



Making a Location a Place: Mapping Residential Colleges in the United States

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SITUATING RESIDENTIAL COLLEGES ON A COMMON MAP can provide important information about the community and its residents. Residential colleges (RCs), a subset of living-learning communities, are like the houses in Hogwarts from the Harry Potter book series, where students live together, share meals in a common space, and learn with and among each other through common courses. One way to easily identify and locate RCs is through cartography, which can provide layered and visual information about each RC. Because there is little geographic information about RCs, plotting them on a common map provides ways to connect similar communities, students, staff, and faculty. For the purposes of this study, we aimed to situate RCs on a common map. An online survey tool (Qualtrics) was used to gather data, which yielded 95 responses about RCs in the United States. Survey data was then downloaded in Microsoft Excel, imported into the Google Account Services drive, and finally into Google My Maps to create the map. Knowing where RCs are located, who lives in them, what amenities they offer, and the capacity of each can provide valuable information about these types of residential living spaces on campus communities.

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The increasing number of studies on residential learning communities coupled with theories about student learning and development provide important information about the rich potential for residential spaces in campus settings. Residential colleges (RCs), a particular subset of residential learning communities, are often based on the Oxford model, a system that assigns housing to a student in what is called a college or residential space. Smith (1994) notes that in a “classic residential college” (p. 247) students and faculty share space in residence.

Cross-sectional residential colleges, modeled after those in Oxford, Cambridge, and elsewhere, were adopted by undergraduate divisions of Harvard University and Yale University in the 1930s and by Rice University in the 1950s (O’Hara, 2006b). In these spaces, students have frequent contact with other students and with faculty mentors, which helps to forge intellectual and communal bonds that can extend well beyond their collegiate experience. RCs are like the houses in Hogwarts from the Harry Potter book series, where students live together, share meals in a common space, often with faculty, and learn with and among each other through common courses. RCs were rare on campuses in the United States until recently (O’Hara, 2006b), and as their presence continues to grow both nationally and internationally, finding a systematic way to identify and locate RCs across the United States becomes increasingly important.

Creating maps of the residences within institutions can offer various types of information about the spaces and places that are so critical to student development.

Cartography provides one way to identify and locate residential colleges, and cartographic practices can also strengthen skills in global literacy, problem solving, innovation, and creativity. Creating maps of the residences within institutions can offer various types of information about the spaces and places that are so critical to student development. Whether we find out more about places, relationships, or even making informed decisions, maps serve as effective infographics, presenting multiple variables in a visual way and providing spatial structure to enhance the story of a particular place or group (Roth, 2021). Plotting RCs on a common map reveals ways to connect similar communities, students, staff, and faculty. For the purposes of our study, we aimed to first and foremost situate RCs on a common map. Knowing where RCs are located, who lives in them, what amenities they offer, and the capacity of each one can provide valuable information about these types of residential living spaces (see Grabsch et al., 2023).

THE ROLE OF RESIDENTIAL COLLEGES IN SHAPING STUDENTS' COLLEGIATE EXPERIENCE

What is a Residential College?

Residential living has become commonplace on college and university campuses. Dating back to the Middle Ages in Europe, institutions of higher education began to assume more responsibility for housing on campus, thus creating spaces where faculty lived in residence with students so that they could continue learning outside the classroom (Boone et al., 2016; Cowley, 1934). Drawing from its roots in the Colonial colleges back in the 17th century (known today as the Ivy League schools), residential living is not a new concept, but it has taken many different shapes and forms over the years. Common terms for campus living spaces today include living-learning communities, residential communities, residential colleges, and themed houses and residence halls (Benjamin et al., 2020); all are essentially living environments in a campus space, but they do not all necessarily share the same characteristics. Residential colleges are a unique subset of living-learning communities based on the Oxford model and serve as academic communities composed of students and faculty who share living spaces, meals, and tutoring. Though many residential universities refer to their own living spaces on campus as residential, the concept of an RC does not necessarily include all the key features noted by the Residential College Society, which, according to their mission, seeks to provide “a learning network for faculty and student affairs educators to share knowledge, build community, and advance scholarship about the residential college experience” (“Mission,” n.d., para. 1).

The Residential College Society advocates that live-in faculty are a key component of RCs, which they define as “a collegiate residential environment in which live-in faculty play an integral role in the programmatic experience and leadership of the community”

(“Definition,” n.d., para. 2). RCs may also have a departmental affiliation, collaboration with student affairs and academic affairs, linked courses, academic experiences (curricular and cocurricular), and traditional LLC programming. Living-learning communities typically connect students with similar academic interests, identities, or passions, and many RCs strive to create a strong identity by maintaining an appreciation of the traditions, history, culture, and sense of community shared among residents and staff. Some RCs are branded with their own shield, crest, or mascot, and others have their own governing structure in-house, which is created and led by students. One of the primary advantages of RCs, especially at larger research universities, is that they serve as microcosms for students to share living space and educational experiences (Jessup-Anger, 2012).

