researcher must focus on the meaning that the individual participants bring to the phenomenon, not the meaning that the researcher him/herself brings to the phenomenon being studied. Reflexivity is the connection between how researchers position themselves within the study, with the participants and with the data that is being collected. Qualitative research follows an emergent design, there is a certain amount of ebb and flow to the study. The path which the study follows may change throughout the course of the research. The movement within a qualitative study is partially due to the multiple perspectives within the study itself, leading to what Creswell refers to as a holistic account (2013).

Throughout Creswell’s eight characteristics, a common theme emerges. The emphasis is on the individual participants telling their own stories. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative studies do not use controls or variables; instead the empirical world is understood from the view point of the study’s participants (Krefting, 1991). For what is of utmost importance in a qualitative work is not only an understanding of an individual but, rather, an understanding of an individual within a given context (Gialdino, 2009). A well-constructed qualitative study will look
at the entire range of experiences of its participants, not seek to find an average experience (Krefting, 1991). In this way each individual, and their experiences, is treated as special and unique.

Qualitative researchers are, themselves, an integral part of a qualitative study. Creswell notes the importance of the role of the qualitative researcher within his/her own study through his discussion of reflexivity (2013). Gringeri, Barusch, & Cambron (2013) concur that “reflexivity supports researchers in managing and accounting for subjectivity while completely engaging in the work” (p. 763). In short, a true understanding of a “studied life means entering it” (Charmaz, 2004, p. 980). The qualitative researcher is, on one level, an active participant in the phenomenon being studied. This is very different from a quantitative study in which the researcher examines the phenomenon from the outside, separating him/herself from the participants. Thus the challenge for qualitative researchers is to understand the logic of the phenomena being studied without imposing their own logic upon it (Charmaz, 2004). The qualitative researcher must be aware that the events and phenomenon they are studying on the empirical level may many other layers of meaning beneath the surface (Shank & Villella, 2010). The ability to uncover and explore the underlying meaning for the phenomenon being studied is what gives the qualitative study its “investigative depth” (Shank & Villella, 2010, p. 48) The depth of qualitative research is uncovered as the researcher begins to organize their data moving into increasingly “complex categories or units’, as themes begin to emerge (Creswell, 2013). There are layers of coding in a qualitative study and it is the challenge of the qualitative researcher to establish logical movement between the various layers. Charmaz (2004) posits that qualitative research is “emergent” (p. 985). Due to its somewhat organic nature, it can be extremely beneficial to have a peer review the categories of coding once they are established
(Krefting, 1991). A peer review can help the researcher to see if the categories of coding are logical and if the movement between the layers of coding is consistent. A peer review helps the researcher to assess the quality as well as the rigor and credibility of the thematic categories they have established (Gialdino, 2009; Gringeri et al., 2013).

Ponterotto (2005) suggests that the goal of qualitative research is to explore not just the experience of the participants but, rather, the experiences of the participants in a specific context or setting. Thus a qualitative study is ideal for an examination of students’ experiences within a specific context or environment, in this case a first year LLC. Within a qualitative study there is a certain amount of fluidity between the participant and the researcher as well as between the participant and the experience under examination. It is this type of back-and-forth interaction which will allow the researcher to deliver a deep and rich narrative of the participants’ experiences. The results of a qualitative study are presented in a narrative form which, for this study, will allow the individual voices and experiences of the participants to be heard.

There are five different approaches to qualitative studies: narrative research, grounded theory research, ethnographic research, case study research, and phenomenological research (Creswell, 2013). The application of one of these approaches to a qualitative study allows the study to be properly assessed (Creswell, 2013). Application of a specific qualitative approach will help to “guide and direct the various phases of the research process”, helping to focus the study and its ensuing analysis (Bradbury-Jones, Taylor, & Herber, 2014, p. 137). The phenomenological approach, specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is the qualitative approach used in this study. IPA has at its foundation a focus on the lived experience (Van Manen, 1984). The lived experience of students in a LLC is the focus of this study.
With its roots in psychology, phenomenology offers a way in which to examine human experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Husserl was one of the first proponents of phenomenological research. He sought a research methodology that would bring scientific rigor to his field of philosophy (Giorgi, 2008). Such rigor was only possible, according to Husserl, if the researcher was able to bracket his/her own experiences and perceptions as separate and distinct from those of the participants. He felt that if the researcher were able to distance him/herself from their own assumptions they would, eventually, be able to get at the heart of a specific phenomenon or life experience. Through Husserl’s perspective, the reality of an experience could be discovered as separate from the individuals involved in that same experience. Thus Erlebnis was something ‘out there’, separate and distinct from the participants themselves. The essence of Erlebnis could only be uncovered when the researcher separated his/her own perceptions from the phenomenon being studied.

Heidegger, a student of Husserl, did not agree that Erlebnis existed outside of oneself. For Heidegger, an individual’s place in the world and their perception of their world was grounded in their relations to others and to their environment (Johnson, 2000). Researchers should strive to find the reality for each participant through the individual participant’s perception of that reality. In this way, phenomenology is a hermeneutic study, one based in interpretation. Unlike Husserl’s conception of interviews that follow a set of separate steps and in which the perceptions of the researcher are bracketed from the perceptions of the participants, Heidegger saw the researcher’s personal perceptions and beliefs as an important background or foundation to the tapestry of the interviews. As such, the researcher is ever present and his/her personal interpretations and perceptions are continuous. Interpretation of interviews cannot be separated out as a distinct step; rather, interpretation is ongoing and omnipresent for the
researcher (Finlay, 2009). It is, therefore, impossible to separate the researcher from the participant as the researcher’s beliefs are as much a part of the data analysis as those of the participants (Donalek, 2004; Fade, 2004). IPA studies do not seek to find one answer to their research question(s). Rather, the goal is to move beyond the findings themselves to explore the manner in which the findings are articulated (Finlay, 2013).

IPA researchers are faced with some challenges. The first being the double hermeneutic which is inherent in the model. IPA relies upon the researcher trying to make sense of the participants as they try to make sense of their own sense making activity (Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, & Hendry, 2011). Even as the researcher strives to make sense of the participants’ world, the researcher’s own perceptions and preconceptions become part of the study (Smith, 2007). The researcher must be aware of their own impressions and conceptions of the phenomenon being studied and how the participants’ experiences are filtered through those same perceptions.

The second challenge is the rather open ended nature of the ‘steps’ to IPA research and analysis. Smith et al. (2009) describes the process in rather vague terms, allowing each individual situation to form its own protocol. “There is no single, definitive way to do IPA” (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p.54). While this allows for great adaptability and versatility, it can also be cause for frustration, especially for a novice researcher.

While this researcher acknowledges and is aware of the challenges presented by IPA, it is nonetheless the best methodology for this study. IPA will allow the researcher to focus on the individual experiences of students within a LLC, to follow the students as they attempt to make sense of their LLC first year college experience. The framework’s focus on relationships both
between the participants themselves as well as between the participants and the structure of the LLC, will allow this study to deeply explore the student LLC experience. The IPA framework positions the focus of the study on the process of LLC participation not on the outcomes. In tandem with the Social Identity Theory, IPA will allow the researcher to uncover the students’ lived experience of LLC life.

**Site and Participants**

The study participants will be recruited from the Charlotte campus of Johnson & Wales University (JWU). The university is a private, not-for-profit institution with four campuses in Providence, RI; North Miami, FL; Denver, CO; and Charlotte, NC. It is regionally and nationally accredited through the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC). The Charlotte campus has approximately 2,500 students in both their Associates and Bachelor degree programs. JWU was chosen as a site of convenience. Additionally the College of Culinary Arts’ LLCs are relatively new to the Charlotte campus. It is the researcher’s hope that this study will play a role in designing the future of the LLC program at JWU.

Smith (2007) discusses the importance of homogeneous sample to IPA research. The research question becomes more significant when applied to a “closely defined group” (Smith, 2007; Smith et al., 2009). In this study that ‘closely defined group’ will consists of sophomore students at JWU Charlotte who participated in the College of Culinary Arts’ LLC throughout their freshman year. By focusing only on the students in the Culinary Arts’ LLC, the researcher will form a homogenous group for whom the research question has meaning and is relevant. A total of 8 students were included in this study. Participants were randomly selected from the group of all students who lived in the College of Culinary Arts’ LLC throughout their freshman
year. All participants live in the LLC throughout their freshman year, students who only lived there for a trimester or two were not included in the selection group. The gap between the participants’ LLC experience and the time of this study is vital. Englander (2012) mentions that it is important for participants to have time to reflect upon their experiences prior to participating in the study. Thus, interviewing students after their LLC experience allows for that time of reflection. Participation was voluntary, with no reward other than the offer of a Starbucks gift card upon completion of the interviews.

**Participant Backgrounds: Academic High School Experiences**

There was not a set of criteria for acceptance into the BPA LLC. Students were simply given the choice of clicking on a LLC option when they completed their on-line housing form. Despite this lottery type of feel to the LLC selection, both on the part of the university and on the part of the students, the participants shared many similarities in their high school experiences. Nadine described her high school academic experience as “I was always like the straight A student kind of girl and if I got a B it was like failing.” Chris also excelled as did Tiffany, Gerry, Brittany and Sandy. All took honor’s classes and had 4.0 grade point averages or close to that. Tiffany: “I was very honor roll. I was making sure that I was on the honor roll, plus I was on color guard so I had to keep up a good grade average to stay on the team and things like that.” Gerry “graduated as a scholar graduate. Technically, I had a 4.0 or above GPA to be a scholar graduate.” Chris graduated second in his class. Of the eight participants, six were on the honor roll at their respective high schools. Two participants had less stellar high school academic careers. Catherine admits that her academics were “pretty average” which she blames on a lack of real purpose or sense of direction. Beau attended an alternative school in California where all subject matter was presented in the forms of projects. His academic work was not graded in the
traditional sense, therefore he did not discuss a GPA but focused, instead, on the various activities and projects he participated in while in high school.

**Participant Backgrounds: Social High School Experiences**

Socially, the participants’ high school experiences were diverse. Beau’s social experiences revolved around his school and the various activities the school sponsored such as dance competitions and various community events, community gardening and fun runs for charity. He spent his high school years comfortable as part of a larger social group. Beth refers to her high school self as “an over achiever who walked around carrying books. I was in all my athletic groups, played softball and was a dancer for 16 years.” Nadine was extremely active in extracurricular activities and groups stating that she was involved in 14 of her school’s 18 clubs. Gerry was active in culinary skill based clubs like DECA and Skills USA but had only a small circle of close friends. Not everyone had an active high school social life, Catherine felt that she was somewhat apart from others in her class. “They were on different wavelengths. Most of my friends really had all of their lives planned out by their parents. I didn’t have that luxury. I kind of had to do it all by myself. I had to make my own plans.” Tiffany, Chris and Sandy did not have a lot to say about their high school social lives. Chris commented only that he “played tennis for four years”, Tiffany describes herself as a “quiet loner type” throughout high school and Sandy, who, due to a series of knee operations had to spend her high school years in a wheelchair, “got along well with my faculty members much more than I got along with the other students. Me and students my age didn’t really ever match up.” She describes eating all of her meals with faculty members rather than her peers. Thus the participants represent a group with extremely diverse social high school experiences.

**Participant Backgrounds: Family educational history**
The educational histories of the participants’ families were extremely varied. The educational history of each participant is important in so far as it indicates their possible familiarity with the college experience before they actually entered JWU. Their family background may also be indicative of the support they felt they had, or did not have, as they went through their first college year. As the following table indicates, there was a wide range of educational background for each of the participants. The backgrounds ranged from Nadine whose parents both have graduate degrees to Gerry and Tiffany who were first generation college students.

Table One

Educational Background of Each Participant’s Family

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Beau</th>
<th>Beth</th>
<th>Catherine</th>
<th>Chris</th>
<th>Gerry</th>
<th>Nadine</th>
<th>Susan</th>
<th>Tiffany</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Both parents graduate degree</td>
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<tr>
<td>One parent graduate degree</td>
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<tr>
<td>Both parents bachelor’s degree</td>
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<tr>
<td>One parent bachelor’s degree</td>
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<td>Both parents associate’s degree</td>
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<tr>
<td>One parent associate’s degree</td>
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<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Both parents no higher education</td>
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<td>X</td>
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Data Collection

Data collection did begin until permission was granted from the Institutional Review Boards at both Northeastern University and Johnson & Wales University. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A). Smith (2007) stresses the importance of using interviews as conversations. Thus while the researcher had developed some broad
interview questions, as well as possible prompts; she was open to allowing the participants to lead the direction in which the interview flowed. In this way questions were altered or modified according to the participants’ responses. Smith et al. (2009) advises that “the participant is the experiential expert on the topic and therefore they should be given much leeway in taking the interview to the thing itself” (p.58). It is not necessary, nor indeed desirable, that each interview adhere to exactly the same questions, asked in a pre-ordained order. Instead, the semi-structured interview allowed for a dialogue to occur between the researcher and the individual participant (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Each participant was interviewed three times. The first interview was informative, explaining the goal of the study and what would be required on the part of the participant as well as an explanation of general research protocol. This interview was also used to establish a relationship between the participants and the researcher (Englander, 2012). The quality of this relationship, especially for creating a context of trust is vital to the success of the interviews to follow (Wagstaff & Williams, 2014). Additionally, the first meeting was used to explain the research questions to the participant. This allowed the participants time to reflect upon the topic before the second meeting. The second appointment consisted of a semi-structured interview. Through their discussion, the researcher and the participant strove to make sense of the lived experience of LLC life. The final interview allowed the researcher to follow up with any questions as needed and the participant to add any additional information if desired. The transcription of the interview, tapes and all notes were kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher’s office. Pseudonyms were used for all participants throughout the transcription process.

**Data Analysis**
Data analysis for an IPA study is both iterative and inductive (Smith, 2007). While the researcher acknowledges that the analysis process is fluid and may change from participant to participant, the following steps outline the general progression of analysis which were employed for this study. Smith et al. (2009) suggests that novice researchers approach their initial analysis through a number of set procedures and phases although IPA is, at its heart, not about following clearly defined steps.

The initial step consists of multiple readings of the participants’ interview transcripts and listening to the original audio recordings. Smith et al. (2009) believes that this will help the researcher to ‘set the tone’ of the narrative to follow. Initial notes are taken at this time. These notes simply involve the researcher’s comments and thoughts on the data. Comments are either descriptive, linguistic or conceptual (Smith et al., 2009). Descriptive comments simply describe the content of the interview. At this point things are taken at face value. As the analysis progresses, many of these initial descriptors will be expanded upon. Linguistic comments focus on the participants’ use of language. The researcher looks at how the participants are expressing meaning. Conceptual comments are interpretative. It is at this stage that the researcher reflects upon their own experiences and understandings as a link to analyzing the participants’ responses.

