

11-4-2015

Living with Students: Lessons Learned While Pursuing Tenure, Administration, and Raising a Family

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Abstract

This case study is centered on two faculty-in-residence: one pursuing tenure and raising a young child while living in the residence halls and one an established professor and associate dean raising two teens while living in the residence halls. This case study offers two unique perspectives of faculty-in-residence at various stages in their career, living in residence with their students, working closely with students outside of a typical classroom, all while managing professional and familial obligations.

Keywords: living-learning communities, faculty-in-residence, residential life

1. Introduction

This study delves into two different depictions from different faculty-in-residence (FIR) from the time period 2008-2012. Each of the subjects had differing levels of experience in higher education, came from different disciplines and held different roles within the university; one a second year tenure-track faculty who began living in the residence halls with his students in the Fall of 2008 and one an established professor working as an associate dean who began living in the residence halls with her students in the Fall of 2010.

As the competition to recruit students has increased, universities strive to demonstrate the increased success of their students. These efforts include increased student support systems, faculty development and creating environments, which maximize student success. One particular strategy universities have found effective is the implementation of living-learning programs. Living-learning programs combine classroom activities with “out of class” activities and also combine the academic components into the entire university experience [1]. The unique environment (e.g. faculty living with students) that living-learning programs provide to its participants has been found to increase student-faculty interactions, student learning, student retention, and faculty development [8, 11, 12, 14]. This environment is found to be more effective in smaller residential living-learning programs than in larger programs and conventional residence halls [5, 9]. The environment is not the only factor that plays a part in creating an enriched living-learning program. Commonly there is a perceived separateness of roles faculty and student affairs professionals serve in the student learning experience [7]. The faculty participating in these programs need to create the conditions necessary to present these increased outcomes (e.g. increased student learning and increased student retention)[10]. This task of creating an enriched environment is not easily accomplished.

This case study seeks to demonstrate the challenges posed to faculty participating in living-learning programs and methods in which these challenges can be overcome to facilitate a more effective experience not only for the faculty, but for the students as well.

2. Case History

2.1 Faculty Members

Michael. Michael began his career in higher education in 2007, when he was hired as an “all but dissertation” (ABD) tenure-track faculty-member for the College of Education. In the spring of 2008, he successfully defended his dissertation and began his time as a FIR the following summer for the Arts and Humanities Residential College. He and his family--an 11-month-old daughter, wife and senior Labrador--moved into the residence halls, during the summer before Fall term. The impetus for this move came from a desire to instruct freshman and sophomore students in a content-based course and a desire to expand his knowledge of the university as whole. Ten years prior to his pursuit of higher education, Michael had been a secondary English teacher and K-12 special education teacher. His experience with instructing college students was minimal, being his second year teaching at the university. Michael had only lived in the residence halls from 1992-1993 while attaining his BA in English.

Janet. The academic career for the Engineering Residential College FIR began in 1979. She lived in undergraduate residence halls for her entire undergraduate degree program until earning her BS in chemical engineering. Shortly after receiving her degree, she returned to the residence halls, and began a doctoral program of study while her partner helped provide for her family as “Head Resident.” Their son, Daniel was born a year later. Daniel was practically the mascot of the undergraduate residence hall, known by name to everyone. He rode his tricycle down the elevator to the cafeteria, docked it; got his tray and silverware and smiled and waved to everyone as they called out his name, or gave him a high five.

Twenty-five years later, she wonders if a return to residential life was inevitable, to make it an even decade of living life from the stage of a residence hall. When her dean invited her to become the engineering college’s next FIR, her family, consisting of her daughter, her youngest son, their dog Lucy had a serious consultation. They visited the two-bedroom apartment, walked the halls and imagined what life would be like. Her daughter, Laura, about to start university herself, pronounced it a great idea, and didn’t mind the thought of not having her own bedroom when home for the holidays. The thirteen-year old son, Ben, approved as well. They rented a storage unit, put their four-bedroom 2,800 square foot home on the rental market, and moved into the residence halls in the early summer of 2010.