The Role of Faculty in Residential Colleges

Though there is no one definition of RCs, most agree on the importance of a faculty presence in and engagement with the community in contributing to positive student outcomes (Inkelas et al., 2018), a positive campus climate (Cress, 2008), students’ career attitudes and intention to innovate (Mayhew et al., 2018), and their critical thinking, cognitive complexity, and appreciation of liberal learning (Inkelas et al., 2008). Faculty engagement with students may also lead to higher GPAs (Anaya & Cole, 2001), persistence (Mayhew et al., 2016), positive self-reports of learning (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004), and an increased sense of community, student thriving, and belonging (Erck & Sriram, 2022; Spanierman et al., 2013).

Unfortunately, faculty involvement in LLC programs is, overall, quite low (Golde & Pribenow, 2000). In some institutions, LLC faculty involvement is meant to be limited to teaching or advising, rather than regular engagement or cocurricular and extracurricular activities, and at others faculty may be hesitant to become involved in LLCs as they feel they are not adequately remunerated for their time and efforts.

The faculty presence in LLCs is crucial, for they fulfill many important roles as advisors, leaders, curriculum advisors, experiential learning guides, guest speakers, mentors, participants, representatives, and teachers, and faculty presence is “layered” and “ongoing” (Eidum & Lomicka, 2023, p. 6) in the community. One of the more substantive or intense roles that faculty can have is the position of living in residence on campus and among a substantial community of students while offering “social, intellectual, personal, and even pre professional development” (Eidum & Lomicka, 2023, p. 6). Faculty-student interactions in living-learning communities evolve in a “dynamic process” (Davenport & Pasque, 2014, p. 59) that provides a more holistic campus experience to students. This active engagement is evident in three areas of programming related to the RC: academic (such as linked courses and teaching), social (presence at programming and events), and experiential (study abroad or service learning). Because faculty bring to the community a unique perspective, they can be instrumental in establishing connections for students, linking back to both academic and professional activities. Felten and Lambert (2020) emphasize that the relationships that faculty build and foster with students matter significantly; based on data

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from more than 400 interviews with students, faculty, and staff at 27 institutions of higher education in the United States, they concluded that “individual relationships can be educationally powerful, but a network of overlapping relationships is more likely to meet a student’s evolving needs than any single mentor can” (p. 15). In their study of themed LLCs, Frazier and Eighmy (2012) further found that “students in residential learning communities with direct and intentional involvement on the part of the faculty and resident staff had a higher level of overall student satisfaction than did students in communities with less faculty and staff involvement” (p. 11).

Placing Residential Colleges on the Map

This project collects information about RCs and then plots the colleges on a map, which allows readers to visualize and access layered information through a spatial lens rather than through the tabular data in traditional text formats. Furthermore, the map can be used by RC staff to help advertise and validate the existence of their colleges to prospective students and to administrators.

Togglable layers enable users to quickly identify spatial patterns and reference data about each residential college. These layers contain queried attributes and information on each RC, which provides data on who lives in a community, how students interact, and what spaces the communities utilize. As users interact with the map, they can examine the cultural and linguistic diversity in RCs as well as the evolving nature of these institutions. The non-linear presentation of information on interactive maps opens a wider view of literacy to include texts that are multimodal (such as audio, images, sound, graphics, and film) and can contribute to the development of multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; New London Group, 1996; Walsh, 2010). Faculty associated with RCs—as well as administrators, student affairs professionals, and graduate students—can benefit from information the map provides both as an overview of RCs and as a detailed description of each. Specifically, a new faculty-in-residence who would like to initiate a formal visit with another RC, an administrator planning to establish an RC on their campus, or a student affairs professional seeking connections or contacts in other RCs can easily access the map and quickly make connections, find contacts, and obtain the needed information.

Maps are an important tool for conducting research, but they can also be accessed directly by higher education staff at residential colleges to advertise or support their residential college. When touring campuses, parents and students are looking for housing options that provide residents with the greatest chance of success. The interactive map can show comparable living arrangements within the United States higher education system. In addition, when administrators and policy makers are in the process of auditing their institutions, RCs can validate their existence by serving as a cartographic tool to provide a visual representation of other schools' RCs quickly.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Informed by the theoretical and empirical literature above, we asked the following research questions:

1. *Where are residential colleges located in the United States?*
2. *What characteristics do they have in common?*

METHODOLOGY

The methodologies utilized in this project draw from cartographic and statistical procedures. First, data was gathered utilizing a 20-item survey created in an online survey tool (Qualtrics) and then distributed to all known faculty and staff affiliated with RCs in the United States. Based on Penven's (2016) methodology, emails were sent to those affiliated with RCs across the United States; additionally, the survey link was distributed via the Residential College Society listserv, where recipients were encouraged to forward and share it with colleagues. A total of 95 participants responded to the survey, which included the following items: name of RC (including city, state, zip), college or university affiliation and website, founding date, the type of institution (public/private), 2- vs. 4-year institution, theme of the RC, number of residents, class of residents (first-year, sophomore, junior, senior), whether an application is required, whether a dining facility is included, whether classes and classroom space are offered in the RC, what the faculty leader is called, whether the faculty leader lives in the RC, and the type of rooms offered, such as suite-style or apartment. This information was then mapped using the Google My Maps web app.

