

# A Case for Change: Living-Learning Communities at York University

---

January 2015

**Authors:**

Andrea Campea - Coordinator, Residence Life

Ashley Grenville-Finnigan - Coordinator, Residence Life

Dimple Savla - Coordinator, Residence Life

**Contributors:**

Amy L Gaukel - Assistant Dean, Students, Lassonde School of Engineering

Daryl Nauman - Assistant Director, Residence Life

Catherine Salole - Director, Student Community Leadership Development

## Table of Contents

Authors: .....	2
Contributors: .....	2
Executive Summary .....	4
Introduction.....	5
Theoretical Underpinnings .....	6
Putting Theory Into Practice.....	7
Living Learning Communities as a Source of Student Engagement.....	8
Best Practices.....	9
Current State .....	12
Overview of Current LLCs .....	12
Academic Connection .....	13
Application/Placement Process .....	14
Assessment & Data .....	14
Internal Surveys .....	15
EBI Resident Assessment, Winter 2014 .....	16
Summary.....	16
Case for Change .....	17
Recommendations.....	17
Other Considerations.....	19
Consultation .....	20
References .....	21
Appendices .....	23
Appendix A: Themed House Living-Learning Communities Memorandum of Understanding 2012-2013 .....	23
Appendix B – LLC Models for York Recommendation .....	27

## Executive Summary

Living-learning communities (LLCs) are not a new initiative to York University faculty and staff. Since 2010, it has been a growing program encompassing the efforts of Housing, Residence Life, Council of Masters, members of faculty, and the Registrar's Office. A pilot project was introduced in Bethune Residence in 2010-2011. Today, we are at a pivotal point where change is needed to re-align the purpose and impact of these communities to institutional goals. As is presented in this paper, LLCs are no longer just an opportunity for increased academic programming at York; they are an influential tool in student engagement, persistence, retention, and success. In the face of enrolment and retention challenges at York, LLCs provide a venue for students to create strong peer-to-student and faculty-to-student connections that can be key contributors to student learning. In addition, LLCs have a great potential to contribute to the occupancy goals and strategy as laid out within the Housing Strategy.

The authors of this report have researched the following theories as they relate to learning communities; involvement, development, peer learning, faculty involvement, collaborative learning and persistence. As with other institutional initiatives, Alf Lizzio's (2006) '5 Senses of Student Success' model resonated with our findings and recommendations. Through consultation with other universities and professional associations, we have identified best practices in planning and operating LLCs. Using this information, we examined our current practices and identified opportunities for growth and expansion. These include recommendations for change that align with the first year experience strategy.

While we have made improvements over the past several years with the current LLC program, it is imperative that we take this opportunity to advance our program and evaluate outcomes.

Through this review, we have identified two key models of LLCs that we believe are achievable and relevant to our student community: Transition-Based and Curriculum-Based LLCs (Inkelas & Weisman, 2007). The purpose of this paper is to encourage discussion about LLCs and the opportunities that exist at York.

## Introduction

The imperative is clear; developing a collaborative strategy on LLCs will afford us a strategic opportunity to deliver a quality academic experience, support first year transition, and promote a culture of academic success in residence. We have been presented with an opportunity at York University to develop an evidence-based, theoretically informed, coordinated approach to Living Learning Communities (LLCs) on our campus. The Housing Steering Committee (HSC) has been working towards enhancing the residence experience since The Scion Group provided a comprehensive report in 2012. Within a context of limited resources, the HSC requested a review of the LLCs that is presented herein. This paper will support the Housing Strategy’s goal to enhance the student experience by strengthening residential programs and student development opportunities with an increasing focus on first year transition.

After conducting a thorough review of the current LLCs, and consultations of best practices at other institutions, the proposed recommendations are grounded in theoretical research and best practices within the field. The goals of these recommendations are consistent with those of the [First Year Experience Case for Change](#), [York University’s Academic Plan](#) (UAP), and the [Provostial White Paper](#). By restructuring the LLCs at York, evidence shows we can successfully:

- Improve student academic success and persistence
- Improve student connections with faculty
- Provide opportunities for students to participate in experiential education

One of the UAP’s objectives is to “enhance the first year experience by fostering students’ transition to the university and their engagement with each other and with faculty, with their studies, and with their community” (UAP, pg. 9). This aligns with the proven outcomes of LLCs as students spend time learning together outside of the classroom leading to more active involvement within a classroom setting (Lizzio, 2003, pg. 5). By supporting our research in Alf Lizzio’s (2006) work on student transition, and relating it effectively to the institution’s goals, the potential of LLCs as a tool for progress at York is evident.