2.2 Impacts on Professional Life

Michael. During his four-year term as a FIR, Michael was receiving conflicting messages from senior faculty on the “value” placed on his service as a live-in faculty member. Some of his colleagues placed little value on this experience, “You should focus on developing your research,” or, “If you are the manager at an apartment complex, you shouldn’t put that on your vita.” While other colleagues seemed to place a great value on the experience, “This sounds like an excellent experience to work with students,” or, “A student approached me today and said you were the best teacher they ever had.” These differing opinions were very confusing for Michael his first year as a FIR and he worried about the possible impacts on his tenure decision.

During the beginning of the second year as a FIR (2009), Michael observed his department receive several financial cuts. These cuts impacted class sizes and course offerings throughout his teaching load. During this same year, he also witnessed changes in spending within the housing department and discussed what was happening in other departments during monthly FIR meetings. Because of this crisis and the multidisciplinary nature of the FIR program, Michael began to have a better understanding of how the “university” worked as a whole-unit. This deeper understanding of how the university operates outside of one’s own department increased his understanding of the possible impacts of university-wide policies and procedures. Michael felt this was especially important, due to the small size, but large number of students served by his department.

It was also during Michael’s second year that he was very focused on establishing his research agenda. Michael felt that because of being hired ABD, he was a year behind in his research pursuits. At times, Michael felt like he had to succeed in a “publish or perish” model. In order to ensure proper progress towards tenure, Michael adopted similar hours as his students when working on manuscripts. Michael reported that he had received adequate progress from the promotion and tenure committee at the college level his third and fifth year.

Prior to Michael's career in higher education, he worked as a special education teacher. In his terms, special education is the same as individualized instruction. During his time in higher education, he witnessed a much higher level of didactic instruction from his mentors and his peers. Students would be encouraged to attend class, absorb the content and to regurgitate adequately correct responses. This is not the model he wanted to adopt during his experience as a FIR. He approached the instructional practices of individualized education with his community residents. This formed a stronger basis of community development by switching the instruction from teacher-focused to student-focused. This student-focused instructional strategy became the foundation of a stronger sense of community among the students.

This student focused teaching strategy was achieved by utilizing students who wished to return to the community for a second year. These second year community members/students adopted a mentorship role in the class and the community for students who were in their first-year at the university. The most appropriate method to accomplish this was to structure the mentorship activities for the second year students around the learning outcomes Michael establish for the residential college. Michael designed the learning outcomes for the community and worked with the second year students to develop activities and tasks to be conducted with the residential college's new members. Michael made sure these activities and tasks were properly aligned with the learning outcomes for the residential college. This strategy observably increased the motivational levels of the students/community members. Michael still implements this practice in his traditional courses by offering multiple assignments and soliciting student feedback on the course schedule.

Janet. Like any large enterprise, universities are organized into domains. Since the domains are different, they are mostly non-overlapping. Consequently, it is unsurprising that faculty members are generally unaware of the services provided to students by the divisions that fall outside their respective domains. They are relatively unaware of the personnel behind these services, and for faculty in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) disciplines, there is little comprehension of the fact that student support personnel have training on how to help students as they transition into independent living.

Realizing what the Engineering Residential College (ERC) FIR didn't know about the rest of the university was a humbling experience for Janet. Even with her relatively rich background in residential life, vicariously experiencing "Head Residency" and personally experiencing all the programming and activities associated with living as an undergraduate, Janet had little knowledge of all the human enterprise that keeps residential life running smoothly. She had even less knowledge of the extensive training university-housing professionals have in enabling leadership, in modeling behavior, and in team building. Living as a FIR taught her more about how a university operates and about student success than more than 20 years of experience in academics.

In her second year as a live-in faculty (2011), Janet decided to retake Calculus I. This was partially inspired by the book: *My Freshman Year* [13], loaned to her by the Assistant Director for Residence Education; but was also motivated by a desire to enhance her mathematics tutoring skills because she was regularly asked math questions in the residence hall. That fall, early in the morning, three days a week, she walked the short distance from the centrally located residence hall, up three flights of stairs to a classroom in the Interactive Learning Center. She sat in the back row, as had always been her habit, and kept "under cover" as faculty member and associate dean for most of the semester. However, she did not adapt the same behavior she exhibited in her own undergraduate days, when she seldom spoke to anyone in the class. This time, after realizing that if she didn't help break the ice in the room, the students would go all semester without talking with one another, she actively engaged the students in the back rows. Janet reported after working with her community members who frequently asked questions about mathematics courses, in pursuit of her own learning, she now had adopted the "just ask someone" model she had employed in her graduate studies. Over the course of the semester, while taking this mathematics course, she engaged in self-reflection and came to the conclusion that the skill of asking for assistance is not a skill that comes naturally to many students majoring in the STEM field.