Data Collection Tools

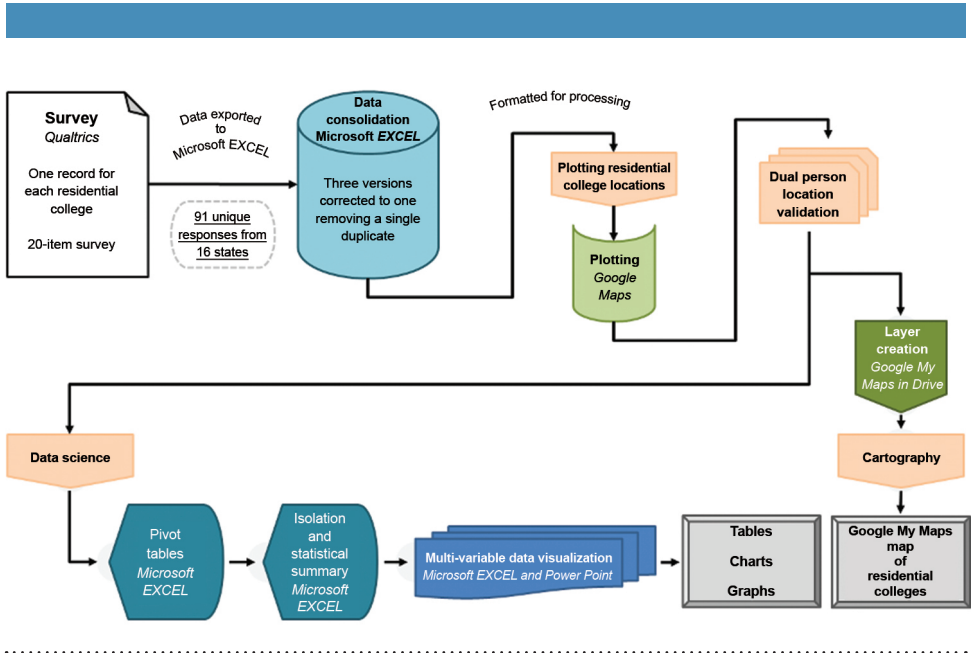
Data for this mapping project was collected and sourced through multiple tools. First, we used Qualtrics, a dynamic online survey tool, to collect data from participating institutions with RCs. Emails with the survey URL were sent to available listservs as well as to institutions known to have RCs on campus (see Penven, 2016). Once survey data was collected, we downloaded it into Microsoft Excel to manipulate and prepare the data for the map. This data was then imported into the Google Account Services drive and then into Google My Maps, and, once there, we plotted the locations provided and linked attribute information to each RC on the map. Finally, the pivot table functionality within Microsoft Excel allowed researchers to pull statistical data and then create visual analyses with Microsoft PowerPoint. Figure 1 (*see page 90*) displays the workflow chart which helps to clarify the multiple steps taken to create and process the map.

Creation of the Map

Creating the map involved three steps: plotting, validation, and symbolization. Point plotting took place by dropping points at the location of RCs that responded to the survey in a master layer. Layers are togglable visualizations on infographics, and the dropped points store a unique latitude and longitude. The survey results provided data for each point's record, and the RC's information was added to the relevant points attribute table. This process transformed our points, also known as locations, into visual

FIGURE 1

Workflow for Creating the Residential Colleges Map



places on the map. These places were then symbolized generally. After this general symbolization of the first layer, additional layers were drafted utilizing this initial progenitor layer to ensure data continuity and to enable users of the web map to filter out unnecessary information. Finally, both researchers validated the data and locations on a place-by-place basis by cross checking the map’s points with the survey results. See Google My Maps (2020).

RESULTS

The results are based solely on the responses from RC participants in the survey. Ninety-five responses yielded information for 91 unique RCs at 27 different institutions in the United States. It is worth noting that some institutions may have multiple residential colleges, but not all may have responded to the survey. Vanderbilt University reported the most RCs at a single institution, with a total of 14 (see Table 1, page 91), followed by the University of Southern California, which reported 12. At Vanderbilt, each first-year student is assigned (randomly) to one of the 10 first-year houses on the Martha Rivers Ingram Commons, all of which are designated as RCs. In a similar fashion, the University of Southern California requires first-year students to live in RCs on its campus, since they are so beneficial in facilitating membership in a community through interactions with peers and can extend the classroom experience by taking learning outside of the traditional classroom. At many public institutions, the number

of RCs is much lower (1–2), which may be linked to lack of staffing or financial support. In fact, 66% of RCs are situated at private institutions, but only 33% are found at public institutions. Though RCs may often be associated with Ivy League schools, they are found in more than 16 countries and more than 30 college and university campuses in the United States.