Throughout the various levels of analysis, patterns began to emerge. Themes surfaced and, eventually, a framework which establishes the relationships between the various themes; for the individual participants and across the group was established (Smith et al., 2009). At this point a portion of the transcript was given to a colleague for a peer review. This audit served to discover if the themes which the researcher has discovered are, in fact, plausible and if they made sense. Finally a narrative was written which will allowed the reader to experience the themes discovered using extracts and quotes from the transcripts (Smith, 2009).
Validity and Credibility

The researcher used Yardley’s four principles for assessing the validity of a qualitative study as put forth by Smith et al. (2009). The first principle is one of sensitivity to context. This begins at the outset of the study and continues until the analysis of the data was completed. The manner in which the researcher understands and approaches the act of data collection is the primary expression of sensitivity of context. Foremost, the researcher must understand that the data itself is the result of the interaction and byplay between the researcher and the participant. The researcher included comments from the participants in her analysis so that her own interpretations are made clear. It is the relationship between the researcher and the participant which leads to Yardley’s second principle of commitment and rigor. The researcher commits to attending to the participants closely, both to make sure that they are comfortable throughout the interview process but also to respect what is being said. Rigor relates to the thoroughness of the study both in terms of the interviews themselves as well as to the analysis. Lastly, Yardley discusses the importance of transparency and coherence. The researcher will be completely transparent in her movement through and description of the various stages of the study. The results of the study will be related in a coherent manner. The researcher will ensure that the primary themes connect to the theoretical framework used for the study and that those same themes are presented in a logical manner.

Positionality

In order to fully understand the researcher’s positionality in relation to this study, she must examine how she makes meaning in her own life both as an individual as well as in her relationships to others (Martin & Van Gunten, 2002). Martin & Van Gunten (2002) speak of
“situated knowledge” (p. 48). Situated knowledge is an acknowledgement that a researcher cannot be impartial, rather, they must be aware of “all perspectives as partial and particular” (p.48). One’s perspectives derive from one’s personal background. The researcher’s own perspective comes from the fact that she is a white, heterosexual, middle class, mid-western, urban raised woman from a European American background. Additionally for this specific study it is important to recognize the large chasm between the researcher’s career path and those of the students in the study. JWU is a career based university; students enter the culinary or baking and pastry program with hopes of becoming a chef. The researcher was a professional pastry chef for 15 years before entering education. Unlike the students in JWU’s baking and pastry program, however, the researcher never attended culinary college. With a liberal arts degree and a major in history, she is a self-taught chef. This background is in stark contrast to the students who have chosen culinary or baking and pastry as their college major. There are vast differences between the researcher’s college experience at a small liberal arts college in a little Midwestern town and the JWU students in this study who are attending a mid-sized, urban, career focused university. There are fundamental disparities between the researcher’s own expectations and experiences as a college student versus the expectations and experiences of the students whom she interviewed.

Moreover, the researcher is the department chair for the baking and pastry program at JWU. She was the driving force in the inauguration of LLCs in the culinary college and, consequently, has a vested interest in their success. Within the culinary college, there are two LLCs: one for culinary students and one for baking and pastry students. The researcher has daily contact with all of the baking and pastry students, touching base with them daily in their kitchen/production classes, helping them with scheduling issues, internship questions, career advice and any faculty or student conflicts that may arise. Furthermore, she teaches one
segment of baking and pastry students each trimester. She is a constant presence in these students’ lives. Martin & Van Gunten (2002) discuss the “complexities of multiple positionalities” (p.47). The researcher wears many hats at JWU and, specifically, within the baking and pastry department with the baking and pastry students. In order to position her role as department chair as separate from her role as researcher, the researcher interviewed sophomore baking and pastry (BPA) students after their first year in the LLC was completed. During the course of this study, the researcher was not teaching a class and, therefore, had no contact with the participants outside of the study itself. In this way the researcher sought to distance herself from the student participants. Additionally, participants would not feel pressured in any way to participate in the study or to censure or edit their thoughts and feeling on their LLC experience.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

The study had minimal risk for the participants and strict IRB protocol as established by both Northeastern and Johnson & Wales University was followed. Participants’ privacy was protected and they were de-identified through the use of pseudonyms. All of the data collected during the course of the study was kept locked and secured in the researcher’s office. Participants signed consent forms detailing the minimal risk involved in the study and reiterating that they could choose to leave the study at any time.

**Conclusion**

To date many studies have been done regarding the effectiveness of LLCs on university campuses. The majority of these studies are quantitative in nature, focusing on the end result, for both the students and the universities of LLC participation (Inkelas et al., 2006; Inkelas et al., 2007). This study will use qualitative methodology, specifically IPA to examine the actual
experience of students who live in a LLC throughout their first year of college. The goal is to
gain an understanding of the experience of these students as they begin to make sense of their
overall college experience. The IPA framework utilized will enable the researcher to examine the
process of LLC living while simultaneously respecting the individual participants’ distinctive
experiences.
Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this study was to investigate the lived experiences of students in LLC during their freshman year of college. An analysis of the interview transcripts yielded two superordinate themes and eight sub-themes. The first superordinate theme is creation of an emotional family. The sub-themes are: valuing sameness, fostering a community, transforming friends into siblings, individual discovery and acceptance of one’s true self, and embracing personal growth. The second superordinate theme is the construction of an intellectual family with sub-themes of: academic focus within the LLC, feeling special or separate from non-LLC students, and being held to higher academic standards. The incidence of each of the superordinate themes is seen on the following chart:

This chapter will explore each of the superordinate themes discovering how and why LLC students were able to develop a sense of family within their LLC.

Table Two

Superordinate and Sub-Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants:</th>
<th>Beth</th>
<th>Catherine</th>
<th>Chris</th>
<th>Gerry</th>
<th>Nadine</th>
<th>Robert</th>
<th>Susan</th>
<th>Tiffany</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Superordinate Theme One:</strong> Emotional Family</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub Theme: Valuing sameness</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub Theme: Community</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sub Theme: Friends to siblings</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sub Theme:</td>
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</table>
Transitions in personal growth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate Theme Two: Intellectual Family</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>X</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sub Theme: Academic expectations</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub Theme: Influence of Faculty Interactions</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub Theme: Valuing Separateness</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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</table>

Creation of an emotional family

All of the participants used the term family in reference to the LLC. Family is certainly a word with many different connotations, for the participants as well as for the researcher. However, a thorough analysis of the transcripts allowed the various meanings of the term to be examined. It became clear that although all of the participants made mention of a LLC family, the term ‘family’ did not mean the same thing to each member and was not used within the same context by each participant. Two primary categories or types of family became apparent. The first category of family was one based upon emotional ties and support. There were four sub-themes uncovered within the development of an emotional family. They are that the participants valued sameness with each other, viewed the LLC family as their community, considered their friends to take on the role of siblings and felt support as they moved through the various phases of their personal growth. The emotional family formed a deep connection between the LLC members although that connection would be experienced differently by each participant. For
some, the emotional family supplied them with sentiments of belonging and acceptance that they had left at home with their biological families. For others, their emotional family provided them with support and acceptance which they had not experienced with their biological families. For all participants their development of a unique and individually constructed emotional family gave them the sensation of support and structure which they needed as they adjusted to college life. The stronger the emotional family they were able to build, the deeper their personal connection to the LLC and to the university as a whole.

**Sub-theme One: Valuing Sameness**

There was a sameness amongst the LLC students upon which all of the participants commented. Although this sameness or similarity between the individuals within the LLC was mentioned by each participant, it was experienced to different degrees by the individual participants and affected each of them in different ways. The one and only common denominator between all LLC participants was their major. It was their BPA major which formed the foundation of the uniform foundation throughout the LLC. And initially it was the similarity between the members of the LLC which the residence hall staff used as its selling point. This study was completed after the first year of the BPA LLC. Because of its extreme newness, there was no clear selection process in place at the time. Some students simply clicked on the LLC link on the housing form while others were called personally by various residential life staff members as they sought to fill in all of the rooms blocked out for the LLC. The LLC concept was ‘sold’ to many of the participants through phone calls with the resident hall director who focused on the uniformity within the LLC. Catherine remembers the resident director of housing asking “Well, would you like to move into a hallway where there are only people who do what you do?” I was “That sounds amazing!” because I’ve been around culinary folks my whole experience. I think it would be cool
to rub elbows with people who like to do the same thing (baking and pastry).” Catherine felt that she would have something in common with other BPA majors. After spending her high school years surrounded with culinary students, there was a sense of relief in living with those who she perceived as being similar to herself. Catherine assumed that sharing the same major with the other LLC participants would equate to sharing similar personality traits and common interests.

Beth and Chris shared Catherine’s palpable sense of relief in living with people similar to themselves. The LLC was initially explained to Beth as “your Resident Assistant (RA) would be the same major.” Chris was contacted personally by the resident hall director who recommended that he go on line and look at the LLC program. After doing so Chris felt like, “Well, that’s a pretty good idea, I’ll get to know people in my major.” He went on to explain that others in the BPA program would “seem to be more in line than maybe somebody with another major.” He too assumed that he would have similar interests and personality traits with other BPA majors.

Clearly these participants felt a connection to the LLC through their connection of similar majors. This connection was established before they had met any of their fellow LLC members or set foot on campus. The initial bond between LLC participants was founded solely on the sameness of their major. To the participants sharing a major meant that they would be living with individuals like themselves. Gerry’s only knowledge of the LLC prior to actually coming to campus was that he would be living with other baking and pastry students. That was enough information for him to feel comfortable.

Despite how the individual students gained entry into, or learned about the LLC, they were instantaneously connected because of their major. The designation of “I am a BPA major” played an instrumental role in connecting the members of the LLC. This is the only theme that was
commented upon or mentioned/discussed by each individual participant in the study. This element of sameness, of like interests would serve to form the connective tissue of what would become part of the LLC emotional family. And it was, despite varying high school and family backgrounds, and different individual experiences throughout their first year of college, the one unchanging factor for each of the participants. No one changed their major at any time during the year. They began the year as baking and pastry majors and finished the year as baking and pastry majors.

It is important to note the prescriptive nature of the BPA program. Students not only share a common major but they also share the same ten lab (kitchen, hands-on) classes. In a three term freshman year, students complete two terms of lab (kitchen hands-on) classes and one term of academic classes. There are no electives for the lab classes. Each freshman BPA student takes exactly the same ten lab classes as every other freshman BPA student. Thus by the end of their first year all of the LLC BPA students would have completed the exact same ten lab courses (albeit with various chef instructors and perhaps in a different order). The only difference in their freshman course work would have occurred in their term of academic course. An individual’s actual academic course load can vary based upon advanced placement exams, transfer credits etc.

Thus, it is not just that LLC students shared a common interest in their major; they also shared a common experience as they moved through the lab classes together. Even if the participants were not in the same class with other LLC members, they would have had the same classes – no electives meant that everyone would, by the end of the year, have experienced the same ten lab/kitchen classes even if they experienced them in different order from each other. Additionally, all BPA students wear identical culinary informs with a bright green colored neck kerchief that distinguishes them from the culinary students. The common technical and intellectual experience of the BPA students served as the back drop for everything else that occurred in the
LLC. It is the web that kept the participants together. Catherine explains it as living “in a hallway where there are only people who do what you do.” Chris liked that “everyone in the LLC was on the same page.” On an emotional level, the participants found the sameness they found amongst their LLC mates comforting. Their shared experiences and expectations as BPA majors formed the backdrop and connective tissue for everything else that the LLC students experienced throughout their year together.

Their common major also served as a large part of the participants’ self-identity. Nadine felt that “The fact that you’re all baking and pastry majors says a lot about you. It’s easy to relate when you live in a LLC because the whole point is to find some sort of ground to have similarities and build off that.” Clearly the importance which the participants placed on their major in terms of defining their relationships with others through their major meant that they were defining themselves through their major as well. For Nadine and the rest of the participants, being a BPA major was their primary identifying characteristic. It served to separate themselves and the rest of the LLC from others – those who were not BPA majors and those who did not live in the LLC. Susan viewed her identification with BPA LLC as a connection with the BPA program overall. “We were all more involved in the baking and pastry program and we had joined in the living community just to be with more baking and pastry people. We were more set on what it is that we wanted.”

Majoring in BPA is what initially placed the participants at JWU. The prescriptive nature of the program does not allow for discovering one’s interests through elective courses. Therefore students don’t enter the BPA program, normally, in order to discover what they would like to study. The assumption is that one enters the program because they are interested in BPA, because that is what they want to pursue, although each individual participant would approach BPA in a
unique manner based upon their individual backgrounds and overall goals. While each participant assumed that there was a level of sameness in the way the others were approaching their major, they could not see past their own expectations for their future careers and the individual goals they had for their own college experience.

Catherine, for instance, was sure that she would not be able to relate to those who were not majoring in BPA. Because the major and course of study were her impetus for entering JWU and for joining the LLC, she found it hard to consider being close friends with anyone who was not experiencing the same things she was. For Catherine, rooming with non BPA majors would have meant living with people with whom she could not relate.

Had I roomed with a Sports and Event Planning major or a Fashion major and a Business major, I don’t really know how things would have worked out. That’s cool, you guys are doing what you do, what you love to do. Congratulations. We can’t really click – I’m really one track. Hey, this is what I do. I have friends that aren’t in my major but we don’t hang out as often. We don’t really have much to talk about as far as school goes and that’s really all I’m worried about. Its like, “Oh, I did this today.” “Oh, that’s really cool I did this” and they’re like “Uh, okay.”

Clearly the basis of her relationship with others in the LLC is her interest in BPA. Her major forms the foundation of who she is and, therefore, of with whom she feels the most comfortable. Because of the emphasis and importance Catherine places on being a BPA major, it is almost unfathomable to her that she might have something in common with non-BPA majors.

