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Students' Lived Experiences of NACE Competencies Within Collegiate Residential Life

THE RESIDENTIAL COMMUNITY IS A KEY PART OF THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE simply because students spend a large majority of their time in the places where they live. Given this fact, a student's interactions and engagement with their community can positively impact their learning experience. We utilized a constructivist, qualitative, phenomenological study design to examine the residential life experiences of students with the competencies outlined by the National Association of Colleges and Employers. Findings from a thematic analysis of 15 semi-structured interviews resulted in three emergent themes around which students connect their residential life experiences to the competencies: unique context, engagement with residence life, and utilization and growth. This research is important for scholars and housing professionals alike as it advances knowledge in both career readiness and our understanding of how the residential experience contributes to transferable skills.

The residential community is a key part of the college experience if only because college students spend a large majority of their time in the places where they live (Riker & Decoster, 2008). Given this fact, a student's interactions and engagement with their residential community have an important impact on their learning experience. In his defense of liberal education in *The Idea of a University*, John Henry Newman explains that when "keen, open-hearted, sympathetic, and observant [students] ... come together and freely mix with each other, they are sure to learn one from another, even if there be no one to teach them" (1893, p. 146). There is knowledge to be gained by simply meeting people from different life experiences and with different perspectives. This centuries-old concept is still exhibited on today's college and university campuses, specifically within residential communities.

Newman's *idea* remains essential in modern higher education institutions because students expect a college education to serve as an investment in the development of employability skills that can help them secure a job upon graduation (Krukowski, 1985). Employability-skill development is inherently incorporated in the university curriculum (Tymon, 2013), but it does not exclusively occur in the classroom (Thompson et al., 2013). These skill sets can also be taught as part of the residential experience and

can be facilitated through intentional programming that brings diverse student bodies together to live and learn. Programming opportunities allow for self-development—and therefore learning—in a nontraditional setting (Day et al., 2004). Additionally, some housing departments clearly emphasize National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) competencies and their connection to student employment opportunities (University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign [UIUC], 2019).

RESIDENTIAL LIFE AND STUDENT LEARNING

Learning is a truly holistic experience that involves all aspects of the college experience, one of which includes student learning and development. “Students learn what they need to know to accomplish a particular task such as resolving a conflict, confronting or counseling another student or taking leadership responsibility in a group” (Day et al., 2004, p. 12). In residential communities, engagement in various tasks or situations allows students to learn in an active context, which is not often possible in the traditional classroom setting (Day et al., 2004).

Recent studies have indicated that residential communities have an indirect influence on retention and graduation; however, the effect on student learning and development is greatest in residential living-learning communities (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). As colleges and universities aim to create an immersive educational experience for students, “residence halls provide purposeful spaces for student affairs professionals to plan formal and informal educational opportunities” (Graham et al., 2018, p. 256). The positive impact on student learning gained from living on a college campus is mostly attributed to organic interactions between peers facilitated by residential programming (Blimling et al., 1999). By virtue of existing in a collaborative and diverse space, student learning and development occurs, which can have a positive impact on career readiness.

NACE COMPETENCIES

Previous studies have examined the cocurricular experience and its relationship with core competencies for college. The National Association of Colleges and Employers is a professional association established in 1956 that connects college career services, recruiting professionals, and business solution providers (NACE, 2022a). The association is a reputable source of information on student employment and outcomes, and an initial task force—made up of NACE members from the departments of career services and university relations and recruiting—developed a definition of career readiness and associated competencies. These were subsequently reviewed and updated by a task force of members in 2017 to reflect feedback from those who were using the competencies with students (NACE, 2022b). The resultant competencies for personal and professional development were as follows: (a) intercultural competence, (b) career management, (c) teamwork, (d) problem solving and decision making, (e) workflow planning, (f) oral communication, (g) critical thinking, (h) digital technology, (i) written communication, (j) influencing, (k) leadership, and (l) professionalism and work ethic (NACE, 2022b).

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RELEVANCE AND PURPOSE

While some studies have examined the relationship between the attainment of NACE competencies and various aspects of the cocurricular experience (Massaro, 2019; Peck et al., 2016), to our knowledge this is the first study of how a college residential environment may facilitate experiences with these competencies. Fellow scholars have identified the need to further examine the impact of the cocurricular experience on NACE competency development in saying that they “would like to encourage scholar practitioners in both fields to conduct research on this topic” (Cramp et al., 2015, p. 20). Therefore, the primary purpose of this study was to understand how students describe their experiences with NACE competencies within residential life.