Inkelas and Weisman (2007) define 3 types of LLC programs: Transition, Academic Honours, and Curriculum-Based. In reviewing the program goals of each type, we are advocating for the two models described below for York’s undergraduate residences that would offer the best design to meet the goals of our institution.

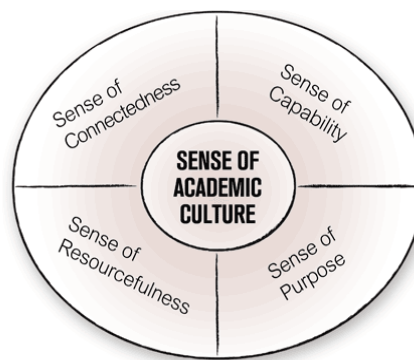
<b>LLC Model</b>	<b>Goals</b>
Transition-Based Program	To facilitate a smooth academic transition for first year students.
Curriculum-Based Program	Through a particular disciplinary focus or theme, seek to provide stimuli to broaden students' sociocultural perspectives and horizons.

Though we have modeled some LLCs at York using components of the Curriculum-Based model in the past, there remains much room for improvement. With a strong focus on student transition at York, a well-coordinated LLC program is mutually beneficial to the institution and our students.

The LLC Review Committee presents this paper in order to gain support and feedback from community members, including Faculties, faculty members, and the administration in order to begin the process of developing a strong and intentional LLC program that rivals those of other institutions.

## Theoretical Underpinnings

In the spring of 2013, the Division of Students launched their five-year strategic plan covering four main priorities including the First Year Experience. The Division embraced the theory of student transition presented by Dr. Alf Lizzio (2006), which outlines five senses that focus on student success, both in curricular and co-curricular environments (Figure 1). These “five senses of successful transition” (capability, purpose, connectedness, resourcefulness, and culture) have grounded the development of the Residence Life Curriculum, along with many other important programs across the institution. Lizzio’s (2006) model is just one of many theories that supports the development of students into, and through, post-secondary education.



**Figure 1: Lizzio's 5 Senses of Student Success**

Astin’s theory on involvement (Astin, 1984) and Lizzio & Wilson’s theory on persistence through sense of purpose (Lizzio & Wilson, 2010) both strongly correlate with the best practices of LLCs in and outside of Canada. For example, Astin’s theory of involvement focuses on five main arguments:

1. That students’ should invest physically and psychologically in their education;
2. The amount of involvement will vary between students;
3. Students’ involvement can be measured qualitatively (understanding of concepts) and quantitatively (grades);
4. Students’ gains (academically and personally) will be directly proportional to how involved they are;
5. A policy can be deemed effective if it successfully increases student involvement (Astin, 1984, pg. 519).

As stated by Stassen (2003), “The ‘involvement’ model [Astin] and the ‘student departure’ model [Tinto] provide theoretical and conceptual reasons why student learning communities should impact college students positively, and much research supports both models. The models suggest that learning communities should increase students’ development, achievement, and persistence through encouraging the integration of social and academic lives within a college or university and its programs, and through quality interaction with peers, faculty members, and the campus environment” (Stassen, 2003, pg. 582). By expanding this research into the context of residence buildings, LLCs at York provide a venue for York to enhance student experience while meeting key student-centered directives.

As we strive to engage students both academically and socially, we come to realize that the efforts are not futile; that student engagement will lead to student persistence. As Tinto (1999) states, “This is especially true during the first year of university study when student membership is so tenuous yet so critical to subsequent learning and persistence. Involvement during that year serves as the foundation upon which subsequent affiliations and engagements are built” (Tinto, 1999, pg. 4). More so, student engagement in LLCs does not just drive forward their persistence to complete education, but underpins student success, especially in the context of York’s dynamic and diverse student population, including international and first generation students. Pike (1997) continues in sharing that residence students excel in involvement, and show higher results of faculty-student interaction, satisfaction, and commitment to their institution than those who live off-campus (Pike, 1997, pg. 6). The theory is compelling; that residence students in learning communities are encouraged to integrate across subject areas, developing academic and social skills. As recommended in the Curriculum-Based model, “Students take two or more linked courses as a group and work closely with one another and with their professors. Many learning communities explore a common topic and/or common readings through the lenses of different disciplines. Some deliberately link “liberal arts” and “professional courses”; others feature service learning” (Kuh, 2008).