Tiffany struggled with shyness throughout the year. She found a great deal of comfort in living with BPA majors. For her sharing that common interest was reassuring. She liked that their
common major connected the group and, in turn, made it easier for her to personally connect with members of the LLC. “I thought LLC was a good balance of a little bit of everybody, and there were some people, like if people dressed in all black, like wear dark makeup, and you’re just like, “I’m not that kind of person. We don’t look like we have the same interests,” but in the LLC you have that common thing.” That “common thing” was their interest in baking and pastry. This was the primary string that wove an otherwise, seemingly disparate group of students together. It was the initial touchpoint that they had with each other. This common interest in baking and pastry was the strongest thread that connected all members of the LLC despite differences in dress, friends, study habits, or family backgrounds.

While everyone acknowledges the sameness of the LLC not everyone saw it, necessarily as a positive element of the program. Chris worried that because of the connection he made between baking and pastry majors in the LLC he was separated from connecting to students in other majors. “You’re going to see those people every day and it’s true that it’s a positive, but I think if there were LLCs that were just in general like maybe a wellness LLC, I think that would help intermingle everybody instead of just having it major based, because like I said you’re going to see them every day. Otherwise, you can mingle with them, meet new people.” While he felt a connection with other LLC members through their common major, he found himself wondering if he could form that same form of connection with people outside of his major and outside of the LLC.

The sameness connection was intensified when participants felt that they, along with the other participants, had been personally selected to be part of the LLC. Gerry remembers that he clicked “yes” on his housing application. “After a couple weeks, I got an email saying, “You’ve been chosen to be in the BPA LLC.” I was so happy, I was like, “Oh I’m special.” That made me
feel really good.” Even after realizing that the process was not competitive he was still happy that he had been “chosen” to be part of the LLC. Thus the participants were connected not only through their major but also through a perceived selection process. They had all been selected or chosen to be in the LLC and that formed an additional connection between the LLC members.

The feeling of sameness brought the LLC members together even before they actually met each other. Each participant felt that their interest in baking and pastry would help to forge a strong connection to others within the community. Their assumption was that a common major would translate into common interests, similar personality traits and comparable approaches to their college experience.

Sub-Theme Two: Fostering a Community

From the foundation of sameness, the LLC members began to develop a sense of community. Like family, community is a word with many connotations and attached images and meanings. It is, therefore, vital to understand the concept of community through the perception of the students who were living within it. When asked for three words which best describe the LLC, Beth used community, family and academics. It is notable that she separates community from family for her the two are not the same thing. For her community consists of people who are like her, baking and pastry majors who take their studies seriously. She was “proud to say, “Hey this is my community. These are my people.” She does not claim that they are all her friends or companions but, rather, simply an integral part of the environment in which she lives. Their sameness, their like interests compromise an environment in which she feels accepted and safe. This is her community.

Their common BPA major gave the LLC members a sense of sameness and with that sameness came a sense of comfort. The members use the concept of ‘community’ to describe
something that reaches both farther and deeper. For the LLC participants, community transcends their physical environment. It does not consist of just their roommates or suite mates. Rather, community is the entire atmosphere in which the LLC resides, including all of the activities which took place both in and outside of the residence hall. Most importantly for the participants community offers a sense of belonging to a group, that sense of belonging transcends the physical environment in which they live. Chris explains, “The community part, you’re one group, you’re not just one person that goes to Johnson and Wales, one person that lives on the fourth floor or the third floor. You’re one group.” The group had its initial building blocks in their physical environment but then formed deeper bonds through the activities in which the participants took part.

Robert went to a non-traditional high school in California. The curriculum was based on active learning and group based projects. The school had weekly team building assemblies and did a lot of volunteer work in the surrounding community. For Robert, the idea of living with a group of people who had the same goal was attractive as it was what he had experienced throughout high school. “We all have this common denominator that we’re all coming together to do.” The activities planned by the LLC played a large role in helping to establish a sense of community between the LLC members. Robert recalls a trip to a nearby petting ranch.

I’d never been to a big petting zoo with buffaloes and stuff. Going there and having a good time with everybody and watching people laughing and get scared and I was like, “Oh, I really like you. I’m going to hang out with you outside of now.” We all went out to eat afterwards and we got to sit down and talk about the experience. Laugh. Giggle. Then ride back together. That was like we were one.
Robert’s comment that “we were one” transcends the concept of sameness. In this particular instance, he got to know people outside of his own social group. It was through a common off campus experience that they were able to bond, this connection extended beyond their common major. They returned to campus as a united group, united through their common experience, united in a way in which they had not been before the trip. It was through the interaction between the various members of the LLC that the community began to take hold for Robert. The more he became part of the LLC community; the more he became entrenched and part of the larger Johnson & Wales’ community. When asked how he would describe the LLC to an incoming freshman he said, “You get a better chance at establishing a group of friends that you can hold onto, enjoy your time more at school because you feel like you’re part of something, and you’ll have a better chance of establishing yourself and getting to know your school and be proud of your school.” Thus for Robert the community of the LLC connected him not only with a social group but also within the larger context of the entire university. It rooted him in the university as a whole, giving him a sense of belonging.

Community transcends the connection of sameness. Community is active, it does not simply happen without any exertion on the part of the community’s members. The participants realize that community requires effort, that being part of a community does not simply materialize through common interests. Instead, community is formed through the work and contributions of its individual members. It is only when the members put forth effort that they will reap the rewards of the community. Robert stresses that being part of a community requires commitment from its members. “It’s called community, but sometimes things can be called what they want, but they really aren’t. Like if you make the effort and you actually go to the events you will feel like you’re part of a community. Like a secondary community. You’re part of Johnson & Wales, but then
you’re also part of this.” “Part of this” is the LLC, the Johnson & Wales community happens simply because you are attending Johnson & Wales University, but the LLC community requires that each participant contribute something to the group.

Robert is not alone in realizing that an effective community requires a certain amount of effort from its inhabitants. Nadine is clear that along with the benefits of being part of the LLC comes obligations.

You’re not just any resident; you’re a LLC resident so living in a community requires, like acting as a community and being engaged and not just sitting in your room all day and doing nothing. You’re an adult now and you make our own decisions but those decisions reflect back on, you know what type of students we want to have in the LLC and how the chefs will view you because they are expecting to engage with you too and for you to not come is just kind of unfulfilling.

Throughout the year, Nadine was a vocal cheer leader for the LLC helping the Resident Assistants plan and organize activities. She believed that while the LLC offers students wonderful opportunities, those opportunities alone are not enough. “It’s really based on that individual student and how they want to be involved. It’s giving them (the LLC members) the opportunities to take the opportunity.” According to Nadine the concept of community did not just happen, it was actively discussed on the floor as a goal for the group “You don’t hear the word community on every floor as much as you do on ours, and that not just me talking. That’s a general consensus”. Community is the consequence of a group of like majors not only living together but putting forth some kind of effort in interacting with each other. Community transcends the group as a coupling of individuals who are joined together through their common major. Community is one step
further, it only occurs through the efforts of the individuals within that group. It is the result of their effort, an extension of their commitment to the group, of their participation in activities. The community does not exist outside of the individual efforts and activities. Those who merely lived on the LLC floor, shared the same major with other LLC members but did not participate in the LLC activities, were not part of the larger LLC community.

The LLC community was formed through the various options for active involvement which were offered to its members. Some activities were trips off campus. Hiking in the nearby mountains, attending food truck rallies, or ice skating are just some examples of LLC activities. Not everything occurred off campus. There were also smaller get-togethers in the dorm or pop-up type of events, such as making Christmas tree decorations, decorating cupcakes, a pancake brunch made by faculty members, or watching movies in the common room. Whether it was a larger pre-planned, off-campus event or a small spontaneous event in the residence hall, the participants viewed these activities as forming a web that served to connect them together into a larger LLC community. The actual act of doing something together proved to be extremely important to the LLC members. Catherine describes what it meant for her.

I don’t think (others) understood what a LLC was. I think they just kind of assumed that we were a bunch of people in the same major that got lumped together in the same space. I don’t think they understood that there was bonding activities that we did. There were things that pertained to what we want to do that went on. We had little movie nights. It was all just like a little tight knot group We could watch movies in our room but we could also watch movies with these people that we made friendships with who enjoy doing all the same things. I think people who didn’t live in a LLC they just wouldn’t understand, they wouldn’t get it.
Catherine’s comment underscores the concept of the individual making an effort to join in the activities. While she could have watched movies in her room, she became part of the larger LLC community once she left her room to watch movies with other members in the common room. It wasn’t necessarily easy, but it was something she was glad that she forced herself to do.

Forcing myself out of my bed to go to these things and a good time always came from something that I never expected was going to be a good time. So I was like, “Well, okay.” Then they grew on me. I think the LLC really was helpful in like just kind of bringing life together.

For Catherine this means it was helpful in getting her out of her room and the ‘forced’ interaction with her peers made her feel part of the LLC community, it gave her a sense of place and family, of belonging to a larger group. Her life was brought together through her participation in and connection with other members of the LLC. Although she had many friends outside of the LLC and spent much less time in the LLC than some of the other participants, Catherine felt that by spring term, the connections she had made with the LLC transformed them into her community.

Catherine, more than the other participants had numerous family issues at home. She grew up feeling isolated from her high school peers who had the support of their parents. She describes her high school friends as being “on a different wavelength” than herself with “their lives planned out for them by their parents.” She was used to feeling separate from her peers, forging ahead on her own. “I felt like I was always a little ahead (in high school) but I tried to keep it mellow so that I could have friends.” Thus for her the community offered by the LLC was both welcome and scary. She had never experienced that level of togetherness and trust before. “I’ve never had to people to tell my issues to. I’ve always been one to kind of retreat. It was difficult and I still have
issues with it. But its getting easier.” Community did not just happen to Catherine, she placed herself in a position from where she could reap its rewards. By forcing herself to join in LLC activities, she was able to become part of the LLC community which would support her through her freshman year. The LLC community centered her amidst the chaos of boyfriend and family troubles she experienced during the spring term.

For Susan, involvement in the LLC activities provided her with a much needed conduit to involvement with her peers. The LLC community offered her a dramatically different experience than what she had throughout high school. Suffering from knee injuries, Susan spent most of her high school career on crutches or in a wheelchair. She reports being bullied and having no friends, preferring to eat lunch each day with faculty members. Her high school memories are of her spending all of her time by herself.

That’s the biggest things that I did have to say that was probably my weakest point because I’d spend so much time alone. Then when I came here, at first I was actually completely uninterested in it because I was so used to being alone. The first couple times that I went to an event I was like “This is too much, we have to go now. I can’t talk to anyone anymore. I just need some more me time.” Because I was just so used to it. I wasn’t used to talking to people so much, so many times, for so often. It was kind of a nice little growing experience for me. It was a bit of a wake-up call. I guess you could say. Not a bad one. It was a good one like, Oh, I didn’t know I had this much in common with other people.

Susan did not attend every LLC event. She worked full time in addition to a full course load which did not give her a lot of time for extra events. It is, therefore, especially impressive to note the sizeable impact the LLC had on her growth despite the rather limited amount of time she
was able to spend with the LLC participants. Having activities tied in with socializing made the transition into the LLC community much easier for Susan. She explains that she would be uncomfortable sitting and talking with new people but having something to do whether it was a field trip, a craft project, or watching a movie together made her able to transition into social interactions more comfortably. She surprised herself.

It broadened my spectrum of how people are and how much more I like people than I thought I did. I like people a lot more now, so that’s the best tool. It is, I was thinking more “Oh, the lone wolf.” But no. No. I am not a lone wolf anymore.

That statement is powerful and represents a completely new and transformed Susan, no longer alone, now a member of a community. This transformation did not take place in isolation but, rather, through her involvement and connection to other LLC members. The formation of her own community, while at a different level than many of the other participants, was enough to move her from a ‘lone wolf’ to a member of a larger group. Through the activities and ensuing support of the LLC, Susan was able to find a community in which she enjoyed participating.

I think it helped in the LLC because we had activities to do. Going out and meeting people, say we’re all just standing around talking, then it gets awkward and then I don’t want to do it. I just immediately am like, “No, thank you.” Since there were things that we were doing, like we had an event that we had to go do, it was like conversation starters already were finished. Like, “Okay, you’re in Baking and Pastry. Great! I’m in Baking and Pastry, too. We have that in common.” It’s kind of like the starter of things that you have in common to help build those little relationships.
She chose companionship rather than sitting in her room alone, even if the latter choice was what she had done throughout high school. Her LLC community was formed through her initiative, through her hard work and courage and, in turn, the LLC community supported her through activities that made helped ease her into social interactions with her peers.

Beth, was pretty comfortable socially throughout the year, agrees that the “the LLC made us interact. It made us sit down and have conversations. You couldn’t just go to meetings or activities and sit there silent. You just started talking to people.” Toward the middle of fall term, Beth seriously considered quitting college and returning home. She was overwhelmed by the academic challenge and missed her family terribly. The community she had formed through her interactions with the LLC, kept Beth at JWU. The community supported Beth. It connected her to the university socially and academically. "The LLC helped me make friends. If I hadn’t made the friends that I made, I probably would have gone back home for maybe a term or for a year. The community makes you feel you have a family outside of your family back home.” The LLC community is her new emotional family.

Robert also felt that he had a connection with the others in the LLC founded upon their joint events. With “the LLC I had people I was going through it with, had events that I could go to that helped pull it out of me Just being in that whole environment that wants you to grow, wants you to become a better person.” It wasn’t simply living with fellow LLC members that made him feel a sense of community and comfort; it was having a group of people with whom he shared activities and experiences. These activities did not necessarily have to be large, off campus adventures. Instead of staying in his room he found himself joining others in the hallway
“Oh, what’s going on down in the hallway?” Why are people so loud?” Then you go and look and they’re just playing with the ball, throwing it back and forth, bouncing around, listening to music, having a dance party. Just like, “Oh, okay. Let me go see and talk to people.” People out there with snacks and stuff just talking about stories from home, stories in class, and it’s just like it’s laughing. It’s just a lot of fun. It’s like I can always find something to do on my floor. You’re not in your room just sitting alone being bored, you’re laughing, having a good time, making memories. I feel like college is about making memories, and lasting and fun memories.