METHOD

Design

We utilized a constructivist, qualitative, phenomenological study design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to examine the self-reported development of NACE competencies in residential life. Honebein (1996) described the constructivism paradigm with an assertion that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through having and reflecting on experiences. Its foundation stems from the belief that people form or construct much of what they learn through experience (Cashman et al., 2008; Hein, 1991). Thus, to the constructivist in us, constructing meaning is learning; there is no other kind.

Setting and Sample

The research site is a medium-sized private university in the southern United States that enforces a 2-year live-on policy. The research site operationalizes a residential college model and houses roughly 3,000 students (Southern Methodist University, 2022). After approval was received by the site’s Institutional Review Board, a roster method (Marsden, 1990) was applied by the research team to identify all on-campus residents during the spring 2021 semester. We utilized the tailored design method (Dillman et al., 2014) to send a series of up to three emails to recruit study participants. They were invited to complete a survey about NACE competencies and were given the opportunity to participate in a semi-structured interview at the conclusion of the survey. A raffle of incentives was offered to complete the survey, including a streaming device, wireless headphones, and a coffee maker. A raffle for one \$50 retail gift card was offered to participants who completed an hour-long interview. A total of 339 of the 2,563 invited individuals responded to the survey, for a response rate of 13%. Table 1 (see page 36) displays characteristics of the identified population (e.g., all residential students) and the survey sample.

TABLE 1
Study Population

DEMOGRAPHICS		POPULATION		SURVEY SAMPLE	
		COUNT	PERCENT	COUNT**	PERCENT
Sex	Male	1,252	49	112	33
	Female	1,310	51	218	65
	Transgender	*	*	2	1
	Gender-nonconforming	*	*	5	1
	Self-identify	*	*	2	1
	Prefer not to answer	*	*	3	1
Age	17	10	0.39	0	0
	18	670	26	63	19
	19	1,108	43	127	37
	20	571	22	101	30
	21	150	6	36	11
	22	45	2	9	3
	23	5	1	1	1
	24	1	1	0	0
	25	1	1	1	1
	29	1	1	1	1
Classification	Freshman	1,484	58	138	41
	Sophomore	796	31	115	34
	Junior	196	8	68	20
	Senior	166	3	18	5
Race/ethnicity	American Indian / Alaskan Native	4	1	7	2
	Asian	189	7	51	13
	Arab or Middle Eastern	*	*	9	2
	Black or African American	167	6	32	9
	Hispanic of any race	338	13	51	13
	Multiracial/biracial	*	*	11	3
	Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander	1	1	3	.77
	Prefer to self-describe	*	*	2	1
	Prefer not to answer	*	*	8	2
	White	1,631	63	217	55
	Nonresident alien (any race)	67	2.62	***	***
	Race and ethnicity unknown	37	1.44	***	***
	Two or more races	128	5	***	***
Transfer	Yes	246	10	24	7
	No	2,316	90	315	93

Note: * Data (classification) were not collected at research site.
** Respondents were instructed to select all that apply.
*** Data were not collected by survey instrument.

Table 2 presents the demographics of the 15 participants who completed an interview before we achieved data saturation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

TABLE 2

Interview Participants

DEMOGRAPHIC		COUNT	PERCENT
Sex	Male	8	53
	Female	7	47
Age	19	6	40
	20	5	33
	21	2	13
	22	1	7
	25	1	7
Classification	Freshman	2	13
	Sophomore	5	33
	Junior	7	47
	Senior	1	7
Race/ethnicity	White	9	60
	Asian	2	13
	Hispanic	3	20
	Two or more races	1	7
Transfer	Yes	2	13
	No	13	87

DATA COLLECTION

In order to aid content validity (Anastasi, 1988), an intake questionnaire and a semi-structured interview protocol were developed by the research team and a panel of experts. The intake questionnaire contained demographic questions, along with those about the self-reported use of NACE competencies within the context of residential life (e.g., Have you submitted a work order? Have you completed a roommate agreement?). The panel of experts comprised housing and residence life professionals, career service professionals, and graduate and undergraduate students who had experience with either residence life or assessing NACE competencies. Semi-structured interviews are flexible and allowed the research team to better understand the perspective of the