The experience of taking this class from her mathematics colleague affected her as profoundly as living with students in the residence hall did. Being a student again made her a vastly improved and much more insightful teacher. The experience went beyond affecting her alone, to also affecting the mathematics instructor. Midway through the semester, realizing that her perspective on what the teacher could do in the classroom was undergoing a transformation, she took the time to record her observations in a reflection. Then, she asked her math professor, her colleague, to do the same. These two sets of reflections contain a story of a profound change in the way these professors now perceive

the classroom; this is reported in detail elsewhere [4]. The math professor reported: “The biggest single item from her observations that I plan to add to my teaching practices is to be more deliberate about instructing students in successful habits, specifically, the formation of collaborative groups and an understanding of the value of homework. I’ve always known I should say more about these things, but semester after semester I end up not saying much. This needs to change.” [4] Janet reported that attending this mathematics course as a student helped her realize that she was developing a community within the course with the students as well as with her residents.

Communities of practice (COP) are groups of people (community), who share a concern or a passion for something they do (domain), and learn how to do it better (practice) [15]. What Janet learned and what transformed her teaching practice, is the simple notion that the more our classrooms move toward becoming communities of practice, the better our students will be retained, the more they will learn, and the better they will retain their passion for their field. Learning about COPs was first modeled to her through the FIR COP that was formed under the leadership of the Assistant Director for Residence Education, demonstrated again with the Living Learning Communities COP, and then finally in the classroom environment, a connection was made in this FIR’s mind – “we can do this here.” That is, we can do this practice [establishing COPs] in the academic environment, a practice that residential life has been doing for years – create community; but this time, in the classroom. While working as a FIR Janet reported under the leadership of the Assistant Director, she was able to develop “micro” COPs with the residents of her ERC, classmates and students.

2.3 Impacts on Personal Life

Michael. Michael informed the researchers that the time spent living in the residence halls with a young family had its advantages and disadvantages. Michael reported that his experience as a FIR would not have been possible, if it were not for the willingness of Michael’s spouse to pursue this venture as well. The prospect of having a child celebrating their first through fourth birthday celebrations in a “dorm” room setting would not have appealed to many mothers. The first question asked by his spouse when being presented with the program was, “Do we have to shower down the hall?” Luckily, this was not the case.

The amount of work required to establish tenure did not require much more time-management skills, but required a compartmentalizing of job tasks. When his schedule was filled with “scholarship” he would have to give up possible distractions (e.g. responding to email, grading assignments) from completing his research tasks. This applied to all aspects of his life at the university. It may seem comical, but family was scheduled much in the same fashion. He had to ask for assistance several times from his spouse, to make sure that he did not persevere on “work issues” when he was spending time with his family. This practice seemed to be successful after his successful appointment as a tenured faculty and the active role he plays with his wife and daughter.

Being new to a community, university and career path can individually impact the quality of life experienced by most people. Having all three factors occur simultaneously has a marked impact on the quality of life experienced by individuals, let alone new families. Humorously, living in the residence halls alleviated much of the typical barriers experienced by transitioning professionals. Since there was such a high focus on developing a sense of community among the students and in their classroom instruction, this extended to the other members of Michael’s family. His daughter began calling the students in the community, “Kids,” and the children at her daycare facility, “Friends.” Michael’s spouse reported enjoying talking to students knowing all of the community members’ names each year. Several of these relationships formed within the residence halls have persisted after the students’ graduations. They have attended several of their former community members’ family events, weddings, sibling performances, etc.

Janet. Janet experienced many impacts on her personal life. She reported the two most prominent were an increased physical activity level and an increase in the time she spent outdoors. The apartment, although beautifully appointed and with a view of the river, was small and she began really spending significant time out of doors with her dog, hiking, biking and skiing. Janet reported that this helped replace her need to garden, which was simply not possible living in a third-floor apartment facing North and the increased activity level significantly improved her fitness and overall sense of well-being.