For Robert, these memories are set within the context of the LLC community. He actively made these memories; a result of his efforts to make connections with other LLC members. They are memories of activities and interactions he had with other members of the LLC. The feeling Robert experienced on the LLC hallway was a large contribution to his overall feeling of community. Robert is not the only participant to sense a distinct atmosphere throughout the LLC rooms. Others also mentioned a feeling of energy on the LLC floor that they did not feel elsewhere in the residence hall. Catherine stated that,

I felt like on our floor, there was always somebody in the hallway, on the floor, doing homework or someone had a speaker sitting out in front of their room. My door was always open. I had a traffic cone that I stole and I had it in my door so anybody could come and say, “’Hey, what’s up?’” Everything was really open on our floor but I felt like every time I walked down another hallway it was really closed and so cold. It was weird, I don’t know, it didn’t feel the same.
Tiffany also mentioned a different feeling on the LLC v. the other floors. “On the other floors it’s very separated and each room is kind of isolated. They usually group one or two, maybe three rooms and they’ll be friends, or across the hall will be friends, but I like the feeling like you walk down the (LLC) hallway and you can say “Hi” to everyone by name.” Tiffany was aware that it wasn’t the events themselves that formed a community within the members of the LLC but, rather, that those events served as a conduit for the formation of a community. “Like we can go to a LLC event, and then once the event’s over it’s like, “Do you want to go get pizza after this?” or like, it branches off. It’s not just the events that bring us together. It actually makes us form friendships to later on have our own little activities.” For many of the participants, the establishment of a community is a vital part in the creation of an emotional family. Tiffany explained that she often referred to dorm room as “home”.

I’m like, “I’ll text you when I get home.” I realized I would say “home” a lot more than I would just be like, “I’m going back to room. I’m going back to the dorm.” They’re like, “Oh, you’re going home this weekend?” I mean my dorm, and I think just how close everyone eventually gets and it’s just very comforting to have people you’re that close with in such a short amount of time.

Thus for Tiffany the community of the LLC gave her the comfort and support she had previously gotten from her biological family at home. Her LLC community was now her “home”, her new emotional family.

As the year progressed the feeling of community between the LLC members intensified. Interestingly, when asked about the specific activities in which they participated, many of the participants named activities that were open to all students, not just to LLC members. While this
might be due to problems recalling specific activities from a year ago, it might also be a result of that when LLC students were together, no matter the activity, it felt like a LLC activity because it was part of their community. Their identity with the LLC community was the focal point. It did not matter that other non-LLC students may have been present, or that the activity was not sponsored by the LLC, their identity was now, “I am a LLC student. This is my community.” The feeling of belonging to a group transcended the participants’ immediate physical environment, it extended to a sense of emotional family which they were able to carry with them on field trips, ad hoc parties, and other group activities.

Community formed one aspect of an emotional family for some of the participants. The participants perceived community as an action, it was not something that just happened, it was not a result of close quarters or similar majors. Rather, community required that the individual participants make an effort to join in group activities, be they pre-planned or spontaneous. Those that put forth the effort found that community forged a deep connection between its members, a connection that transcended the sameness of their BPA majors.

**Sub-Theme Three: Friends to Siblings**

The strongest link in the LLC emotional family revolves around the deep relationships many of the participants made with each other. For many, those relationships served as a substitute for the families they had left at home. “Family” however, meant different things to different students. For Beth the notion of family meant that she found people she was comfortable being with, people who knew her. “We became a tight knit group. Everybody knew each other. We all knew each other. We knew where we are coming from and what you like to do and all that stuff because we hang out with each other.” For her physical proximity to other students was important. She could walk down the hall to see her friends which made making
emotional connections easier to make. But she was also focused on establishing relationships that would embed her to the school and give her a sense of place. She had some academic struggles which made the development of a supportive network important for her to establish.

I would say I was more invested in the LLC than a lot of the students were. A lot of them just saw it as, “This is where I’m living. These are the people I have to live with,” things like that but I feel I was really invested in the idea of I need to make a second family away from home and these people seem the best because they are like me. They think like I think and they act how I act and that just made sense to latch on.

This did not happen immediately, but rather over the course of the year. It was at the end of the year when she looked back that she realized that ”slowly over time they went from being by best friends and co-students that it felt more like I was among brothers and sisters than I was among fellow students.” She admits that she may not have been ready emotionally and academically for college and that it was the connections she made with LLC members that kept her at school. “If I hadn’t made the friends that I made, I probably would have gone back home for maybe a term, maybe a year and really prepared myself for it (college).

This is especially interesting in lieu of her comments about actively trying to find a family and serves as a prime example of the two categories of families students needed and pursued through their first year of college. The family she was trying to find was one to offer her academic and intellectual support as she struggled with her academic college work. She did not feel she needed emotional support. Thus she was surprised to find that along with the academic support she needed, she had found a group of people who also fulfilled the emotional chasm she felt after leaving home. She explains that the RA on the LLC floor,
Walked me through when I was having a stupid, emotional, I want to go home and see my parents but I can’t because it’s not break time yet. He sat me down and would walk me through on making sure I kept my head straight. I was able to pull on my roommates and I was able to pull on the RA and talk to some of the people in the hallways that I pass. I was like, “Are you having this trouble too?” If they were, we just sat down and talked that out.

The second family she pursued for intellectual help became something bigger. In its stead, she found a family that would offer the best of both worlds, social and emotional foundation along with the intellectual support she needed and was actively seeking.

Catherine did not have close friends in her home town. Her parents separated while she was in high school and throughout the process she felt that she had no one to turn to for support or solace. “All of my friends’ parents were still together and their families were hunky dory and stuff. I was kind of on my own so I dealt with it on my own. I’ve never had a group of friends like that (in the LLC) to help me before.” It was a novel experience for her and one she is still not altogether comfortable with but for which she is extremely thankful. When it was time to leave for Christmas break she remembers thinking, “Wow, look at all these people, we’re all here, we all don’t want to leave, we want to stay around each other. That’s a big deal, to want to stay rather than actually wanting to go home.” As the year progressed her relationship with and movement into the LLC community began to deepen. She learned to trust those around her in a way she had not experienced with her high school friends.

Chris admits to being introverted and shy. Chris grew up in a small town and is one of quadruplets. College is the first time he had been apart from his three siblings. For him the
freshman year was challenging socially. The LLC and the friends he made in the LLC became close enough to fill the gap he lost when he left his siblings to move to Charlotte. For Chris the LLC was a

Big thing about family and togetherness. The family with your LLC that you see. But because we’re in the LLC we get to see each other. We get up and we chat about that. We catch up. So I feel like that really helps socially, being in the LLC, that you are more than one and you’re going to have these friends for the rest of your life because of that.

Throughout the year we were connected, just different strings. Obviously by the end it was stronger. Like at the beginning we were kind of getting to know each other so it was weaker, but by the end, like I said, we knew each other really well. We had gotten to know each other so by that time it was a really strong connection and it carried over to the sophomore year

Although Chris participated in a large number of informal and formal LLC events and put effort into being part of the LLC community, it is interesting to note that simple proximity “we get to see each other” is what he feels is primarily responsible for developing the LLC community. This proximity reminded him of his family, the people you are around all the time, the people you see every day. It was what he initially missed when he came to college and what the LLC supplied him with through the course of the year.

Gerry, a member of an extremely large extended family and the first to go to college, found “his kind of people” within the LLC. “His kind of people” are those with whom he felt a deep connection. As he did not have family members at home to help him with his new academic challenges, he turned increasingly to those around him in the LLC. “I can say that I have really
lasting friendships. I feel like I will have a lifelong friendship from people in the LLC, at least two or three of them, I think that’s something, like I see them as siblings.”

The movement from friends to siblings did not happen for each participant or for each member of the larger LLC. As members became embedded into the larger LLC community, they also became members of smaller, close knit groups within that community and it is within those smaller sub-groups that participants found their new ‘family members’. Tiffany realized the depth of her feeling for her LLC mates when she left for spring break after the winter term.

“Oh, I need to call them and tell them this happened, and this, and all that.” Then when you come back in spring you’re like, “I missed you guys.” Then it’s just like you guys are like family now. I think about y’all all the time. You don’t really realize it until you’re away from them for a little bit and you’re like, “Oh yeah, this is my family, but I need to go back to my other family.”

As the year progressed, many of the participants felt an increasingly smaller gap between their biological families at home and their newly developed emotional families within the LLC. In constructing their new emotional families, the role of the participants’ friends moved to those of siblings. This was a powerful transition for the LLC members regardless of their relationships with their biological families. For all participants referring to friends as siblings meant that the connection between them was strong. This was true even for those participants who came from homes without sibling and emotional connections. The perception for all participants is that referring to a friend as a sister or brother is to relate with them on a deep and meaningful level. This bond was able to occur within the confines of the LLC.

**Sub-Theme Four: Transitions in Personal Growth**
Inevitably freshmen coming to their first year of college will undergo some fairly drastic personal changes. For many participants the LLC helped them with their personal growth, transitions and ultimately personal acceptance. Not only did the LLC provide a safety net and safe harbor, it also, in some instances, provided role models for those wanting to change.

For many of the participants, the concept of family is synonymous with the notion of personal acceptance. For some their emotional family meant simply that they had found a group of people with whom they felt completely accepted. This did not happen overnight and for some it was accomplished only in the spring term and as a result of a yearlong struggle. The study participants came from diverse personal backgrounds and all adjusted or tried to adjust to college life in different ways. For most the LLC provided a safe haven where they found acceptance for who they were or role models for whom they wanted to become. This was not instantaneous and for some it did not occur until they were out of the LLC and had time to look back and process what had occurred throughout their freshman year experience.

Catherine had a rather tumultuous freshman year. She viewed college both as a way of moving away from her family and as a new environment in which she could reinvent herself. “I know I came to college and I was like, “I am not going to be the person I was this whole last sixteen years of my life, I want to be me, a whole totally different version of me and nobody’s even going to know because these people don’t know me.” For Catherine personal acceptance came as she began to transform her identity. She credits the LLC community and the people and relationships she made there with helping her to achieve her goals.

It was more than just living alongside them. We learned together, we all grew together. I can’t name anybody who lived on that floor that is the same way they came in. I know a
lot of people, they found their real personality. I think that’s the best part. Even if you
don’t end up being the person, I am definitely not the person I wanted to be, but I’m so
much happier this way. Being able to grow with these people I learned from them. I can
pick pieces from everybody that I knew and put them into myself. I like this person’s
quality and I like how this person talks and how this person does work and this person’s
work ethic and how this person is so friendly. It’s just like you’re surrounded by a bunch
of different people with different traits that you absorb.

By the end of the year Catherine was happy with whom she had become.

I wanted to find that kind of contentedness within and it helped seeing everybody else be
so comfortable. It really helped me become comfortable. It’s okay to have these bumps
and stuff. Everybody there was like super helpful in the growing transition. It’s okay if
you’re not funny all the time.

Her comfort level rose with her self-confidence and her self-confidence rose as she felt accepted
“bumps and all” by those in the LLC. Her self-acceptance came both from within and from
outside of herself. She clearly actively worked on changing aspects of her personality but would
probably have not been as successful or as happy with the result if not for the LLC community.
The LLC members served as role models for change but, equally importantly, accepted her
throughout her journey of personal growth.

Like Catherine, Robert also found role models within the LLC community. “I just started
seeing what everybody was about, and I kind of blossomed, and I liked it.” Like many of the
other participants, Robert was able to accept himself as he learned to accept those around him.
The LLC brings things out of you that you didn’t think you would normally do. It brings a different kind of person out of you, it just brings new feelings, new passions. Just brings all different kinds of things out of you that you didn’t think you would do in a big group or to certain people. Just being in that whole environment that wants you to grow, wants you to become a better person.

Robert entered into the community wanting to grow and change and within the LLC he found both the support and structure he needed in order to facilitate those changes. Robert’s growth was tied to discovering value in the sameness he felt with other members of the LLC community.

Susan also found the LLC provided her with the catalyst for personal development. Susan also grew through finding similarities between herself and others in the LLC. She fundamentally changed throughout her freshman year from someone who preferred to be alone to someone who is happy to spend time with others. While she alone is responsible for her transformation, the LLC provided the conduit for that transformation to take place.

I didn’t really talk to anybody so if you had talked to me in high school it was really a very different, quiet person. Now I just talk to people whether they say “Hi” back or not. I’m just like well, at least I did say “Hi”. It just doesn’t really matter as much anymore. I don’t know. It just kind of helped me find my little bit more individuality. I guess, even if it was in a group that I found individuality. I didn’t have as much of a problem with it because I found other old souls. Even though we were all so different we had enough in common that we could be our own selves and it was nice. I liked it.

Although Susan was proactive in the changes she underwent throughout her freshman year, the LLC served as both her prompt and support network throughout the process. Belonging to a group, identifying and engaged with other LLC members, helped her find her own voice and
self-confidence. She believes that the LLC helped show her “how to socialize with other people. I’m still probably awkward but I don’t mind as much anymore.” She has found a group in which she feels accepted and this, in turn, has made it easier for her to reach out to others. The acceptance of the group has given her the strength and confidence to stand on her own, within a group she has discovered her individuality.

The inevitability of personal growth and change throughout the first year of college was intensified through the emotional family the participants found within the LLC. The deep connection forged between its members offered a safe haven where acceptance by the group was the catalyst for individual personal growth. Some participants entered the group actively seeking to change aspects of their personalities. Within the LLC they found role models and a support network to facilitate those changes. The transformation of other participants happened only after they were exposed to individuals completely different from themselves. Within the emotional LLC family, they were able to pick and choose personality traits which they then were able to incorporate into their individual personal growth.

The emotional family founded by the participants reflected, to a great extent, the needs and desires of the participants themselves as they entered their first year of college. The sameness they found within their major brought an otherwise rather disparate group of individuals together. It set the foundation for further relationships to develop. As the year progressed many of the participants realized that relationships within the LLC family could be intensified only through their own actions. Those students who actively chose to be involved with LLC activities, who put forth effort and energy became a part of the deeper LLC community. This community became integral to the participants as they started to identify themselves as “I am in the LLC”. The LLC community also offered a safe environment within
which participants could explore various aspects of their own personal growth as the year progressed. Part of this growth was based upon finding role models within the LLC, another part was in moving into deeper friendships with LLC members in which friends became transformed into the role of siblings.