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interviewee (Daymon & Holloway, 2002). The interview proceeded through each of the 12 NACE competencies, and participants were asked to reflect on engagements of their residential experience within the competency area. They were provided definitions of each NACE competency before the interview and were read the definitions during the interview. Participants were asked to provide examples of how their residential experience contributed to their understanding, knowledge, skill, or ability within the competency area (e.g., Do you believe that your experience living on campus has contributed, if any, to your development in intercultural competency?). The semi-structured interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist service. Research team members completing each interview produced field notes and kept reflexive journals (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017) of interview transcripts. Each member of the research team reread all transcripts and field notes to ensure familiarity with the data. We each generated a list of start codes on one transcript and then compared codes. Based on this step, we agreed to an initial code list and reviewed all remaining transcripts independently for coding. We discussed each transcript as a research team to aid with trustworthiness and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) as we searched for themes. After reviewing the emergent themes, we used the start codes and secondary codes to author a narrative description of each theme (Nowell et al., 2017).

Positionality

The term *positionality* describes both an individual's worldview and the position they adopt about a research project and its larger social and political context (Foote & Bartell, 2011; Rowe, 2014; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Researchers can identify and develop their positionality in three primary ways: locating themselves about the subject, locating themselves about the participants, and locating themselves about the research context and process (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Our team members were interested in the phenomenon of study because each of us has encounters with and interest in the on-campus experience being a dynamic living and learning environment. The research team comprised a current undergraduate student who serves as a peer career leader and housing professionals with backgrounds in programming and assessment. Finally, we all work at the research site and were interested in examining the phenomenon in order to inform new programming efforts for upper-division students living on campus.

FINDINGS

Findings from the thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews exploring the relationship between residential life and NACE competencies resulted in three emergent themes. Table 3 displays these three themes from participant interviews.

TABLE 3
Themes and Descriptions

THEME	DESCRIPTION
Unique context	Participants described how living on campus presented them with unique opportunities due to their new living assignment. The on-campus experience was credited by participants as exposing them to a unique opportunity for the first time and providing outcomes that they were not initially expecting (unintended outcomes). Participants detailed opportunities such as living with a roommate, living with others from various backgrounds, and holding a leadership position.
Engagement with residence life	Participants discussed two primary elements of their residential experience that connect with NACE competencies: residence life processes and student leadership roles within the community. Residence life processes such as roommate agreements, work order systems, and resident assistant interview processes were highlighted. Student leadership roles within the community were revealed as contributors to NACE competency development, like RA and Community Council positions.
Utilization and growth	Participants differentiated between growing and utilizing a NACE skill within the residential life context. Growing in a skill was synonymous with skill development or being taught a skill. Participants also mentioned their utilization (the ability to practice skills with which they were already comfortable) within the residential setting.

Unique Context

The first emergent theme found to connect NACE competencies with residential life was *unique context*. About half of the participants discussed how living on campus has provided them with unique opportunities to experience NACE competencies. The theme of unique context contains subthemes of *a time for firsts* and *unintended outcomes*. When discussing how NACE competencies were seen through residential experiences, participants used language such as “my first time” or “first opportunity to.” Similarly, they noted that the unique residential environment exposed them to experiences that were unexpected.

A time for firsts. For a majority of participants, their residential community has been a place for firsts. While reflecting on NACE competencies, such as intercultural competence, teamwork, and written communication, participants shared prevalent experiences like interacting with other members of the community or their roommates, community involvement opportunities, and living on their own. Participants utilized words such as “first experience,” “first time,” and “first opportunity” to characterize this theme. One participant (White, female, junior) shared the following:

I really had a big culture shock coming to college because for the first time, I was interacting with a lot of people from a lot of different backgrounds, from various ages . . . it's fascinating to get to see all the different worldviews and how they interact with each other. If I hadn't stayed on campus . . . I doubt that I would have as much insight now or as much of a well-roundedness of my own worldview that I have today without that.

Through the residential experience, this participant was able to engage with NACE's intercultural competence and develop her own worldview by interacting with members of her residential community.

Living in a collegiate residential community was a first for many participants, who reflected on how their current residential experience differs from their previous experiences living with parents, guardians, or siblings. Participants discussed NACE's competency of problem solving and decision making in light of facility issues. For instance, as one student (Hispanic, male, sophomore) explained, “You got to fix it yourself . . . and not being reliant on your parents anymore. Just being surrounded by all these people that are also living on their own . . . has been very beneficial.” This participant's sentiment on the necessity to problem-solve on your own and no longer having the same tools to solve a problem was also illustrated by two other participants.