3. Discussion

Michael. As a junior faculty-member, elevating teaching evaluations and maintaining a high level of research productivity are crucial for attaining tenure. This is not an easy task and can be compounded when adding a higher teaching load and a service obligation as well. There is a substantial buy-out (20%) for being a FIR and since the initial confusion as to how this adjustment in workload was perceived by various colleagues; Michael did not take part of this workload adjustment. He continued to teach his typical workload and focus on his research.

As a junior faculty-member living with their students, Michael felt it was important to be readily accessible. He scheduled appointments with every one of his community members and the community's respective program assistant. This was to establish an individual relationship with all the students and to have this reciprocated by all the community members. Having to fit everything into everyone's schedules, however, is an impossible task. To combat this, community members were recommended to provide times in which they did not want to be disturbed. This was a critical component of people having the ability to be together as a community and still have time for himself or herself as an individual. With some residents, or during certain periods of the academic year (e.g. the week before finals), persons could become reclusive. One strategy adopted to combat this was to schedule end-of-the-year venture trips. These trips would challenge community members in various new experiences (white-water canoeing, rock climbing, etc.) and have several learning outcomes implemented during the trip. This allowed community-members to interact outside of the typical residence halls framework. A majority of community participants deemed these trips to be the most powerful experience throughout the year.

Janet. As an associate dean, part of her job is to improve student retention; so being a FIR fit in very well with her job description and with her research agenda. As described earlier, it has helped her see how social learning theory can be used to help engineers keep their motivation, learn and achieve eventual graduation. The engineering education community for at least a decade has begun to apply social learning theory in various situations [3]. Janet is the Principle Investigator for a National Science Foundation grant which has the specific aims of increasing first-time, full-time retention of STEM majors, with the goal of increasing the numbers of students who attain these degrees, so as to help meet the nation's workforce needs. What she learned as FIR has helped leverage her efforts in this regard.

Janet found living in the residential community to at times make her feel as though she had an infinite amount of unfinished work, as at the end of the day there was the remaining "work" of spending time with the residents. This was not an imperative, but rather a self-generated feeling of responsibility. She didn't actually do this at the end of each day; rather it was a feeling of "maybe I should go and see who is out in the lounge, or prop my door open for a while to see if anyone would like to see me." The presence of the Program Assistant – a student who supported her as FIR, who reported to the Assistant Director, and who was responsible for touching in weekly with each resident, immensely helped with this feeling of unfinished work. Sometimes she wondered, "Am I doing a good job of being FIR?" and would then answer her own question: "Of course you are. You are living with 18 undergraduate freshmen engineering and computer science students!"

4. Conclusions

As might be expected, two different perspectives of benefits and gains expressed by these FIRs vary greatly, one being a tenure-track faculty in the beginning of his career and another being an established scholar playing an administration role within a college. Each of the participants faced challenges with the demands of participating in a living-learning program (e.g. lack of privacy, smaller accommodations). Although these demands differ due to factors such as: seeking tenure, familial obligations, living arrangements and administrative duties. Both subjects reported the experience as positive.

Each subject presented in this case study found the experience to be rewarding on a professional level. The overall benefits of participating in a live-in program outweighed any of the challenges they faced. Both subjects reported that this experience affected their professional practices in a positive fashion. They experienced gains in their teaching, an increased understanding of how the university operates as a whole, an increased awareness of needs of their students, and a greater understanding of university resources available to all students. These personal gains reinforce the living-learning program goals as well, which, focus on increased student learning and retention. Albeit, neither Michael nor Janet feel they are responsible for any one students' success at the university. Their active pursuit of participating in

a successful live-in program contributed to the success of many of their residents. Michael successfully received tenure and promotion to Associate Professor his last year of residency. Janet returned to her duties as Associate Dean for the College of Engineering and is continuing her research pursuits on student success and retention.

It is our hope this case offers some insight to the possible gains when adopting this unique experience with higher-education learners and instructors. If you are a graduate of any university, think back to your favorite professors and ask your younger self, “I wonder what they would be like as a neighbor?”

Acknowledgements

[Edited for the review process]

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