**Creation of an Intellectual Family**

The family which the participants built and described had its roots not only in the emotional connections between the LLC members but also between the LLC members and their intellectual and academic experience throughout the year. The basic foundation of the LLC was built upon the students’ common major, thus it is not surprising that in addition to an emotional family, participants also felt a deep connection to other LLC members as part of a greater intellectual family. The support the participants felt from their intellectual family differed from that of their emotional family. Unlike their emotional family, acceptance into the intellectual family was founded on the condition of academic success. Participants felt that there was both a spoken and unspoken expectation of academic prowess within the LLC. Participants’ response to that expectation varied. Some felt challenged and excited by an environment based upon scholarly achievements. Others acknowledged the academic emphasis but felt, at times, unequal to the challenge. Despite the variations in response to the academic atmosphere within the LLC, the participants’ individual experiences within that atmosphere served to establish their intellectual family. There are three primary sub themes under the superordinate theme of establishment of an intellectual family. The first is the academic expectations with which the students entered the LLC, the second is the connection between the LLC participants and faculty members and the third is the separateness felt by LLC members from non-LLC students in terms of individual academic standards.
Sub Theme One: Academic Expectations

Before the participants even stepped foot on campus, a large portion of their expectations for their LLC experience revolved around academics. Initially this can be attributed to the fact that the resident hall staff marketed the LLC to incoming students as an environment which was academically focused. Those participants who were contacted directly by a member of the residence hall staff recall being told that the foundation of the LLC, its primary defining characteristic, was its academic rigor. Chris recalls expecting “it to be like a concentrated group of individuals. Not everybody’s going to join it, so I felt like they would be the ones that were most interested in success in school. If you have a problem with a class you can go talk to them.” The fact that everyone shared the same major was perceived by some as also sharing the same academic goals. Susan assumed that other BPA majors would share in her serious regard and approach toward her academic work.

We were all more involved in the Baking and Pastry program and we had joined in the living community just to be with more baking and pastry people. We were more set on what it is that we wanted. That’s what I liked about it is that there weren’t people who were there going to school just because. Everyone who was there knew that they wanted to be in Baking and Pastry, they wanted this major, they wanted to go to these classes.

As the year progressed, the participants felt that there was a constant academic emphasis placed upon LLC members. Chris used the words “focused and determination” to describe his LLC experience. He related both of these to his academic life while in the LLC. “I feel like if you’re going to be a part of something that you’re going to have the determination to do better, to try to show what you can do to those people. I like the group because they have the focus and
drive to try to do better, and they’re all supportive of each other.” Academic success was important to Chris and he saw the LLC as one step in the process of reaching his academic goals.

Although participants recognized that the LLC was academically driven, not everyone perceived that focus to the same degree or in the same manner. Each individual perception of the academic focus behind the LLC was a direct reflection of the participants’ own personal academic and intellectual strengths and weaknesses. Thus not every participant constructed the intellectual family in the same way, some did not construct one at all.

Beth constructed a strong intellectual family through the LLC. At home, Beth’s family considered her to be smart and therefore that is the way she defined herself throughout school. Her older brother went through high school as the popular, captain of the football team, very social bit man on campus, type of guy. Although he would later drop out of community college, he cast a wide social shadow that covered Beth as she followed him into high school. As she was considerably less outgoing than her brother, Beth made a reputation for herself as being “the studious one”. I was the overachiever who walked around carrying books”. On the other hand, Beth also admits, “I never did homework in high school but somehow I managed to pass.” It is clear that although in contrast to her brother she was considered more studious by both her family and herself, the reality is she did not have a lot of individual academic discipline. Academic college life was ultimately much more demanding than she had anticipated and as she faltered academically, she relied on other LLC members to help pull her through her classes. “I was in a community of people who sat me down and said, “Shh, sit there and study and don’t speak. Just study.” I was able to pull my math grade out of the gutter and I ended that class with a high B.” Within this context it is not surprising that Beth views the entire LLC as having higher academic expectations than other non-LLC students. She felt a certain amount of pressure from
other LLC members to succeed academically. They (other LLC members) “are expecting you to be this great student and if you come home and you say, “I didn’t have a great class today or I didn’t get as good grades,” they look at you, you feel you failed them as much as you failed yourself.” In Beth’s case the academic expectations of the LLC are, in reality, the academic expectations she had for herself as she entered this new and challenging environment. She entered college believing that the LLC “was going to be more focused on your schooling” and throughout much of the year that is where she put her emphasis. She expressed regret at not joining any campus clubs or participating on any sports teams, things she had done during high school. She felt that college work demanded her full attention. “I wanted to be part of a lot of the clubs but I think I was more focused on my schoolwork and getting into the habit of “this is college, you need to be at a higher standard. I really focused on my schoolwork.” In the LLC she found a community which would support her in her academic pursuits.

Catherine came to college with a fairly average high school academic record. In her conversations it seems clear that she was used to being a C student and that any academic pressure she felt was on perfecting her baking and pastry techniques and not, necessarily, in getting A’s in all of her classes. Rather than the competitive drive expressed by Beth, Catherine found that the LLC to offered her a comforting transition into her academic classes.

It was like I get to see these people all the time and I’m comfortable with them. It wasn’t shocking when I got into labs. It wasn’t like, “Oh my God, all these new people, this is going to make it hard and make me feel weird.” It was all these people that I’ve been living with, that I’ve seen walking in the hallways with socks on and their robes, like I know where you live, you know where I live, we know how we are. It was comfortable.
It was really good in that sense. It was helpful. It made the transition a lot easier. I think that’s where my positive experience in academics came from.

For Catherine the support she needed for academic success came from the emotional support she had already established with members of the LLC community before entering classes. Unlike Beth she wasn’t looking for a group to push her but rather a group with whom she felt personally comfortable. It was within the emotional comfort of the LLC community that she was able to find her academic and intellectual family. She stayed on the perimeter of the LLC’s intellectual family, often preferring to watch the various competitions and study sessions rather than actively participate. “I did go to a few of the competitions that were held for the LLCs. I didn’t participate in them. I was never confident enough to do it, but I did go and those were always really exciting.” Even though her primary focus was on the development of an emotional family, Catherine was influenced by the academic and intellectual activity which surrounded her in the LLC. Although she did not actively seek out an intellectual family, she could not avoid stumbling into one as she watched the LLC activities taking place around her.

Nadine, who was extremely comfortable socially, saw no distinction between her emotional and intellectual families. When it came to academics and interaction with her instructors, “it was just like I’m gonna be engaging with chefs outside the classroom and I was really excited about that. I don’t know, I guess I kind of thought that I was going to be hanging out with chefs but not necessarily on a regular basis.” She was comfortable academically, did well in her classes and looked to any academic or intellectual interaction as an extension of the emotional family she was already establishing.
Like Nadine, Robert experienced little to no gap between the emotional and intellectual family he established in the LLC. He felt that the relationships and comfort he felt within the LLC helped him to achieve academically. “You’re here to learn, but you’re also here to have fun. If you’re going to live somewhere, you might want to live there (the LLC) and it might make it a little easier. The LLC makes it easier.” The emotional support Robert felt he received through the LLC carried over into his attitude toward his academic work as well. The happier he was emotionally, the more he was able to achieve academically. He was inspired mentally and intellectually by those around him. At one point Robert defined the LLC as “academics mixed with passion, I guess. That’s a better way at least for me, and I know a couple of other people, but I’m going to say for me, that it’s a way for me to get better grades and stuff.” Chris agreed,

Because of the LLC I feel like you definitely get to break that social thing, and that’s a big thing in college. Like, “Who are my friends?” I feel like that is one part and if you’re not good in that area, that can also be the downfall in your academics. Because you’re stressed about that. You’re like, “I don’t have any friends. What am I doing with my life? All I do is go to class. It’s so boring.” But by accelerating in that (social) area, it helps you out more academically.

Chris’s emotional/social adjustment to college was difficult. It is clear that once he found his niche, the emotional community in which he felt comfortable then he was able to focus on his studies and academics. While the emotional and intellectual families are connected for him, the emotional family needed to be firmly established before his intellectual family could grow and prosper.
The concept of an intellectual family differed greatly between the participants. Some welcomed the challenge of being part of a group with high academic expectations. They felt simultaneously supported and pushed to achieve intellectually. Others, found themselves unable to meet the challenges which the LLC represented. For this group of participants it was necessary to firmly construct an emotional family to support them in their intellectual endeavors. Once they felt comfortable and accepted on an emotional level, they felt more able to meet the academic expectations presented by the group as a whole.

**Sub Theme Two: Influence of Faculty Interaction**

Another faction of the LLC’s intellectual family was formed with the participants’ connections with faculty members. Although faculty did not participate in all of the LLC events, they did play a major role in the events which occurred off-campus and in the university kitchens. Activities with chef instructors ranged from cooking contests, to bakery tours, food truck rallies, pancake brunches, hiking, ice skating and pot luck dinners. The possibility of interaction with faculty was part of the ‘marketing’ of the LLC to students by the residence hall staff. Nadine remembers a letter that stressed that the LLC students would be “engaging with chefs outside of the classroom”. After speaking with the resident hall director, Gerry “expected to learn more and have better academic opportunities.” Robert was told, “Oh, you’re going to get a better experience because you’re going to go out to the community and get more interactive with the chefs outside of class.”

The role that the faculty played in the foundation of each participant’s intellectual life was contingent on the importance that same individual placed upon their academic life. Participants viewed the involvement of chef instructors in the various activities (both large and small) as an important part of their academic life and intellectual family at school. This
interaction played an important role in the formation of the participants’ intellectual family. Attendance at activities where chefs were involved was higher than activities that consisted of only LLC members. Chris mentioned picking activities based on if faculty was attending or not. He felt that interacting with the chefs outside of the kitchen was a huge bonus of being in the LLC. Gerry described “faculty interaction is extra learning and you know, it’s fun. It’s no extra cost to me and I’m just taking advantage of everything that I could. I thought it was really cool getting to know the faculty at the beginning and just talking to them. I felt like it just prepared you a little more.”

Nadine described the LLC “as an avenue to connect with chefs and instructors in a very unique way that not everyone else gets to do. It is a very unique engagement because like to call it just an engagement would just be a normal resident hall event. It (interaction with instructors) made me love it here.” For someone who eased into the emotional family of the LLC fairly seamlessly, the connections Nadine was able to make with the faculty helped her to create her intellectual family. She actively worked on making connections with faculty, realizing how important that kind of networking could be. “It’s like I can go and I can either sit over here and talk to my friends or I can go over there and talk to a chef and make some connection. That was not uncomfortable for me, it was something that excited me.” Nadine understood and appreciated the opportunities that the LLC offered and took full advantage of every one of them.

Having faculty involved with LLC activities helped to ease the students into their lab (kitchen) classes. Their interaction outside of the classroom/kitchen with the LLC members had a tremendous impact. According to Catherine,
The faculty had really like a guiding role. Not guiding. I don’t know how to explain it. They weren’t chaperones. They were cooler than chaperones. The chefs made it a lot easier to be comfortable because they were so comfortable hanging out with us. It was comfortable coming to class with the chefs because we knew them outside and we did decorate cupcakes and cookies and ornaments and our doors. It was fun. That made it a lot easier.

For Catherine being accepted and feeling comfortable were vital components to the development of her intellectual family. Chris agreed stating that knowing an instructor before entering into the lab classes “went ahead and broke that barrier, so you could go ahead and be more comfortable. I feel like was a better chance to go in and break that step, so you could grow further.” He described a small event in the dorm through which he got to know one chef in particular. “It was actually before I had her in class, so like that’s a step up, you’re already comfortable with that person and you know how they are. Definitely, that helped out.” For someone who struggled with shyness, the LLC events through which he could meet his instructors helped Chris form a stronger intellectual family than he may have otherwise had. Having the structure of an emotional family established was vital before he could begin to construct his intellectual family.

Tiffany was in much the same situation.

The interacting with chefs makes you more comfortable. It makes you more comfortable going into class because I remember my first day going to a lab, I was in a panic attack. I didn’t know what to expect, but the fact that you’ve interacted with the chefs in the kitchen or just on a little outing in Charlotte, it just helps you realize they’re not as
intimidating as you think. They’re just your teacher. They’re there to help you and it’s
nice to know that they genuinely care.”

With the structure of an ever growing emotional family behind her, Tiffany was able to begin to
develop her intellectual family once she made connections with her chef instructors. This
occurred even before she entered her lab classes. “All the students and the teachers they went
and they did this thing. They went to the chocolate place and so then teachers and the students
then have that connection outside the classroom. Then in the classroom they’d have more of a
connection than a lot of the students who didn’t go on those trips.” Tiffany felt that the
intellectual family she had with faculty was distinct from the relationship that other students may
have had with their faculty members.

Chris perceived that meeting faculty outside of the kitchen gave LLC members an
advantage once classes started. “I definitely feel like, because they saw you in the extracurricular
activities, they’re like, “Oh, I know you. I recognize your face. You’re in the LLC.” So I kind of
felt like that gave you another step up to go ahead.”

Even participants who had a fairly strong emotional foundation, those who were outgoing
and not terribly shy, appreciated the chance to make a personal connection with their instructors
before encountering them in the classroom. The groundwork for the personal connection had to
be in place before the foundation blocks of an intellectual family could be laid. Gerry was not
overly shy but he too appreciated the contact with instructors outside of the classroom as a
conduit to forming a comfortable intellectual family. “I thought it was really cool getting to
know the faculty at the beginning and just talking to them. I felt like it just prepared you a little
more.” It helped to establish an association with the faculty outside of the student-teacher
relationship that takes place in the classroom. “I liked the faculty interaction. You got to know people and like they know you’re in the LLC and you get to talk to them and I feel that they were more personable to you because you were there. I guess that kinds of builds up your confidence.”

The intellectual family perceived by the participants did not consist solely of LLC members. Faculty members, specifically those from the lab classes, were an integral part of the intellectual family which each student was constructing for themselves. Most all participants recognized the importance of participating in LLC activities in which faculty members were involved. The connections made through such activities helped to build each of the participants’ intellectual self-confidence. That self-confidence was fostered once participants began to develop relationships with the faculty outside of the classroom. The personal connection made between LLC members and their faculty played a large role in the success of the students once they entered lab classes. Participants felt that associating and bonding with faculty outside of the traditional teacher-student roles increased their confidence of meeting the academic challenges of college work.

Sub Theme Three: Valuing Separateness

Another sub-theme under the umbrella of an intellectual family is the feeling of separateness that was, for some participants, an intrinsic part of the intellectual LLC family. An aspect of the LLC perception of their intellectual family is that it was separate and distinct from the intellectual environment elsewhere in the residence hall. The participants definitely felt an air of specialness. Robert described the LLC as “a special floor”. Many participants felt that the LLC members had higher academic standards than non-LLC students. Tiffany described it as “I felt like a lot of people in the LLC were aiming for good grades and had a very strong sense of what they want to do, so that can influence your way of thinking about class.”
Gerry: “You felt like you were in a separate community because you’re – I guess you can say because you’re a better student.” Beth felt that the LLC students were “much more driven” than the non-LLC students.