Participants also highlighted their residential community as a unique context for new involvement and leadership opportunities. As shared by one student (Asian, female, junior), residential leadership council “was one of my first leadership positions . . . or involvement on campus” and the residence hall “was the first place where I actually had a chance to be in a leadership position.” In this example, she credited her residential community for affording her the first opportunity to hold a formal leadership role. These leadership roles were unique and unlike other recognized student leadership positions. Seven other participants acknowledged that their residential community was their first form of involvement or their first experience with the NACE competency of leadership on campus.

Unintended outcomes. Thematic analysis revealed another subtheme of *unintended outcomes* within the theme of unique context. We understand this subtheme to mean a residential experience that the participant was not expecting as a result of their

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As our participants recommend, explicit articulations of why a process exists and its contribution to student learning on each form or process could aid in student development of NACE competencies.

on-campus life. Participants utilized words such as “not expecting,” “unintentional,” and “as a result of living on campus.” While reflecting on the NACE competency of problem solving and decision making around a facilities emergency, one student (White, female, freshman) pointed out, “I think it gave us the opportunity to grow . . . it was very unintentional, but I think I definitely learned more being at [college] because you are on your own.” This student saw a facility emergency as an empowering moment within her collegiate experience. Holding a leadership role has also provided participants with unexpected opportunities to interact with NACE competencies. While reflecting on problem solving and decision making, another student (Asian, female, junior) commented on her experience as a residence assistant (RA). “I credit a lot of growth to the RA role because it’s problem solving and decision making in a different way, in a way I never thought I would make, like emergency situations.” By serving as an RA, the participant was able to engage with the NACE competencies of leadership and problem solving and decision making in a way that she was not initially expecting.

Engagement with Residence Life

Another theme reflecting how participant experiences have mapped with NACE competencies was *engagement with residence life*, which comprises residence life-facilitated processes (i.e., roommate agreements, facilities work requests, interactions with residence life staff) and student leadership positions within residence life. Table 4 (see page 42) presents results from the intake survey showing that participants connected NACE competencies to residence life-facilitated processes, opportunities, and staffing.

Residence life-facilitated processes. The subtheme of *residence life-facilitated processes* can be defined as a resident’s engagement with departmentally determined, standard business processes such as a roommate agreement, room change, student leader application, interaction with a residence life staff member, or a work order involving a NACE competency. As depicted in Table 4, more than half of the participants have had experiences with submitting a work order or communicating with a residence life staff member, and every interview participant who self-identified as participating in a residence life-facilitated process credited the process with utilizing at least one of the 12 NACE competencies.

Five participants spoke about how the roommate agreement process of the residence life department resulted in growth in various NACE competencies. When asked about roommate disagreements, one student (White, female, junior) noted, “The roommate contract really made me think about my written communication . . . am I communicating my expectations clearly?” In this example, the participant was asked to complete a form designed by residence life professionals—a roommate agreement—with a specific process in mind, which utilized the NACE competency of written communication.

TABLE 4

Self-Reported Use of Competencies During Residence Life Engagement

NACE COMPETENCY													
Residence life engagement event	Intercultural competency	Career management	Teamwork	Problem solving and decision making	Workflow planning	Oral communication	Critical thinking	Digital technology	Written communication	Influencing	Leadership	Professionalism and work ethic	Unsure
Experienced a roommate conflict or roommate mediation process	1	0	2	3	0	3	1	0	2	2	1	1	0
Submitted a work order	0	1	1	3	1	3	1	1	6	0	0	1	0
Attended a faculty-in-residence (FIR)-led program	4	1	1	0	1	4	2	0	0	1	2	3	2
Had a conversation with a member of the residential community with whom you do not agree	5	0	1	4	0	6	4	0	2	1	4	3	0
Advocated for a personal belief	2	0	3	2	0	5	1	0	1	3	3	4	1
Communicated with a university staff member regarding your residential community	1	0	4	5	1	9	3	0	4	3	5	5	0
Worked as part of a team	3	0	7	5	1	3	1	1	3	1	4	4	0
Held a formal or informal leadership role	3	1	5	4	3	5	3	1	3	3	5	3	0

The residence life processes of move-out and room changes were also connected to NACE competencies within the participants' experiences. When asked about growing in their understanding of problem solving and decision making through engagement in residence life, one student (White, female, sophomore) described what she needed to do in response to the pandemic. "Certainly moving out during the pandemic . . . figuring everything out with moving and what I needed . . . and then even moving into a new dorm room . . . and having a new roommate." By engaging with the move-out and room change process established by residence life, this student was able to translate engagement in a process into an experience relevant to NACE competencies such as problem solving and decision making and oral communication.