TABLE 1

Number of Residential Colleges at Participating Institutions

Institution	Number of residential colleges
Vanderbilt University	14
University of Southern California	12
Southern Methodist University	11
Washington University in St. Louis	10
Louisiana State University	9
Elon University	6
University of North Carolina Greensboro	3
Virginia Tech	3
Baylor University	2
Michigan State University	2
University of Oklahoma	2
University of Virginia	2
Appalachian State University	1
Baylor University Honors College	1
Butler University	1
Clemson University	1
Cornell University	1
Dartmouth College	1
New York University	1
The University of Mississippi	1
Tulane University	1
University of California Santa Cruz	1
University of Georgia	1
University of Massachusetts Amherst	1
University of Massachusetts Lowell	1
University of Michigan	1
University of South Carolina	1

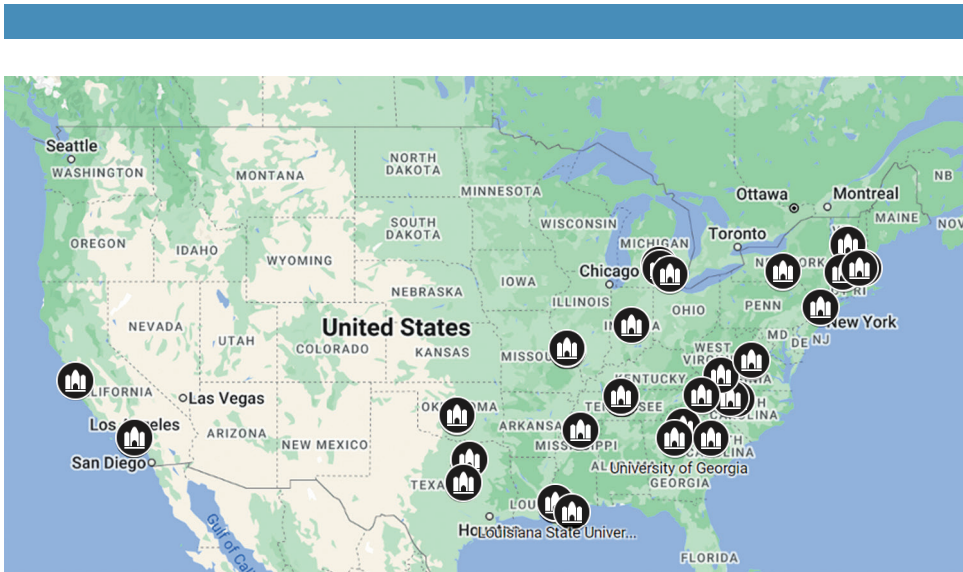
DISCUSSION

Research Question 1

Responses to the first research question provide important information on where RCs are situated in the United States and indicate that RCs exist in 16 states across the United States and seem to be most prominent in the eastern and central areas (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2

Map of Residential Colleges in the United States



The largest number of RCs are found in Tennessee, Texas, California, Louisiana, Missouri, and North Carolina (see Table 2, page 93). According to O'Hara (2006a), half of the top 25 national higher education institutions in the U.S. News rankings have faculty-led RC systems. In each of those states with higher numbers of RCs, the data indicate that the RCs are concentrated in 1–3 institutions. For example, those who responded to the survey in Texas reported 14 RCs, which are located at Southern Methodist University and Baylor University. One identified trend is that a number of institutions (for example Vanderbilt, Southern Methodist University, Elon, and Washington University) house multiple RCs within their campus system, which can be unique in themes, traditions, academic years (e.g., first-year or upper-division students), or academic affiliations. Many of the institutions with multiple RCs strive to promote a strong sense of community and belonging. For example, Vanderbilt (2024) describes their RCs as “promoting the development of intellect, community, personal well-being, self-discovery, and cultural awareness” (para. 1).

TABLE 2

Residential College Numbers by State

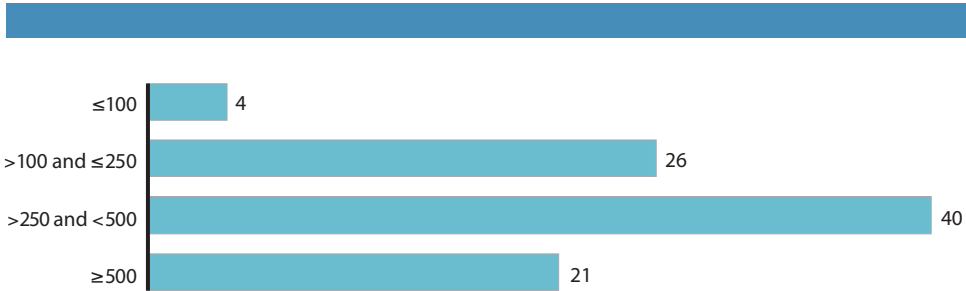
State	Number of residential colleges
Tennessee	14
Texas	14
California	13
Louisiana	10
Missouri	10
North Carolina	10
Virginia	5
Michigan	3
Massachusetts	2
New York	2
Oklahoma	2
South Carolina	2
Georgia	1
Indiana	1
Mississippi	1
New Hampshire	1