We were kind of saying there’s like an unspoken thing where we all just did really, really well. That was kind of cool. The common room or the study rooms up there and we’d have little study sessions sometimes and things like that. It was kind of nice. Even if we weren’t studying the same thing we’d just sit in there and do homework. We were just all much more focused on what it is that we wanted. Mentally it felt like a little push to do things better.

LLC participants not only viewed themselves as separate from other groups, LLCs and otherwise, but also defined themselves as a group with high standards – and not just high standards but standards that were higher than any other group’s academic standards. In some cases these standards were imposed upon them by the very nature of their living in the LLC and in others, the standards were internally impressed upon them by their LLC peers. Chris described the LLC as a group that “had the focus and drive to try to do better, and they’re all supportive of each other.” He viewed the other LLC participants through his own lens, that of wanting to achieve academically and pushing himself to do so. A first generation college student, Chris was very aware of using college as an opportunity for greater professional success after graduation. He perceived other LLC members as having those same goals. “I know they’re (the LLC participants) going to be determined, they’re going to want to do something better, they want to better themselves for their career.”

Gerry felt that the faculty had higher academic expectations for the LLC members.
I kind of feel like since we got to meet faculty and stuff at the beginning, like the pressure is on, they know who we are, we have to do good, that kind of – I kind of feel it set the standard a little bit higher, because the teacher already knew you and they see that you’re in a group of baking and pastry LLC so you’re obviously going to do better because you’re there for a reason.

Interaction and forming relationships with faculty outside of the classroom served to give the LLC students a feeling of “specialness”. Gerry remembers that “I felt a little special. That was nice.” That “special” feeling also translated into feeling a certain amount of pressure to perform academically. Chris echoes this perception:

I feel like because the chefs already knew you, they kind of had that assumption that you were wanting to try harder. I don’t feel like the standards were necessarily different grade wise but definitely they thought you were going to try to do it a little harder than somebody who might not have been in the LLC. Not to say they are not as good, but just that underlying intensity.

This perception is especially interesting considering the rather haphazard way in which the LLC was cobbled together. Students were not selected on the basis of academic merit, merely on their common major.

Intellectual separateness and high standards not only came from the members’ interactions with the faculty but also with the members interactions with other members. Within the LLC itself, the participants helped push each other academically. Susan recognized a difference between the academic approach of the LLC participants versus those of students outside of the LLC.
None of us are really afraid to tell each other, you know, for the high standard part. I don’t know, a bunch of people, I was noticing, they didn’t care about their grades or they stopped certain things, like when you come to college and you’re away from your parents. For some reason when you would go out to these activities if someone wasn’t there or if somebody didn’t show up to class and we were together we’d be banging on each other’s doors like, “Wake up! We gotta go!” We kind of held each other up to a little bit of a higher standard and I liked that.

There was a perceived delineation between those students who are just following their major and those who are actively working to excel within their chosen field. Nadine believed that the LLC “created a certain type of person definitely. We were all really hyped about helping each other and all being successful.” She went on to say that other non-LLC students are “not of the caliber of what we are or like, the quality.”

Others also mentioned the distinctions between LLC and non-LLC students. Beth recalls hearing some nasty comments from others in the dorm.

No, they didn’t hide their thoughts. I think a lot of it was people were jealous maybe of the fact that we’re smart, we’re together and we know where we’re headed in our life. Maybe the people who were saying these mean things, they weren’t as steady, and they weren’t as ready for college life for their future as we were.

This is an especially interesting perspective considering that Beth herself struggled academically throughout the year. Despite this, she still identified herself with the academic achievers in the LLC.
That “higher standard” was felt in the kitchens as well. Catherine remembers being very influenced by the quality of the work being done by other LLC members.

I know I wasn’t to my full potential when I got here. But I was surrounded by people who really have been doing this for years. I was like, “that’s really admirable.” It was always really cool to have them there and have their help and then be in class and watch how they do things. It was almost inspiring, which is really great for me, personally. I always need that spark to make me want to do better.

Catherine was able to find “that spark” that added push to achieve through the LLC. The emotional ties she had made with fellow LLC members made it easier to reach out to them for help and advice when they were in the lab classes. Tiffany came to rely on other LLC members to push her academically. “I feel like a lot of people in the LLC were aiming for good grades and had a very strong sense of what they wanted to do, so they can influence your way of thinking about class.” This comment certainly seems to indicate that if others hadn’t pushed Tiffany academically she may have been content with less academic success than that which she found as part of the LLC.

Interestingly, the perception of separateness transferred to the manner in which the LLC members viewed their own living space. Although the members did not agree on the nature of those differences, as some saw the LLC hall as being louder and more friendly than the other halls in the resident hall and other felt that the hall was quiet and more focused than the other halls, But regardless of the differences in their individual perceptions, the one constant is that every participant remarked that the LLC floor was vastly and markedly different from the other non-LLC floors in the same residence hall.
Catherine tried to explain the differences. “Yeah, I don’t know, there was just a different vibe on our floor. It’s such a positive thing. It’s a really positive experience.” Catherine’s perception of the feeling on the floor is obviously influenced by her own positive feelings of comfort with the LLC. Thus she felt that the very aura of the LLC floor was different from that found on other floors within the same residence hall. Susan agrees. “I talked to a couple of people when we were coming over to each other’s rooms and I went over to some other hallways and there would be people running up and down the hallways or doing this, that or the other thing. They’d come up to our hallway and there’d be doors open and stuff but it’s much more quiet.” Susan attributes this difference to the fact that the LLC members “were just more focused on what it is that we were doing.” It is obvious that with working full time and attending classes full time, certainly Susan was extremely focused on what she was doing and had little tolerance for those who were not.

The intellectual family constructed through the LLC was, to a great extent founded on the concept of separateness. Although individual participants perceived and experienced that separateness in different ways, it was felt to a greater or lesser degree by everyone. To a great extent each participant’s perception of separateness was related to their feelings about their own intellectual achievements. Those that enjoyed and thrived in the academic environment within the LLC embraced the separateness. They viewed the LLC as encompassing those who were willing and able to work hard for academic success, separate from non-LLC students due to their academic prowess and achievements. On the other hand, those individuals who struggled more academically, perceived the separateness as almost a cocoon of support and encouragement as they struggled to navigate the academic waters of their freshman year. In both cases, the participants regarded the LLC members’ approach to their academic work as separate and
distinct from that which students outside of the LLC were experiencing. In short, within their
perception of separateness, they all shared a view that intellectually the LLC was separate and
distinct from others in the university.

Conclusion

This study strove to investigate the lived experiences of participants in a BPA LLC at a
private university. Their lived experience was found to encompass two versions of family. In the
first version family was perceived as an emotional support. Within this context participants
found an immediate common ground through their majors. As BPA students the participants
perceived their major as a primary identifier of their personality as well as the personalities of
others within the LLC. Thus, participants assumed that others within the LLC would share
similar likes, dislikes and outside interests. In this way, the participants’ major provided a
foundation for the growth of their emotional family. The following step in the construction of the
emotional family was an acknowledgement of the effort one would need to take in order to
become a part of that family. This effort moved the notion of family into the concept of
community. It is within the notion of community that the ties of the emotional family extend
beyond the walls of the LLC. It was through individual personal effort and work that participants
were able to create an emotional family that became an integral part of their lives as they moved
through their first year at the university. As the year progressed, so too did the feelings of being
deeply connected to those around them. This connection was evident in the many comments of
the participants who at the end of the year had transferred their erstwhile friends into the role of
siblings. In this manner, the biological family they had left behind at home was replaced with the
emotional family they had assembled within the LLC. For some of the participants, the safety
and comfort they found within the LLC led to tremendous personal growth. The LLC provided
them with both an environment of comfort and understanding as well as supplied them with role models. Many of the participants actively sought out and followed the lead of others in their own individual journeys of personal transformation. While all of the participants did not experience each individual aspect of the LLC emotional family, they all built a family through the course of their freshman year that supported them psychologically as they traversed the challenges of college life.

The second aspect of family perceived by the participants is based on intellectual and academic life. Clearly the primary academic connection between the various participants is their common BPA major. Beyond that similarity, however, the participants founded an intellectual family within the LLC that was grounded in similar academic expectations for themselves, as well as for the others within the LLC. Those expectations were intensified through the influence of various experiences that some participants had with faculty members throughout the year. The overall construction of an intellectual family contributed to the participants’ feeling of separateness from non-LLC students. While some participants enthusiastically rose to the challenges offered by scholarly college life in general and the LLC in particular, others found themselves overwhelmed by the demands of university academic life. In both cases, the participants perceived that their intellectual family within the LLC was not something experienced by non-LLC students. They considered their intellectual and academic experiences to be separate and distinct from that of other freshman students within their same BPA program of study. All participants in the study experienced and contributed to at least two or more aspects of both the emotional and intellectual families that were constructed by and integral part of the BPA LLC.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this research study was to discover how participation in a LLC affects a student’s first year college experience. Tajfel’s theory of social identity was used in conjunction with a qualitative approach, specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. This approach allowed the researcher to examine the participants’ sense-making of the phenomenon they had experienced. A close analysis of the data uncovered two super-ordinate themes 1) the creation of an emotional family and 2) the creation of an intellectual family. This chapter commences with a discussion of the findings related to each of these super-ordinate themes and to their position within current literature. Within each of the super-ordinate themes, the chapter identifies and discusses each of the sub-themes: valuing sameness, fostering a community, transforming friends into siblings, individual discovery and acceptance of one’s true self, and embracing personal growth, for the first super-ordinate theme and academic focus within the LLC, feeling special or separate from non-LLC students, and being held to higher academic standards, for the second super-ordinate theme. The implications of these findings in the practical setting will then be discussed as well as suggestions for improving practice. Recommendations for future research will conclude the chapter.

Developing an emotional family

For participants in this study, the most important factor in their first-year LLC experience was the formation of a family. This process meant different things to different individuals and occurred at different times through the course of the year. But regardless of when it happened, the formation of a family is the one constant within the LLC phenomena of each participant. A deeper analysis of what ‘family’ meant for the individual participants led to the division of
family as something that is emotionally based and family that has its roots in participants’
academic or intellectual life.

The creation of an emotional family began before students even arrived on campus. It had
as its foundation the identity of each participant as a baking and pastry major (BPA). Participants
felt a sense of connection to other LLC members before they actually met them. The common
perception was that all BPA majors would share some common personality traits that would
connect them to each other. This immediate sense of connection helped most of the participants
in calming their nerves about meeting and living with a group of new people. The designation of
“I am a BPA major” was the only theme that was mentioned by each individual participant in the
study. Their major was the thread which would connect all of the LLC participants throughout
their first-year experience. Not only did their common BPA major serve to connect the LLC
participants to each other, it also served as the basis through which the participants would
develop a community or family that was separate and distinct from any found outside of the
LLC.

**Valuing Sameness**

Tajfel’s Social Identity Theory is rooted in the formation of individual social identity
through group membership (Cinoglu & Ankan, 2012). According to Social Identity Theory, an
individual’s personal characteristics are less important in the development of a social identity
then their belief or perception that they belong to a particular group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).
This phenomenon was experienced by all of the participants in the study. They all felt a
connection to the LLC group, through their common major, even before they had met the other
LLC members or set foot on campus. It was a connection they did not feel with other incoming
freshmen. It was founded not only on their common major but that they would be living together
and the fact that living with others who chose to live with BPA majors made their living situation distinct and separate from those who were simply assigned to a room in the residence hall.

The participants’ major in BPA formed the foundation of their perception of themselves in college as well as their perception of those around them – students with other majors and other BPA majors. The connection they had through their common major was the basic fabric that held the group together. More than one participant mentioned that having the same interest in BPA transcended how an individual may dress, or otherwise act, that somehow this common interest connected everyone on a fundamental level. This belief is in keeping with the literature on depersonalization, the concept that members of a group will and are willing to sacrifice portions of their individual traits in order to maintain group membership (Ellemers et al., 1999). While the level of depersonalization differed from individual to individual within the LLC, it was consistently part of each of the participants’ first year LLC experience. Ellemers et al. (1999) also mention that individuals who have voluntarily chosen to be in a group will experience a greater degree of depersonalization than those who are assigned to a group. With one exception, all of the participants in this study volunteered to be part of the LLC, thus it makes sense that their levels of depersonalization, while differing from individual to individual, would none the less be fairly strong throughout the group. Not only had the participants volunteered to be part of the LLC, many of them believed that they had been specifically chosen to be in the LLC. This gave them a sense of specialness, increasing their level of separation from other freshmen BPA majors and intensifying their level of depersonalization.

While some participants eagerly sought to identify themselves as part of the BPA LLC group, there were others who were less willing or eager to lose some of their individual personal characteristics in order to belong to the group. A few of the participants felt that the group
identity was, at times, stifling and often wondered what it would be like to be less associated with those who were like themselves. Some questioned their ability to form a connection with non-LLC, non-BPA majors. Although this feeling was not experienced by many of the participants, it is not unique to Social Identity Theory. Talburt & Boyles’ study focused on the possible negative consequences of what can be a relatively insular nature of many LLCs (2005). Jaffee’s 2010 work includes a discussion of the negative implications of a group of students spending too much time with others who are too much like themselves. The claustrophobic feeling experienced by some participants is an integral part of Social Identity Theory’s concepts of salience and fit.

Salience refers to the various levels of connection which specific individuals may feel with reference to their group (Ashmore et al., 2004). The degree of salience can ebb and flow for the individual participant (Burford, 2011). The point at which one’s social identity is activated is the point of salience. For participants there was no one specific instance when this occurred, rather, connections of salience were made throughout the school year, as members moved closer to and farther away from the group identity formed by the LLC.