We must also place the role of peer learning and peer leadership as integral components of living-learning initiatives. As Kuh (2008) states, “The developmental theory literature encourages educators to design learning environments that both challenge and support students to move to higher levels of intellectual and psychological development” (Kuh, & Zhao, 2004, pg. 117). In these environments, challenge and support are intentionally combined to create learning environments that can assist students in adapting to the challenges of a new environment (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). LLCs can accomplish this by encouraging students to learn to live in communal environments with their peers, while transitioning into and through their higher education careers with the addition of supplemental instruction, group work, and related social-cultural programming. Residential learning communities, in comparison to curricular learning communities outside of residence, can be highly influential by increasing social interaction, extracurricular involvement, academic persistence and grade results, along with gains in critical thinking and comprehension skills (Blimling, 1993; Pascarella, Terenzini, & Blimling, 1994; Kuh, 2004). Involvement in purposeful social and academic activities through LLCs is a high indicator of student success.

## **Putting Theory Into Practice**

Consistently, LLCs are referenced as prime locations for co-curricular student learning. Living and learning simultaneously with their peers advances students’ academic ambition, sense of purpose, and connection to faculty through a variety of organic and intentional peer and faculty interactions and programming. In the first proposed model for Curriculum-Based LLCs, a combination of service learning, opportunities for research with faculty, and group study are potential offerings to pique student engagement in curricular learning in a more informal setting, such as residence. In the case of Transition-Based LLCs, the focus would be on first year student transition into a new curricular and co-curricular environment, affording students opportunities to engage with faculty in an academically and socially supportive environment (Inkelas and Wiseman, 2003; see Appendix B).

## Living Learning Communities as a Source of Student Engagement

LLCs have the distinct role of engaging students in curricular and co-curricular learning on an on-going basis, with the hopeful outcome of student engagement, persistence, and ownership in their own learning. Living in residence is positively correlated with higher levels of achievement, cognitive development, and persistence, and “the greatest gains in learning and intellectual development are found when residence hall environments are structured to reinforce classroom experiences” (Pike, 1997, pg. 10; Schroeder, 1994). The process of collaborative learning in the LLCs is what drives student involvement, both in and out of residence halls (Smith, 2001). Waerzynski and Jessup (2010) write that “Results suggest that being a student in a collaborative living-learning community is more likely to predict greater peer academic interactions and an enriching educational environment” (Waerzynski & Jessup-Anger, 2010, pg. 201). Lizzio (2006) would call this the development of the senses of connectedness and academic culture, where the outcome would be students’ positive perceptions of both their residence experience as a whole, as well as how residence contributes to their overall success at their institution.

As student persistence relates to student retention, the residence program strives to engage students in co-curricular learning experiences that complement their learning, personally and academically. Learning communities in residence thus, are not just coordinated programs for creating student networks. Rather, “They [learning communities] can be used to dramatically increase student retention, especially among our most vulnerable student populations” (Smith, 2001, pg. 8) such as first year students, students in high-fail rate courses, or those who are simply grappling with the challenges of living in residence away from home, all while transitioning into a new academic culture and lifestyle. Thus, LLCs provide solace to students in making this process a more manageable experience. Retention would be calculated in two ways through the residence program: return rates to residence, as well as return rates to the institution, and potentially even their program. Nosaka (2005) cites the National Study of Living Learning Programs (NSLLP) reports, which states students in LLCs were more likely than other students “to be involved in political and social activism and to be committed to service and volunteer work. They were also more likely to express a future commitment to be involved with people in social clubs and activities, student government, and political and social activism” (Nosaka, 2005, pg. 14). Developing students’ academic potential, while providing them a platform to pursue active involvement as local and global citizens proves to be just one added value of living-learning programs.