The student leader application process is an additional residence life-facilitated process in which participants have experienced various NACE competencies such as leadership, oral communication, and professionalism and work ethic. Three participants discussed the unique aspects of a student leadership interview with a member of their community. When prompted to elaborate, one student (White, female, junior) described the interview experience as "an opportunity to practice and grow" in her interview skills. As a result of participating in the RA interview processes coordinated by the residence life department, this student was able to put NACE skills to use in the collegiate residential environment.

Leadership role within the community. As another subtheme, *leadership within the residential community* has not only been a first for some participants as we highlighted earlier, but has also facilitated interactions for seven participants with various NACE competencies, including oral communication, teamwork, problem solving and decision making, professionalism and work ethic, intercultural competence, and leadership. Leadership roles such as Community Council and RA positions emerged as influential in experiencing a NACE competency. When comparing experiences as a resident to experiences as a student leader, participants remarked on how the leadership position facilitated interactions with NACE competencies beyond any of the experiences they had as a resident. One student (Asian, female, junior) noted, "If I look back on my time as a resident, I can't think of a specific thing that I would say has built [my intercultural competence] because I don't think I interacted with people on the same level that I do now as an RA." This participant reflected that her leadership role within the residential community has been relevant to the NACE competency of intercultural competence.

Being a member of the Community Council emerged as a leadership position cited by seven participants as contributing to their experiences with NACE competencies within the residential setting. Involvement in council afforded them the opportunity to interact with numerous NACE competencies, primarily teambuilding, leadership, and problem solving and decision making. Participants reflected on working through team problems, the challenges of event planning, and observing other leaders.

Professionals can evaluate their programming models against NACE competencies in order to ensure that residents have opportunities to develop and utilize their skills.

One student (White, male, junior) reflected on his role in the council. “When I was chief of staff, I really got to improve my teamwork a lot . . . There were a few times where [Community Council] would want to put on an event but we’d need the RA’s help.” This example shows that a leadership position within the residential community allowed this participant to utilize teamwork skills to produce a result.

Another residence life leadership role discussed by participants was being an RA. Four participants remarked that the RA role provided them unique experiences relevant to NACE competencies through position responsibilities such as policy enforcement, program planning and implementation, community, and team building. Reflecting on the impact of the RA position on experiencing NACE’s teamwork competency, one student (Asian, female, junior) described the RA position as being “really what helped me understand how to work on a team . . . in other organizations I’m the lead of the team or president . . . and that is a different dynamic than the RA team.” Through this reflection, the participant identified the RA role as an opportunity to engage with NACE skills within her residential experience.

Utilization and Growth

The third and final emergent theme involved students reflecting on and differentiating between the *utilization* and *growth* of a NACE competency. This distinction was made across multiple NACE competencies (e.g., intercultural competence, problem solving and decision making) from examples connected to the residential experience. Across all 15 interviews, participants mentioned an average of six of the 12 NACE competencies connected to the residential experience.

Participants described the concept of competency utilization when discussing their collegiate residential experience, typically noting utilization in the areas of submitting work orders, working through roommate disagreements, and serving on a team, experiences to which they apply language such as “previously learned” and “knew from high school/home.” When prompted to discuss the utilization or growth of a NACE competency while reflecting on an interaction with her roommate, one student (White, female, sophomore) explained, “I think I’ve always had some good problem-solving skills just as a coping mechanism, I guess. So yeah, I think more utilized.” Another student (Hispanic, male, sophomore) remarked, “I came in with a base level . . . I would say I learned it more at home and then just brought it.” In this example, the participant has been able to use his residential life experience as a context for utilizing a NACE competency with which he already had experience. This was echoed by another student (Asian, female, senior), who has lived on campus for 4 years: “My high school that I went to, I feel like did the most in terms of teaching [critical thinking].”