Comparative fit is one form or degree of salience (Haslam et al., 2000). It is also another form of Tajfel’s in and out - groups (1971). Whether referred to as comparative fit or in and out-groups, the result is the same. The group was initially connected because the differences they perceived between the individuals in the BPA LLC were seen as less significant than the differences perceived between the LLC and non-LLC students. Participants in the study valued the sameness they perceived within their group. That sameness was grounded in their BPA major. Their common major was the glue which held the group together and would form the foundation of the community they would build together as the year progressed.
Fostering a Community

The creation of a separate community amidst the larger university setting is a primary catalyst to the foundation of LLCs. The literature is in agreement that the primary role of LLCs is to create a small community of individuals within the larger environment of the university (Daffron & Holland, 2009; Hoffman et al., 2002). This creation of community, in turn, aids participants in their integration into the academic and social life of their university (Frazier & Eighmy, 2012; Inkelas et al., 2006; Rohli & Rogge, 2012, Wawrzynski et al., 2009). This study, through the application of IPA, was able to examine how a LLC community was created and how, specifically, a sense of community was perceived and experienced by the LLC members. The qualitative nature of this study is important as the majority of current LLC research has been quantitative, focusing on retention and graduation rates as well as the grade point averages of LLC participants in order to assess the overall effectiveness of LLCs. Large national surveys such as the National Study of Living-Learning Programs and the National Survey of Student Engagement have supplied the quantitative information used in much of the current work done on LLCs (Axelson & Flick, 2011; Beachboard et al., 2011; Coates, 2008; Cole & Korkmaz, 2010; Inkelas et al., 2006; Inkelas et al., 2007; Inkelas et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 2007; Krause & Pike, 2012; Zhao & Kuh, 2004; Soldner & Szelenyi, 2008). Within this context the individual experiences of LLC participants has been ignored or buried. The use of IPA allowed the researcher to examine and analyze the manner in which LLC participants experienced the sense of community within the LLC and, specifically, how that sense of community was established.

This study revealed that participants viewed the sense of community they felt within the LLC as something which transcended the physical environment in which they lived. The
participants created a community that connected the group in a deep way, intensifying their relationships with each other. This connection transcended their physical environment.

All of the participants were clear that the sense of community they felt within the LLC did not simply happen. The creation of community required effort on the part of each individual within that community. It was something that had to be actively pursued, uncovered, and discovered. In this way community was perceived as something active, not merely a result or by-product of their environment, or of living together in close proximity. Participation in activities formed a bond that transcended the connection they shared as BPA majors. The interaction within the LLC had a large impact on most of its members, easing the social transition to college, making it easier to be involved because there was always something ‘to do’ which made the overall social interactions with other LLC members easier. LLC interaction and community was, however, contingent upon each individual becoming involved, leaving their room and joining in activities, large and small, planned and spontaneous. In this way the onus for creation of the community lay with each individual member of the BPA LLC.

Tinto’s Theory of Attrition examined the many moments of interaction which would lead a student to drop out or persist through to graduation (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1978). In much the same way, this study was able to document LLC participants’ journeys as they built a strong community throughout the academic year. While engagement did not mean the same thing for each LLC member, the community they built together was founded on moments of engagement they had with each other. While Tinto (2003) posited that attrition does not happen at any one specific moment in time, the same could be said of community building. Just as a student’s decision to leave a university is founded on many small experiences, so too, was the community built by the LLC grounded in a myriad of diverse experiences the participants shared together.
These experiences not only drew the individual members of the LLC together, they also simultaneously wove the participants into the wider fabric of the university, rooting them with a sense of belonging.

The quantitative nature of much of LLC literature does not allow for a focus on how participants within a LLC create their own sense of community (Axelson & Flick, 2011; Beachboard et al., 2011; Cole & Korkmaz, 2010; Inkelas et al., 2006; Inkelas et al., 2007; Inkelas et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 2007; Krause & Coates, 2008; Pike, 2012; Soldner & Szelenyi, 2008; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). In contrast, the use of IPA allowed the researcher to examine the phenomenon of the steps to creating a LLC community and the manner in which the building of that community is perceived by its members. Participants were adamant that the community could only be formed through the efforts of the individuals. It was not something that simply happened. Putting forth effort to join and build the community led to a connection between the LLC members that transcended the sameness of their BPA majors. The examination of how the LLC members built their community makes this study unique from the broader context of LLC literature which focuses on large quantitative studies with an emphasis on outcomes. The exploration of individual student perceptions as to how they were able to form a community offers a new way to scrutinize and understand overall student satisfaction with their college experience and with their LLC membership in particular. Although participants’ perceptions of the physical environment of their community may differ from student to student, all participants perceived their floor as separate and distinctly different from the other floors in the residence halls. The community they had built was theirs alone. It was a community founded in their individual efforts to connect with each other and with the group as a whole. The construction of a
community changed the perception each participant had of the other members of the group, they became more than friends or acquaintances.

**From Friends to Siblings**

Social Identity Theory has a dynamic nature which allows for change and transformation within a group over time (Turner, 1975). The degrees of comparative fit which form part of the basis of Social Identity Theory waxed and waned throughout the year for the individual participants. This was seen throughout the study as participants were comfortable defining themselves as part of the LLC as long as the differences between members of the LLC were perceived as being less significant than differences between non-LLC students. Overall, however, as they looked back at their freshman LLC year, the participants were proud to say that they were part of the BPA LLC.

A measurement of fit is social embeddedness. Social embeddedness refers to the relationship of the group to the individual’s daily life and relationship (Ashmore et al., 2004). Social embeddedness was experienced by every participant in this study although, again, the experience varied from individual to individual. For most participants social embeddedness is the point at which they begin to refer to their LLC friends as their sisters and brothers. It is the point at which friends move into the role of siblings and the LLC group, or the part of the group with whom they identify themselves, move in to fill the emotional role of their family.

The families constructed within the BPA LLC changed and shifted over the course of the school year. While there were some participants who moved outside of the LLC for their emotional and social support, by the end of the year most all participants were in agreement that the family they had found within the LLC was one in which they felt completely accepted. Many
participants may have realized this had happened only in retrospect as they looked back at their freshman year during the summer or as they began their sophomore year at school.

The perception for all participants is that referring to a friend as a sister or brother is to relate with them on a deep and meaningful level. This bond only occurred within the confines of the LLC. The movement from friends to siblings varied from person to person but overall it functioned in one of two ways. Some participants came to college leaving behind strong familial support at home. These participants were able to find a replacement for that emotional support through the relationships they forged within the LLC. On the other hand, there were other participants who did not have strong family support at home. Thus, the LLC connections they were able to form filled this void, offering them a kind of support they had not experienced before. This is not to say that every LLC member felt a deep connection with all of the other members. Instead, family members were found in the smaller sub-groups within the LLC. The movement of relationships into sub-groups within the LLC is typical behavior seen in studies of in-group development (Amiot & Aubin, 2013). In this way the participants were able to identify to different degrees to portions of the LLC in-group prototype, experiencing different levels of depersonalization (Hogg et al., 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000). The dynamic nature of the Social Identity Theory allows for the fact that some participants were willing to identify more closely to the in-group prototype, sacrificing portions of their own individuality, than others (Ellemers et al., 1999). For many participants, the movement to increased depersonalization mirrored the progress and changes in their own personal development and growth.

Transitions in Personal Growth

The dynamic nature of the Social Identity Theory is observed in the personal growth experienced by all members of the study. The movement from group to personal identity follows
the movement from Tajfel’s social identity theory to the self-categorization theory developed by his protégée, John Turner (Turner, 1975). While social identity theory revolves around the establishment of personal identity through group formation, self-categorization theory looks at the impact of social identity in the development of one’s personal self-growth. The application of self-categorization theory in the development of one’s personal identity is accomplished through prototypes. Individuals use prototypes as a way of distinguishing or characterizing the basic qualities of the group to which they may belong. These prototypes are not always clearly defined but they contain all of the perceived important characteristics or components of a specific group (Hogg & Terry, 2001). Self-categorization Theory is a movement of me versus non-me as opposed to the us versus them seen in the Social Identity Theory (Onorato & Turner, 2004).

Prototypes serve as a blueprint for participants seeking to discover their own sense of identity. Not all members of a group will experience or construct the prototypes in an identical fashion. It is clear in this study, however, that the majority of the participants experienced self-categorization to either a greater or lesser degree. Some participants mentioned finding role models within the LLC. They watched others and used traits they admired to build their own new identity. Other participants served as those role models. In both cases the LLC offered participants a safe harbor and a catalyst, serving as the conduit through which the individuals were exposed to various prototypes. The common perception within the participants is that each individual experienced some element of personal growth throughout the course of the year. The sameness and comfort each participant felt within the LLC offered them the strength to discover their own personal identity. The prototypes offered by the group as a whole served as the catalyst for individual personal growth. The creation of an emotional family allowed the LLC members the combination of security and stimulus needed for their personal transformations.
**Conclusion**

This study was able to move beyond previous large quantitative studies and explore how, on an emotional level, LLCs are successful for students through their first year of college. The study discovered that the participants all desired to belong to a group and that it is through group membership that they were able to develop their own social identity. While that identity was initially based upon sharing a major and living with like-minded individuals, it morphed into something deeper and more meaningful as the year progressed. It was based on a connection forged through the efforts of each individual involved in the LLC. The establishment of a group and of a personal social identity did not simply happen to these participants, it was something which they actively sought and for which they had to put in effort.

Although the depersonalization necessary for the activation of a group social identity happened for each individual at different times and at different rates, all were, to a greater or lesser degree, affected by the LLC in-group prototype. Their movement to a group based social identity formed the web that connected them all. Being part of the BPA LLC made them feel special and distinct, even though they had chosen and were not selected, to be part of the program. The feeling of specialness, of belonging to a group from which they developed their own personal sense of identity and worth, is the root of what made the LLC so effective for so many of the participants. The LLC created a strong social structure from which each participant drew comfort and strength. This emotional family and social identity laid the foundation for the establishment of an academic support system.

**Creation of an Intellectual Family**
Participants did not only create an emotional family within the LLC, they also found and developed an intellectual family. The two families were, at points, related but they also served to fulfill distinct needs for each of the students living in the LLC. IPA allowed the researcher to unpack the various elements of the relationship each LLC participant had with their intellectual family. Through the exploration of each participant’s lived experience, this study was able to go beyond academic outcomes such as one’s GPA (Baker & Pomerantz, 2000; Frazier & Eighmy, 2012; Golde & Pribbenow, 2000; Pasque & Murphy, 2005). The result was the discovery that the participant’s intellectual experiences were not all similar, but rather unique to each individual. What this study was able to discover is that a participant’s perception of their intellectual family was, to a great extent also a reflection of the individual participant’s own attitude toward their school work. Participants who struggled in classes felt pressure from the community to succeed and to work harder. For others, the intellectual support they received from the LLC was an extension of the support they were used to giving others. One’s intellectual family was for some participants a reflection of their own emotional stability and personal comfort level. Once personal comfort was established, many participants felt more able and willing to meet what they felt were the intellectual expectations of the group. It did not matter if the participant viewed the LLC as representing pressure to succeed intellectually, or offer academic support. In both cases, academics formed a large part of the foundation of their own individual social identity.

**Academic Expectations**

The literature is consistent in agreeing that LLCs have an overall positive impact upon student’s academic achievements (Baker & Pomerantz, 2000; Frazier & Eighmy, 2012; Golde & Pribbenow, 2000; Pasque & Murphy, 2005). For the participants in this study, that positive impact is evidenced in their determination to succeed academically and the intellectual pressure
some participants felt from fellow members. The literature discusses the importance of connecting students together through their academic life within the LLC (Grills et al., 2012; Longerbeam et al., 2007). This connection was experienced by the participants in this study as well. Although individuals may have entered the LLC with distinct academic capabilities, they all found that living in the LLC both supported and pushed them intellectually. The foundation of the LLC intellectual family was grounded in the individual academic expectations with which each participant entered the community. Initially, participants shared the perception that sharing the same BPA major meant that all members of the LLC would, in turn, share the same academic goals. There was a common and widespread belief that others in the LLC would be more focused academically, more ‘into’ their major. Certainly there was an overall feeling that by choosing to live in the BPA LLC, the participants were choosing to live in an environment or community in which there was an emphasis on academic achievement. It is clear that the participants’ individual identity was formed, to a great extent, through their perception of the identity of the overall group. This source of identity follows social identity theory’s notion of in and out groups (Stets & Burke, 2000; Tajfel, 1971). The LLC participants were connected through their perception that they as a whole were more academically motivated than other non-LLC students. No matter that each individual came to the group with different academic abilities, their academic family was grounded in the perception that the LLC had higher academic standards than anyone else. The in-group prototype, of having high academic standards, activated each participant’s individual social identity (Hogg et al., 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000). In this way each participants became part of a larger LLC academic/intellectual family. The integration of participants into the LLC intellectual family facilitated their further integration into the
university overall. They became connected to each other and to their college (Grills et al., 2012; Longerbeam et al., 2007).

The results of this study differ from some of the current literature, in the matter of self-selection. In many studies students were selected to join in the LLC and once in the LLC, their course structure was different from that followed by non-LLC students (Ellett & Schmidt, 2011; Golde & Pribbenow, 2000; Inkelas, 2011). Other studies (Arboleda et al., 2003; Love, 2012; Johnson, 2001) have emphasized that the academic support offered by a LLC has the most impact on students who might otherwise struggle at college. Some of this academic support has come in the form of the educational models and/or methodology used for the LLC courses (Cross, 1998; Eck et al., 2007, Smith & Hunter, 1988; Stassen, 2003). The application of alternative educational models in LLCs have been found to increase student engagement which, in turn, has led to increased retention rates and persistence to graduation (Edwards & McKelfresh, 2002).

In this study students chose to join the LLC, they were not selected to do so. They came from diverse educational, socio-economic and familial backgrounds. Their sole connection was, initially, their common major and the fact that they shared an interest in living amongst students who shared that major. Unlike other studies, the academic success of these students cannot be attributed to smaller class size or exposure to non-traditional education models, or alternative instructional methods (Cross, 1998; Dodge & Kendall, 2004; Zepke & Leach, 2010). Baking and Pastry LLC students followed the same prescriptive curriculum as Baking and Pastry students who were not in the LLC.
Thus the matter of self-selection becomes an important underlying component in this study. Would the participants have had academic success without belonging to the LLC? Was a specific type of student attracted to joining and participating in the LLC? This study was able to begin to answer these questions and explore the reasons why the students chose to live in a LLC. This small qualitative study was able to concentrate on one specific group of students who were joined together only through their common major and desire to live in a LLC. Through the interviewing process it became clear that the key to the participants’ academic success was simply being together with other students who shared their interest in their major and desire to immerse themselves in their desired field. This differs from the studies related to the National Study of Living-Learning Programs (Inkelas et al., 2006; Inkelas et al., 2007; Inkelas et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 2007; Soldner & Szelenyi, 2008) or the National Survey of Student Engagement (Axelson & Flick, 2011; Beachboard et al., 2011; Cole & Korkmaz, 2010; Krause & Coates, 2008; Pike, 2012; Zhao & Kuh, 2004) all of which covered a wide breadth of students with a plethora of majors and focused on outcomes without looking at the catalyst for joining the LLC initially. The academic expectations of the LLC members, although they had self-selected to join the group, connected and challenged the participants intellectually. This finding separates this study from the larger quantitative studies which make up much of the LLC literature.