Many RCs have their own traditions and history that are passed along over the years to generations of students. The survey data indicate that the average age of respondent residential colleges was 17.2 years, meaning that most RCs in this dataset are well established. The newest one to complete the survey was Nicholas S. Zeppos College, founded in 2020 at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. The oldest RC to complete the survey was also at Vanderbilt: the West House residential college founded in 1922. The average residential capacity for RCs is 387, according to those responding to the survey. The RC with the largest capacity was Cornell University’s West Campus House System, with a maximum residency of 1,800, while that with the smallest capacity was Vanderbilt University’s Memorial House, with a maximum residency of 80. Clearly, sizes of RCs vary across campus as well as across institutions (see Table 3, page 94).

Although not specific to living-learning communities, there may be optimal community sizes of 50, 150 and 500, resulting in greater longevity of the communities (Dunbar & Sosis, 2018). For example, much of British Anthropologist Dunbar’s work comes from studies (i.e., Dunbar, 1992) drawing from primates’ social grooming

TABLE 3

Residential Colleges by Number of Students



practices, which, based on the size of our neocortex, means that we can maintain meaningful relationships with 150 people. Larger LLCs may not always be better; though size may not significantly impact the RC, well or moderately well-resourced living-learning communities with strong partnerships between academic and student affairs yielded stronger student learning outcomes (Inkelas et al., 2008).

Research Question 2

Many RCs have common components such as a faculty member or leader, dining spaces, affiliated classes, designations of particular room types and student ranks, and specific application requirements. Of course, RCs also differ in many respects, as can be seen in a layered map that allows easy access to the particularities of each: a visual component (including the picture) of each RC (see Figure 3, page 95), with the information about each layered into the map. Users can consult the map to obtain more information about an RC (see Figure 4, page 96).

COMMON COMPONENTS OF A RESIDENTIAL COLLEGE

Residential College Faculty

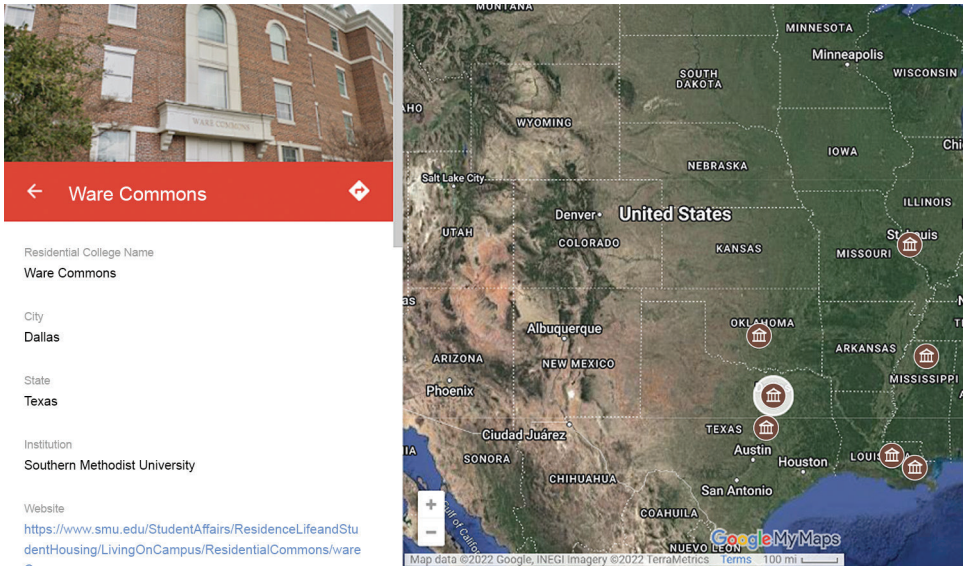
Most residential colleges refer to their faculty as faculty-in-residence, though there are a wide range of titles used for faculty affiliated with RCs (see Table 4, page 97). The most common titles include faculty-in-residence, faculty head of house, rector, faculty

Though there is no one definition of RCs, most agree on the importance of a faculty presence in and engagement with the community in contributing to positive student outcomes, a positive campus climate, students' career attitudes and intention to innovate, and their critical thinking, cognitive complexity, and appreciation of liberal learning.

The non-linear presentation of information on interactive maps opens a wider view of literacy to include texts that are multimodal (such as audio, images, sound, graphics, and film) and can contribute to the development of multiliteracies.