While Lizzio and Wilson (2010) identify academic achievement (GPA) to be the strongest indicator of student retention at the end of first year, they believe that a student’s *sense of purpose* makes significant contribution to their decision to stay in university (Lizzio & Wilson, 2010). Their findings indicate “that sense of purpose acts as a protective factor in activating persistence. Students with a stronger sense of purpose for being at university are more likely to persist in the face of difficulty or even failure”, influencing their academic engagement and coping techniques in times of academic difficulty (Lizzio & Wilson, 2010, pg. 1). One could argue that living within an intentional community of peers, having access to additional supports, provided in either curriculum-based or transition-based LLCs, students will develop a stronger sense of purpose and thus be more likely to persist at university. Tinto (1997) would argue that unlike other retention programs seeking to influence academic experience of students, “learning communities seek to transform the essential character of that experience and thereby address the deeper roots of student persistence” (Tinto, 1997; Cross, 1998). They serve to actively involve students in learning with other students within the classroom, and thereby promote both social and academic



involvement (Tinto, 1997, 2003; Zhao and Kuh, 2004). For students who may be struggling to transition for a number of reasons, LLCs would also introduce academic and social assistance via faculty involvement, peer study sessions, and residence staff support that will enhance student learning, as well as student motivation (Tinto, 1997).

## Best Practices

After a thorough review of the literature written by Kuh (1995; 2008), Tinto (1999; 2011), Inkelas & Weisman (2003; 2008), Lizzio (2006) and other key contributors to the topic, as well as consultation with other universities (i.e. Ryerson University, University of Toronto Scarborough, and University of Waterloo) the following are best practices that provide opportunities for success at York:

**1. Academic staff/faculty and student affairs professionals should work collaboratively in the planning and organizing of student programming in LLCs.**

Although placing programs at the intersection of academic and student affairs is rare (Inkelas et al., 2008), this type of shared-service model provides participating students with an experience that is both holistic and well supported. An example of this is Ryerson's School of Fashion that not only funds the welcome mixer for students of the Fashion LLC, but also attends and contributes to both academic and social programming throughout the year.

At York, through the UAP, one goal is to focus on "increasing the time spent by students in small group settings with full-time faculty members" (UAP, pg. 10). By engaging faculty actively in programming events for students involved in LLCs, a sense of involvement and dedication can be built that helps encourage growth of LLCs year after year.

**2. Direct interaction with members of faculty is an integral part of the learning experience in LLCs.**

Whether related directly to a course that students are taking, or simply having the opportunity to connect with a professor, students undoubtedly benefit from informal opportunities to build relationships with their professors, and make sense of the role of "the academic" outside of the classroom. One way this can be accomplished is through assigning a "Faculty in Res" or "Faculty Advisor" to an LLC. At the University of Waterloo, students in the LLCs are able to have lunch with a faculty member and participate in specialized program related to the community.

Presence of a member of faculty in an LLC may include: having an office inside residence; living-in residence; attending both academic and social events as a guest and host; running regular study groups with students in the LLCs; etc. (Inkelas et al., 2008).

As stated by Waerzynski and Jessup-Anger (2010), "The academic influence of the faculty and peers of the collaborative living-learning communities may also explain why students in the collaborative living-learning communities had greater perceptions of their environment contributing to greater educational gains such as critical thinking and analytical skills" (Waerzynski & Jessup-Anger, 2010, pg. 214).

**3. Peer learning is known to be an effective tool for student success.**

Students benefit from academic support of upper year peers in their program, or those who have a strong interest and background in that subject area. These peer advisors serve “as role models and linking agents between FIGs [first year interest group] students and faculty” and “were a key element in the FIGs program. Peer advisors also assisted faculty in teaching the FIG seminars” (see Pike, Schroeder, and Bery, in press; Pike, 1997, pg. 8). The University of Waterloo staffs the LLCs with Peer Leaders who are in the same program of study or who have participated in an LLC previously, The students are then able to learn from this peer and each other while participating in events or in supplemental instruction.

Students further benefit from peer-to-peer interaction through group work and academic discussions within the context of their LLC. Research states “being a student in a collaborative living–learning community is more likely to predict greater peer academic interactions and an enriching educational environment” (Waerzynski & Jessup-Anger, 2010, pg. 201).

Peer learning is just one tool that can be both intentionally and organically constructed into a LLC program, strongly meeting Lizzio’s sense of connectedness around building student-to-student, and student-to-staff relationships. York boasts initiatives such as YU Start and Bethune College’s SOS, which provide these academic mentorship experiences, and LLCs are another way to build upon this foundation.

**4. LLCs provide opportunities to engage faculty in student programming as key contributors and stakeholders.**

At Clemson University in South Carolina, LLCs exist in all three models described by Inkelas and Wiseman (2003). For Curricular-Based programs, LLCs are requested and applied for by Faculties through the University Housing & Dining department. Requesting faculty members must propose new LLC ideas, ideas for integration into current curriculum, as well as plans for funding and staffing. The success of the LLCs is then dependent on coordinated, well-planned, and academically supported programming.