The other concept discussed by participants was the growth of NACE competencies. For instance, they pointed to moments of growth afforded by the residential context where skills were developed. Growth was also described by words such as “learned,” “developed,” and “taught.” When prompted on their student leadership experience having facilitated either utilization or growth of NACE competencies, one student (White, female, junior) replied, “I definitely grew as a leader.” Growth in NACE competencies due to a residence life leadership position was echoed by another student (Asian, female, senior): “During the RA role . . . that is the role that I’ve grown the most in.” Growth in a NACE competency was additionally discussed by another student (White, male, junior), who shared, “My friends [and I] have experienced the most growth in critical thinking as a result of living on campus.” By living in a residential facility and interacting with others, this participant was able to grow or develop in the competency of critical thinking because of reflection on his own values. Growth was more than just utilization; development was likely achieved within a NACE competency.

DISCUSSION

The residential context is unique in the realm of student learning and development (Blimling et al., 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Schroeder et al., 1994), as are the experiences related to NACE-identified competencies (Peck & Callahan, 2019). Participants in our study described the unique context of the residential environment as having provided opportunities for first-time experiences and unintended outcomes. While an individual’s efforts may not always have been intentional, the residential environment was perceived of as offering a living environment with opportunities for the learning and development of NACE competencies.

The influence of formal leadership positions also became clear in contributing to our understanding of the three emergent themes. As part of our thematic analysis, we decided to embed the participants’ leadership experiences within each of the three emergent themes because each leadership example was inextricably tied to its theme’s characteristics; separating it would have diminished our ability to explain the rich, thick descriptions as related to the NACE competency phenomenon under investigation. This concept of leadership being embedded in learning as an experience is not new. Previously, Ammann (2018) discussed how the leadership experiences of different individuals can constitute potential starting points for learning processes. We noticed that the leadership roles of our participants have led to their lived experiences of the NACE competencies within collegiate residential life.

Our findings also highlight that institutional policies and practices should be student-centered and developmental in nature. Given the multiple demands made of a residence life office such as business, administration, and policy enforcement, some offices have chosen to prioritize a business approach. While practices such as roommate agreements, student leader interviews, and work orders may be formed with

developmental intent, they may shift focus toward achieving a business end or departmental goal (Blimling, 2015). It is important for housing and residence life departments to revisit their goals with an eye toward aligning their business practices with their philosophical approach. As our participants recommend, explicit articulations of why a process exists and its contribution to student learning on each form or process could aid in student development of NACE competencies.

There is a difference between utilization of a skill and development of a skill, according to our participants, and this is an important distinction within the residential experience. The higher education literature emphasizes skill utilization within contexts like student employment (Anderson et al., 2018) and internships abroad (Feldman & Bolino, 2000). The distinction between utilization and development (Heard et al., 2020) is especially important for higher education educators, researchers, and assessment professionals, and emphasizing the distinction in an interview protocol or within assessments can help explore where growth or development might be occurring rather than just whether or not an existing skillset is being utilized.

While not discussed in the findings, students, at times, were confused about how the NACE competencies apply to a residential life setting. Although they understood the idea of the competencies, they had a hard time understanding how they apply to their experience in a tangible way—and they often asked for clarification. When prompted about the career management competency, one student asked, “I’m still unclear of what you mean by that. Can I have an example of career management?” Students would benefit from the competency descriptors being more practical than theoretical so they can understand how the competency plays a part in their college experience.

IMPLICATIONS

Higher Education Professionals

Recent scholarship shows that a residential setting can provide purposeful spaces for student learning (Graham et al., 2018). Professionals can evaluate their programming models against NACE competencies in order to ensure that residents have opportunities to develop and utilize their skills. For example, a facilitated program on résumé building, where residents are asked to reflect on their time in residence life as a means of articulating various competency development on their résumé, would be extremely valuable. As cited in our literature review and as expressed by participants in this study, the organic interactions between peers—the virtue of living on campus—is an impactful experience for students. It is important to consider how residence life professionals are documenting learning that occurs in these organic spaces with an eye toward reflection on NACE competency development. Furthermore, housing and residence life programs can leverage business processes such as room changes, roommate conflicts, and work order submissions to also explicitly connect their usage to competency development.