FIGURE 3

Visual Component of Map

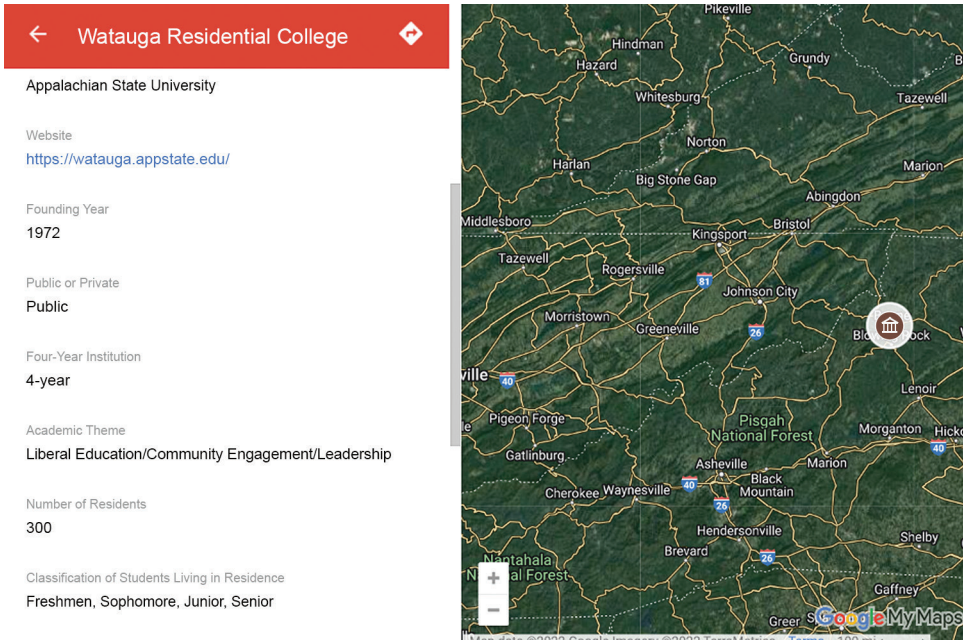


fellow, faculty director, faculty principal, faculty steward, and faculty associate. Although the terms used for the faculty title indicate some type of faculty involvement with the community, each title may be specific to an institution, community, or RC. The types of duties and responsibilities that faculty fulfill can vary at each institution; some may have live-in faculty, and others may simply associate faculty with a designated community. Survey data also indicated that 76% of faculty live in the residence, while 24% do not.

O’Hara (2001) makes a strong argument for the importance of faculty in student spaces that are outside of the classroom and can thus lead to deeper connections and meaningful interactions: “We must return the faculty to their proper place—not just as teachers in the classroom but as the principal influences on student life throughout the university” (p. 52). Faculty in general are often privy to the value of social and academic

FIGURE 4

Layers of Information



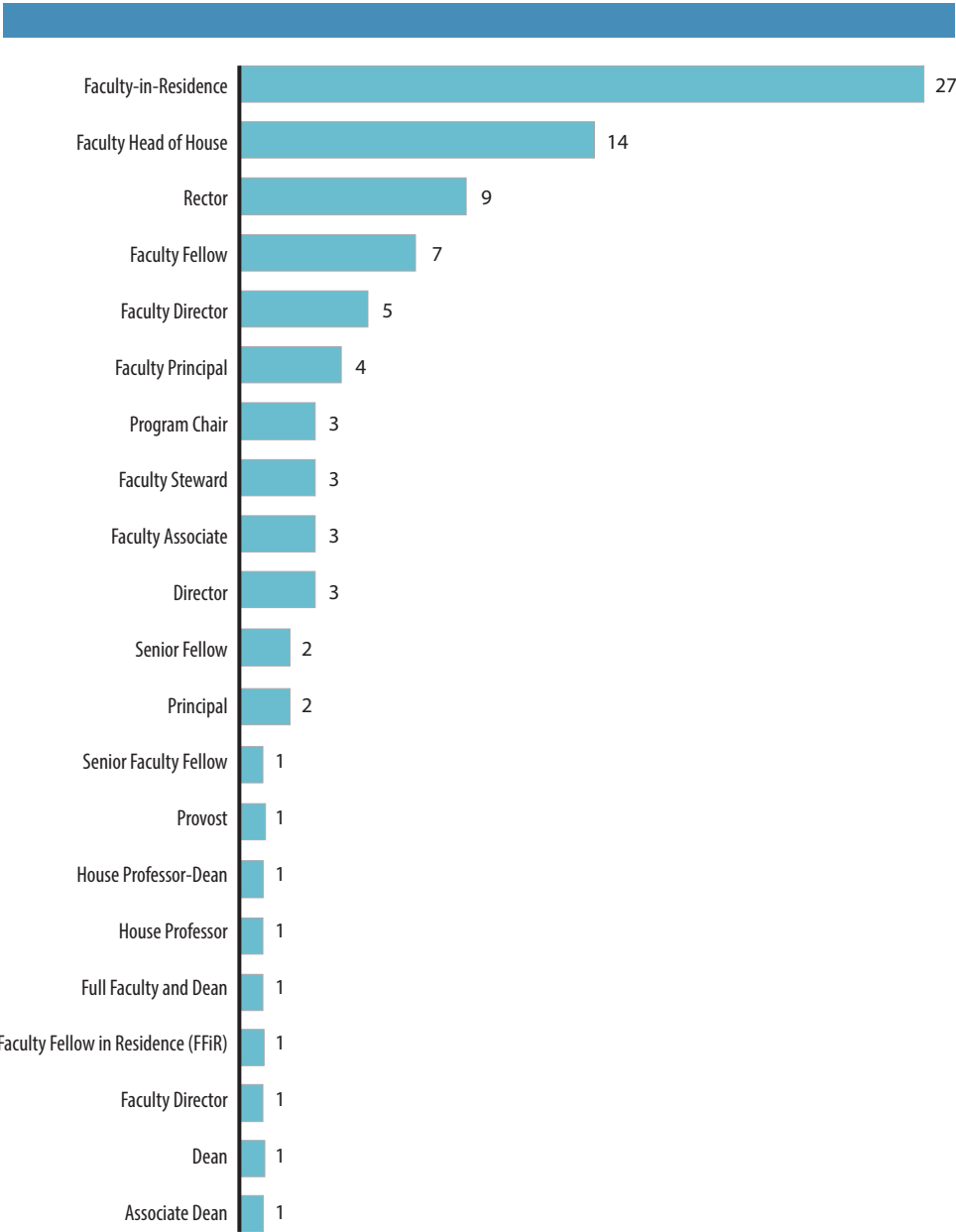
interactions, which are indeed important and necessary, but faculty-in-residence can be instrumental in the process of engaging in deep life interactions, which are characterized by discussions of meaning, value, and purpose and can positively influence the psychological sense of community (Beckowski & Gebauer, 2018; Sriram et al., 2020; Sriram & McLevain, 2016).