Influence of Faculty Interaction

Many studies in current literature stress that the single most important aspect of student engagement within a LLC is that the students have strong interactions with their faculty (Axelson & Flick, 2011; Haynes & Janosik, 2012; Johnson et al., 2007; Pike, 2010). The role of faculty was important in this study as well. Initially, faculty involvement was used as a primary piece of the LLC marketing strategy and certainly many of the participants entered the LLC with the
expectations that they would have close involvement with faculty members. It was often the interactions with faculty which helped to form each participant’s intellectual family. Getting to know faculty members outside of the classroom humanized them to the participants. In turn, this connection made the participants feel more equipped to handle the stress of classes. Many participants commented that getting to know faculty members before they entered the classroom aided them in their future academic success. Some participants mentioned feeling increased stress due to the faculty having higher expectations for the LLC students even though these expectations were never articulated by faculty members to the participants.

Wawrzynski & Jessup-Anger (2010) stressed the importance of looking at the quality of student-faculty interactions rather than simply counting the number of faculty-student interactions. This study was able to examine what the participants themselves viewed as quality interactions. Through IPA, the researcher was able to investigate what the participants felt about those interactions, how they made them feel and, in turn, how they influenced their eventual academic success or performance in the classroom.

The literature suggests that academic achievement within a LLC can be related to the application of new or non-traditional teaching techniques (Dodge & Kendall, 2004; Zepke & Leach, 2010). Some researchers believe that it is the application of new techniques more so than LLC membership itself which contributes to the academic achievements of LLC participants (Brownell & Swane, 2009). This was definitely not the case in this study as LLC members were integrated into the same classes as their non-LLC peers. What is applicable from the literature is that living in an environment that supports one’s academic goals, is an important element to each participant’s eventual intellectual success (Beachboard et al., 2011; Love, 2012; Moir, J. 2010; Tinto, 1998; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). The participants perceived that the connection they made with
their faculty members helped to further support them academically. This perception differs from other studies which found that intellectual gains in LLC communities are a result of unconventional teaching techniques (Dodge & Kendall, 2004; Zepke & Leach, 2010). Furthermore the participants in this study believed that their relationship with faculty separated them from other non-LLC students.

Valuing Separateness

The development of an emotional family was grounded, to a great extent on the LLC participant’s feeling of sameness. Their intellectual family takes this notion one step further. Through their emotional family the participants came together as they recognized that they were connected through their BPA majors. Their intellectual family, however, was based on their perception of their group being distinct from others on campus. The emotional closeness the participants felt to each other, in combination with the intellectual support and challenge they felt from their fellow LLC members, served to give the group a distinct feeling of separateness from the rest of the university. This is, to a great extent, the primary goal of LLCs, the connection of students not only to the members of their group but also to the larger university community (Grills et al., 2012; Longerbeam et al., 2007).

The intellectual family that each participant constructed through their freshman year was perceived as being separate and distinct from that built by other non-LLC students or found elsewhere in the residence halls and throughout the university. Participants viewed themselves as better students, more driven than non-LLC students and held to a higher standard by their peers as well as by their teachers. There was an overall feeling of being simultaneously pushed and supported by fellow LLC members. Within the LLC as a whole, participants found smaller groups with whom they shared intellectual goals and struggles. The individual participants within
each group actively worked to make their group separate and distinct from other groups. This “depersonalization” of one’s individuality in order to fall in line with the group is a central component of Social Identity Theory (Ellemers et al., 1999). This study aligned with the literature in that not all participants experienced the same degree of depersonalization or experienced depersonalization at the same time (Stets & Burke, 2000). Most participants did not mention any kind of academic relationship with non-LLC members; their intellectual family was viewed as almost an autonomous structure within the LLC itself.

Although all participants perceived a separate intellectual family within the LLC, not everyone viewed it in the same way. Some students embraced the professed higher academic standards as increased pressure to succeed in their classes. Others felt supported by the cocoon of academic support they received in the LLC as they struggled in classes and sought to meet what they perceived as the academic expectations of the LLC. The creation of different strata within the intellectual family is an example of the differentiation seen within Social Identity Theory (Brown, 2000). The literature is in agreement that the support and confidence many students find within the LLC transfers into greater academic success (Beachboard et al., 2001; Love, 2012; Moir, 2010; Tinto, 1998; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). This was absolutely true for the LLC participants in this study. The sense of separateness parlayed into a feeling of specialness which supported the participants throughout their intellectual journey.

Conclusion

This study was able to further illuminate the connection between LLC students and their academic work. For the participants in this study, the academic connection within the LLC was so strong that they perceived it as a vital component of their family, their intellectual family. This
academic family was, to a great extent, related to the degree of comfort each participant felt both with themselves as individuals as well as a member of the larger LLC group. Those participants who were more closely aligned with the in-group academic prototype felt comfort and support in the LLC academic family with which they identified. Others, those with a lesser degree of depersonalization, felt pressure from the in-group to perform academically. Those participants who felt academically challenged moved further away from the academic in-group prototype and moved further to the periphery of the LLC academic identity.

Paradoxically, the sameness that initially drew the group together simultaneously created a separateness between the BPA LLC and non-LLC students. Regardless of their individual degree of depersonalization, the participants were connected to each other through a distinct feeling of being intellectually separate from both other BPA majors as well as all non-LLC students. A large portion of this separateness was based upon the relationships LLC participants had with various faculty members. The connection participants had with faculty was a large part of the group’s academic prototype, serving to reinforce the feeling amongst the LLC members that they were distinct from other students. Although every participant accepted the academic prototype of the LLC in-group to a different extent, some more and some to a lesser degree, their movement toward and acknowledgement of that prototype clearly defined their group versus others in the out-group. Even those who struggled academically recognized that the academic standards of the LLC were unique in comparison to the standards held by non-LLC students.

What is not clear is the role which individual participants’ academic expectations may have played into the development of their intellectual family. Participants chose to join the LLC based on the initial interest and enthusiasm they had for their major. It is not clear if the
movement toward the academic prototype was a result of the individual characteristics of the LLC participants or in the characteristics of the LLC itself.

**Conclusion**

Living-Learning Communities work. The literature is clear that they are an effective tool in increasing retention rates and grade point averages, building a sense of community and connecting LLC members to the university as a whole (Love, 2012; Pasque & Murphy, 2005). These are all important outcomes of LLC participation. This study was able to appraise and examine the first year lived experience of LLC members offering a look at the process of being a LLC member, rather than the outcome of that membership. A deep examination into the lived experience of LLC participants allowed the researcher to discover what the LLC meant to each of its members. The primary finding is that students felt a sense of family within the LLC and while that sense of family varied from individual to individual depending upon their own personal backgrounds, and expectations and experiences, it was a powerful and life changing force in their first year of college.

Although they were connected, the emotional and academic families constructed by the LLC participants, were able to supply the often disparate demands and needs of the individual participants within the group. Through the analysis offered by IPA, this study was able to discover the depth and breadth of the connection LLC participants felt with others in the LLC as well as with non-LLC members. Not surprisingly, the stronger the depersonalization became, the more the participants moved to the in-group prototype, the greater the feeling of being distinct, special and apart from the rest of their student peers. The participants perceived their social and academic support system as unique. They felt a sense of distinctiveness as part of the LLC group.
For all of the participants, that sense of uniqueness was reminiscent of belonging to their own distinct family. Thus although the participants came from varied backgrounds, together they were able to construct a group dynamic which fulfilled the emotional and academic needs of its members. The sense of being special and distinct from other students was an integral component to the construction of the LLC family. Overall, the LLC group embraced their differences; they gloried in their distinctness from other students on campus.

The strength of this study is in its application of Social Identity Theory to a real life setting. It was able to take Social Identity Theory out of the laboratory or the artificially constructed settings used in previous studies (Abrams et al., 1990; Amiot & Aubin, 2013; Dobbs & Crano, 2001; Ellemers et al., 1999; Fielding & Hogg, 1997) and apply it to a distinct and dynamic group of individuals. In this way the construction of the group’s emotional and intellectual prototypes was uncovered as well as the change and movement in those prototypes over the course of a year. While this study has certainly opened the door to new factors in the LLC experience and reasons for their success, its small and somewhat limited nature leaves many questions unanswered.

**Recommendations for Practice**

The positive influence of LLC membership on the participants in this study is undeniable. That does not mean, however, that there are not changes that could take place in order to make the existing program even stronger and increase the depth and breadth of its impact on students. The suggested changes could also ensure that university resources are being used in the most effective manner.
This study examined the first year of the BPA LLC. There was no true selection process in place when it came to recruiting students to join the LLC. In addition to the online housing form, residential staff made personal phone calls to BPA students asking them if they would like to join. The result was a diverse group of first year BPA LLC participants from varying academic, emotional and socio-economic backgrounds. The immense influence the LLC had on its member is undeniable. For this reason the university may want to explore an expansion of the program.

Presently, the classes which LLC members attend are no different from those of non-LLC students. The literature has shown that alternative teaching techniques have had great success when applied to LLCs. The university may want to consider adopting various styles of LLCs to meet the various demands and needs of their student population. First, the university could target the LLC recruitment efforts at first generation college students as well as those in need of increased academic assistance, based upon their high school records. Second, application of alternative or non-traditional educational methodologies could serve to emphasize the already proven academic benefits of LLC membership. Third, working in tandem with the Admissions and Financial Aid offices could determine which students could best benefit from this new variation of the BPA LLC. In this way the time and money spent on the LLC students could be targeted at those most at risk of attrition. Additionally, the university may want to consider expanding the LLC program beyond the freshman year, in order to continue to support and challenge those students who would most benefit from living in the LLC community for more than one year. While certain aspects of the LLC would change as the students matured, the core sense of community which all participants found to be vital to their success, would remain in place.
Another recommendation would be to connect the various LLCs on campus. While the LLC for the College of Culinary Arts, which includes culinary and baking and pastry students, was extremely strong the participants in the LLCs for the Hospitality and Business colleges were left on the sidelines. In order for a larger number of students to benefit from the strengths of LLC participation, the researcher recommends that the Hospitality and Business colleges meet with the College of Culinary Arts LLC leaders and begin to structure their LLCs accordingly. The Student Affairs staff has been extremely helpful with the BPA LLC and the researcher is sure that they would welcome increased faculty presence and involvement from the other colleges as well. Cooperation between LLCs would also best utilize university resources, in terms of money, equipment, vans, and the many hours of time donated by faculty and staff.

The feeling of sameness BPA LLC members experienced could be expanded through the merging of students from various departments within a LLC. In this way the depth and breadth of the participants’ academic outlook would be deepened and strengthened and the connection they make with other LLC members would be built on shared academic mindset rather than built upon sharing the same major. This expansion would serve to forge a greater connection between the LLC members and the university overall.

Throughout the study the nature of community and community building was discussed often. The lived experiences of the participants has clearly shown that for them community is built through the efforts of all of the individuals involved. Perhaps this message could become an integral part of all residence hall life. Resident Assistant (RA) training could have as its emphasis building a community, what that means and how it can be accomplished. Activities, both large and small, could have as their focus building a community. Community as an action, as a verb is something that could transform the residence halls. The goal would certainly be that the power
which community and family played for the LLC could have a role in all members of the university as well. In this way more students could reap the rewards that are currently only offered to LLC participants.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

One of the limits of current research is that many previous studies have included extremely large numbers of students and are quantitatively based, focusing on the outcomes of students living in a LLC. This study took a qualitative approach, applying interpretative phenomenological analysis in order to closely examine the lived experiences of a small number of LLC members. An examination of the participants’ lived experiences made it clear that living in a LLC had a profound impact on their first year college experience. There are, however, many unanswered questions.

Future research should examine the element of self-selection. The majority of the participants in this study chose to live in the LLC and did so with fairly clear expectations of what that would involve. They were already excited and passionate about their major before they even stepped foot on campus. Is the success of LLC students and the deep connection they felt to the university and to each other a reflection of the LLC or a reflection of their personal natures and the outlooks with which they entered college? Would they have been successful even without the LLC family they created? These are certainly questions future research should address.

Additionally, it would be helpful to expand the study beyond the eight students included here. An analysis of the entire BPA LLC of 40 students or even examining both the BPA and CUL LLCs would certainly add to the present literature on the topic. Similarly the experiences of
the LLC students could be compared to those of BPA students who live on the same floor but are not in the LLC, or even other BPA majors who do not live together. In this way future research could explore the sense of family discovered in this study. A comparative study between these various groups could certainly play an important part in beginning to unpack where the connection and establishment of family happens and specifically what is responsible for the level of connection. Is that sense of family unique only to those included in the study; is it unique to only BPA majors? Or does a similar sense of family and community exist on other floors as well?

It was clear through this study that the rewards of LLC participation were large. It was equally clear that effort must be made on the part of each individual participant in order to reap the rewards. What is interesting, however, and what warrants further research is an examination of the tipping point for the effort involved. There were some participants who either worked outside of school, or were not as involved in the LLC activities as others and yet, they still reaped many of the rewards of LLC living. Future studies should analyze how that is possible i.e. what is the relationship between the effort an individual puts forth and the rewards they receive? Is there a common denominator here, what factors come into play? Would everyone benefit from participation in a minimal amount of LLC type of activities, or is something else at stake here? If the tipping point of involvement and connection to the university can be uncovered, then it could be applied to more students within the university. In this way the benefits of LLC participation could be expanded and become an integral part of the larger university community.
Appendix A: Interview Protocol

- Describe your high school experience
  - What are some examples of activities you were involved in as a high school student?
  - What made you choose JWU?
- What made you want to join a LLC?
  - Was this prompted by any of your high school experiences, family, teachers?
- What were your expectations of the LLC?
  - Give an example of how that expectation played out within the LLC I.e. was that expectation met or not met through the course of the year?
- What were your hesitations about joining the LLC?
- Overall, describe your first year LLC experience.
  - How do you think your experience would be different if you were not in a LLC?
    - Give an example
- What were the best things about being in a LLC?
  - Socially, academically?
  - Give an example of an instance when your participation in the LLC made you feel more connected to the university.
  - What extra-curricular activities are you involved with?
- Give an example of a negative experience about being in a LLC.
- Describe your relationship with the other members of the LLC.
- Describe your relationship with other friends you may have outside of the LLC.
- Describe your relationship with your faculty members.
- What do you wish you had experienced with the LLC that you did not?
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