Furthermore, student affairs practitioners should identify the NACE competencies that their department is equipped to help students develop. Rather than aiming to educate students on all competencies, residence life departments should choose those that they can champion within their portion of the university ecosystem. This will allow practitioners to focus on select competencies that naturally align with programming and activities that occur within their functional area. Other functional areas can champion the same or different NACE competencies to develop students holistically in the ways employers are expecting. Our research showcases how students may engage with specific NACE competencies within their residential experience. This poses a question about which other current programs or offerings overlap with various campus partners or university goals. Residence life and student housing departments should review opportunities to enhance partnerships with other functional areas of campus, such as career centers, multicultural student affairs, and academic affairs. These partnerships will allow for unique avenues of cross-departmental collaboration resulting in development for student participants.

Future Research

Our study has implications for future research and assessment efforts related to the residential life context. First, the current national benchmark, Project CEO, uses self-reported data “to determine to what extent students believe they are gaining the 12 [NACE] skills identified as most desirable by employers” (Anthology, 2020, para. 2). The assessment also inquires where in the college context the competency is developed (e.g., cocurriculum, classes, internships, etc.). This question should offer additional categorizations of the cocurricular experience: Is competency development occurring in the environments as a result of educational programming, leadership experiences, or other factors? By using a more nuanced national benchmark, NACE and housing professionals can better understand how environments and engagement opportunities impact development of the skills that employers seek.

Next, research and assessment tools should differentiate between skill growth and skill utilization. It might be interesting to form matrix questions that give students the opportunity to report their skill utilization and skill development. For instance, “How often do you *use* intercultural competency within the residential environment?” could be situated next to “To what extent have you *developed* intercultural competency within the residential environment?” Researchers and assessment administrators can then utilize a weighted mean score calculator to explore gaps and to identify possible sources for skill utilization and skill development.

Rather than aiming to educate students on all competencies, residence life departments should choose those that they can champion within their portion of the university ecosystem. This will allow practitioners to focus on select competencies that naturally align with programming and activities that occur within their functional area.

LIMITATIONS

While we believe our research to be sound, we note three limitations. First, some of the competencies were described by NACE in a way that participants struggled to understand. This disconnect may have impacted our ability to fully capture their lived experiences related to the phenomenon of interest. As we recommend, to aid with clarity, future iterations of NACE competencies should involve college students in their description development and updates. Second, this qualitative study focused on all 12 NACE competencies as of 2020. While the intake survey indicated that, across all participant experiences, each competency was connected to at least one participant, the residential life context may favor only a handful of the competencies. For instance, our participants seemed to connect better with the competencies of leadership, intercultural competency, and problem solving and decision making in their residential experiences. This is juxtaposed with the least connected NACE competencies: digital technology and career management. Finally, our phenomenological study was about the lived experiences of college students and the NACE competencies within the residential setting. Data collection occurred in spring 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. We did not limit our study to the development of the skills, but rather exposures and experiences connected to them, which may have been impacted by the pandemic. Future research might narrow inquiry to the development of NACE competencies within the residential setting.

CONCLUSION

Participants in our study felt that NACE competencies were experienced through three main themes: unique context, engagement with residence life, and utilization and growth. The residential experience shows that overlap exists between students' on-campus experience and their lived experiences with NACE competencies. Our research is unique as it looks at NACE competencies from a contextual lens—the residential experience—compared to a position or a specific program. This research is important for scholars and housing professionals alike because it advances knowledge in both career readiness and its intersection with the residential experience. This research should further inform practices around how to integrate NACE competencies into the residential experience by, for example, encouraging reflection throughout the residential experience and documenting organic learning. Future research is recommended to explore the creation of assessment tools that will allow student affairs professionals to more accurately assess competency development. ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. This article highlights use of the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) competencies to examine the residential life experiences of students. How might these competencies be used at your campus as a means to explore student housing experiences and outcomes? What competencies are most important for your residential life curriculum?
2. The authors define unique context as distinctive experiences associated with living on campus. What unique context experiences exist in your residential program that align with specific developmental outcomes and/or NACE competencies?
3. Residence life-facilitated processes (e.g., work order submission, roommate agreement completion, room change request, etc.) can often seem transactional. Here, the authors note the skill and knowledge development of students who engage in these experiences. At your campus, what student housing business processes might be used as transformational opportunities?
4. Transitioning from competency utilization to growth is a worthy student outcome discussed in this article. What interventions can you provide to assist residential students as they navigate the journey from action to development?
5. The authors of this article discuss the impact of leadership in the learning process. What types of diverse leadership opportunities should your residential living curriculum offer to enhance student learning?

*Discussion questions developed by Christopher Heasley, Saint Joseph's University
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