Rank of Student

According to the survey, 59% of RCs house all levels of students, while 30% offer this housing only to first-year students. Though there are advantages to having first-year students live together in residence, there are also arguments to having students from all ranks live together. Mixed residential living spaces can create a more realistic living situation (Schelhas, 1978) and provide first-year students with more opportunities to engage with older students who can serve as peer mentors, offer academic and social advice, and be positive role models (Schelhas, 1978; Schoemer & McConnell, 1970).

TABLE 4

Titles of Faculty Affiliated with Residential Colleges



Type of Accommodation

There are a wide variety of on-campus housing options available to students (Sickler & Roskos, 2013), and most RCs offer traditional (56%) and suite-style (54%) accommodations but very few apartment-style, single, double, or triple options. Suite-style rooms include two adjoining rooms connected by a bathroom, while traditional rooms often house only one or two students, who share a community bathroom with others. Those living in suite-style halls tend to develop a greater sense of belonging and increasing engagement (Rodger & Johnson, 2005) and emotional support (Ballou, 1986). Those residing on campus tend to be more open to diversity (Pike, 2009) and more engaged with the academic environment (Astin, 1973), and they exhibit greater personal growth (Schroeder & Mable, 1994), social interaction with others (Ballou et al., 1995), and academic performance (Moos & Lee, 1979; Turley & Wodtke, 2010). RCs in general can offer a strong sense of community (Spanierman et al., 2013; Wawrzynski et al., 2009) as they represent a smaller cross section of students at an institution while providing “physical, social, and academic anchorage” (Tinto, 1993, p. 125).

A Sense of Community

There was some variation associated with the community themes across RCs, though more than 40 did not identify with a particular one (*see Table 5, page 99*), and many of these housed first- and/or second-year students. It may be that residents of RCs without a particular theme are new students, whose identity is linked by rank rather than by academic discipline. In many LLCs, residents are grouped by shared activities or experiences (Inkelas et al., 2007; Inkelas et al., 2018; Inkelas & Soldner, 2011). Other RCs were specific to a shared interest or classification, such as honors, sustainability, or STEM.

