

Wouldn't it be nice if during your freshman year at college

you could live in a residence hall with people who you had a lot in common with who shared your hobbies and interests, or who were even in the same major?

By Val Prevish, Enquirer contributor

Well, actually, you can.

Residence communities, which go by names such as Living/Learning Communities (LLCs) or affinity housing, group students together by any number of metrics, such as interests, accomplishments or major, and then offer programs geared specifically for those like-minded individuals.

Victoria Suttmiller, associate director of university housing at NKU, says that there is definitely evidence that LLCs contribute to student retention.

"Students persist more when they're in an LLC. Their GPAs are even higher, and they are more engaged with the institution," she says.

NKU began offering LLCs about five years ago, says Suttmiller, and currently offers roughly a half dozen options from fraternity and sorority housing to intercultural living and LLCs devoted to study disciplines such as STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) and the health professions.

At Miami University, which began offering LLCs in the early 1980s, students can choose from two dozen options that include everything from hobbies, such as outdoor activities, to causes like social justice and areas of study, such as engineering.

Tresa Barlage, associate director in the Office of Residence Life, says students living on campus are required to choose an LLC because of the evidence it improves their success.

"Students who are involved in LLCs have greater retention rates and graduation rates," she says. "They are one of many facets of improving retention, but they have a strong impact."

Grouping students with similar passions makes sense for many reasons, she notes.

"Students with shared interests or talents understand each other," says Barlage. "For instance, in the honors community, I've heard students say 'people don't look at me weird because

I'm studying on a Friday night. They get that.'"

At Miami, as at many other colleges, the LLCs are led by residence hall staff, such as a residence assistant (RA). They work with the residents of the LLC to determine what type of activities the group would like to take part in, and then organize programs around those ideas. There is no requirement for the number of

activities. Those particulars are left to the discretion of the students in the LLC and the RA.

Thembi Carr, academic initiative coordinator at the University of Cincinnati, says themed communities at UC are called affinity housing and are organized to accompany the university's areas of study, but are not limited to just residents. In many cases, she says, any student

may join in.

"We have speakers, field trips, social outings, just about anything. A lot of activities appeal to more than just the residents in that community. For example, one group took a field trip on the Metro bus system to learn how to use that form of transportation," she says.

"If you can think of it, we can do it." ■

'It felt like a real community'

Erin Edwards of Florence, Kentucky, a senior at Northern Kentucky University, says after moving into a residence hall floor last year that was dedicated to her sorority, Phi Sigma Sigma, she felt more confident in her studies and enjoyed a new connection to campus that she didn't have as a commuter student her first two years.

"I studied with my sorority sisters, which was really beneficial," she says. "I could see my grades improving."

She also says there was a strong comfort level in living with others she felt a close connection to.

"I knew everyone, so we walked in and out of each other's rooms. It felt like a real community."

That sense of belonging is one of the reasons Living/Learning Communities, LLCs, have become popular on campuses across the country. Students who are happy with their living situations and feel connected to the school tend to stay and complete their degrees rather than dropping out, educators say.



Erin Edwards

Val Prevish