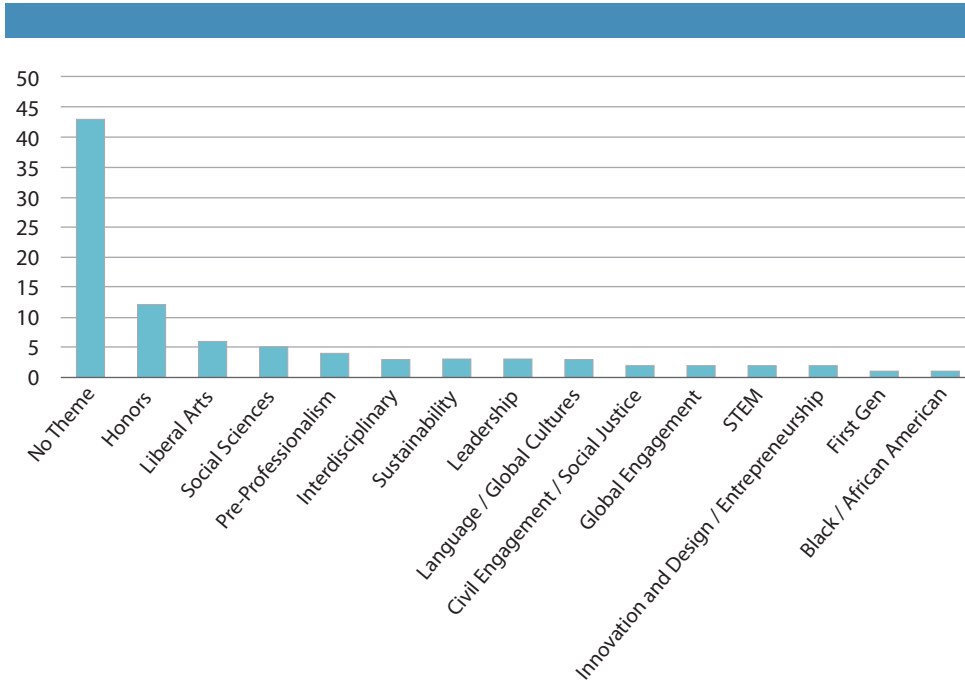
Dining Spaces

A total of 33% of RCs in this study offered a dining space specifically associated with the RC, while 53% did not and 14% share one with others at the institution. Dining spaces help to foster a sense of community by providing an opportunity for shared meals and conversation and informal academic discussions with other students, faculty, and staff (Altmare & Sheridan, 2016; Hsu et al., 2022). This space can also bring a sense of tradition and ritual to students’ everyday experiences and can be used specifically for special events (O’Hara, 2001) and common dinners. Cox and Orehovec (2007) discuss the example of one residential college that served weekday dinners that were required for students and associated faculty members, and these became important arenas for engagement: “The College-wide dinners were the setting most frequently available for the faculty and students to interact” (p. 347).

Maps are an important tool for conducting research, but they can also be accessed directly by higher education staff at residential colleges to advertise or support their residential college.

TABLE 5

Residential Colleges by Theme



Affiliated Classes and Classroom

A total of 31% of RCs offered classroom space and/or held classes in the RC, while 28% offered neither, and 37% had a designated space for classes to be offered in the building. Though arguments can be made for having space or not having space within the residence, Altimore and Sheridan (2016) remind us that learning occurs not just in the classrooms that are part of LLCs; it extends to dining spaces, other informal spaces such as lounges or study rooms, and residential spaces; these non-classroom spaces support “the goal of social connectedness and community formation,” making them “a worthwhile investment” (p. 13).

Application Requirement

An additional area explored in this survey was how students are assigned to RCs (i.e., applications). Of the RCs in this study, 26% required an application but 64% did not. Applications can take various forms, from essays to short answer response questions, and can provide useful information for administrators, particularly for themed communities and when community living has limited spaces and spots are competitive.

In these spaces, students have frequent contact with other students and with faculty mentors, which helps to forge intellectual and communal bonds that can extend well beyond their collegiate experience.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE: NEXT STEPS

A customized interactive map can offer an increased awareness and deeper understanding of where RCs are situated in the United States and can provide readers with non-linear access to a variety of information in one space through multiple layers. Designed to provide a visual stamp of where RCs are situated, maps can provide access to information about each RC. Through a pin for each RC on the map, we can identify their size, the number of RCs at each institution, the role and title of faculty, dining facilities, application requirements, the rank of students living there, and type of room style available. Knowing where each RC is located, along with other basic information, can serve student affairs professionals, faculty-in-residence, housing professionals, and students as they explore residential living spaces.

The survey administered to those involved with RCs yielded a rich set of data, but we regret that not all residential colleges in the United States responded to the survey, leaving the map incomplete; however, it is our hope to continue seeking out those that have not responded and to expand the map as new RCs are established and as staff from RCs not represented are able to contribute. The research team will continue to annually update the map with new records and locations provided by any additional RCs that submit a completed survey to Qualtrics. In addition to yearly updates, an annual review of existing information will be performed by the research team, which will ensure proper functioning of displayed records and locations for represented RCs. Finally, we hope to expand the map internationally to develop a better sense of where RCs are located beyond the borders of the United States. ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Residential colleges were rare in the U.S. until recently. What factors do you think could have contributed to their rise? What benefits and challenges might they present on your campus? Considering the common components of residential colleges identified in this study, which do you think would be the most meaningful for students on your campus?
2. The authors cite a study revealing that faculty involvement in residential colleges and living-learning community (LLC) programs has historically been low. With this in mind, consider the following questions regarding faculty involvement in these programs.
 - How does your college or university engage faculty within residential colleges and LLCs?
 - How do faculty at your current institution engage with academic, social, and experiential learning?
 - How could faculty engagement be increased in these areas?
3. The toggable map can be useful for various audiences, such as parents, student affairs professionals, and policymakers. How could colleges and universities leverage this tool to enhance its services or communication?
4. What benefits can a prospective student who is considering living in a residential college gain from using this multilayered map? How might this map impact their decision about where to attend college or live?
5. This study examines common components of residential colleges such as faculty involvement, dining spaces, affiliated classes, room types, student rankings, and application requirements. What additional aspects should future research explore?

Discussion questions developed by Sara Huggett and Rachel Hosig, Virginia Tech