As per Kift’s (2008) suggestion that first year experience programming should “transcends academic, administrative, and support areas’ silos” (Kift, 2008, pg. 2), LLCs have a strong potential to support and further successful student learning in residence halls with the cooperation of faculty.

**5. Central coordination of LLCs is integral to their impact, interest, and longevity.**

Traditional models of staffing LLCs are done through Student Affairs or Residence Life offices. For example, Ryerson University manages their LLCs through two different residence life professional roles: a Residence Life Facilitator, and an Academic Link Coordinator, who manage the theme-based, and academic-based LLCs respectively.

The LLCs’ staff is complemented with student-staff hired as Dons or Residence Assistants (RAs) who support the community through personal, academic and social programming. This is

true at York as well as Ryerson, where the Dons also take on additional programming for their communities related to their LLC topic.

In addition to residence staff, it is common to have a peer advisor or programmer that is outside of the Don role. At York, this position was a CLAY (College Life at York) position known as the Themed House Programmer. At Waterloo, Peer Leaders are hired who further supplement the work of the Dons by organizing academically related initiatives in which students participate. It is important that student programmers are hired and trained prior to the academic year.

Judging from the various staff and student-staff positions, it is only logical to have one central office, person, or location that each of these roles report to, thereby ensuring the most cohesion within the LLCs. At the University of Waterloo, there is a Living and Learning office within the Residence Life department. This is staffed by full time professionals who manage the Peer Leaders, liaise with Faculties and departments, and coordinate the overall program. As recommended below, a central office for LLCs, similar to the department of Residential Education at Clemson University in South Carolina, would be an effective model for a cohesive approach to LLCs at York.

## **6. Funding**

One best practice, common between Clemson University and in recommendations from the 2012 SCION Report, is to include supplemental fees for students involved in LLCs. By applying to participate in the program, students agree to contribute additional fees toward their LLC. At York, this would be an additional fee on top of the Residence Life Activity and Administration Fee (RLAAF), currently set at \$80 per student.

Programming costs for LLC are an important part of the functionality of the communities. This responsibility does not need to solely fall on one Faculty or departmental/division, as collaborative contributions are effective ways of maintaining stakeholder interest. For example, Ryerson's School of Fashion traditionally funds a number of events throughout the academic year to supplement Residence Life funding. The CLAY positions at York aimed at hiring Programmers to work with the Dons is another example of how collaborative funding contributes positively to the LLC program.

An opportunity to be explored and reviewed is third party participation and funding, specifically from donors of large programs at an institution. This may include entrepreneurs, academics, companies, or advocates of particular topics of study, and can be easily linked to programming for service learning, experiential education, or internship jobs for students involved in the LLCs. The University of Waterloo is currently piloting a co-op LLC, working with three industry partners to provide programming experiences and funding for the community.

Overall, LLCs have the potential to answer, promote, and support a key question that Tinto (1997) raises from the research of Barr and Tagg (1995). Rather than thinking about student learning with the question "How should we teach students?" Barr and Tagg argue that we should ask "How should we help students

learn?” (Barr and Tagg, 1995; Tinto, 1999, pg. 7). Through the implementation of best practices based in literature and that of competing local institutions, York University has the potential of expanding student-focused learning models that we already utilise (e.g. YU Start, experiential education, peer advising within the Colleges, Residence Curriculum) to our undergraduate residences. By including faculty and academic integration, peer learning models, with considerations of residence placement, sustainable funding, and while continuing traditional student-staff programming and support in residence environments, incoming students will have a well-rounded curricular and co-curricular learning experience that is unique to students opting to live in residence. Without a doubt, the programming offered to our residence students will not only impact their interactions with peers and faculty in their own classes, but serve as a strong model to initiate learning communities as a retention technique across faculties and programs at York.

## Current State

Within the Division of Students’ strategic plan, there is an increased focus on improving the First Year Experience. Residence Life seized the opportunity to make some strategic changes to support this divisional and institutional priority by adjusting the Residence Life Curriculum. All programs and initiatives are now grounded in Lizzio’s transitional framework. LLCs have the potential to become an important opportunity to further support and develop the first year experience in residence, specifically enhancing Lizzio’s Sense of Academic Culture through providing quality academic experiences in residence that supplement in-class learning. Currently the number of LLCs offered has been reduced during this review. We hope to rebuild this program through a theoretically-informed, evidence-based, and coordinated approach to further engage and support our incoming first year residents.

## Overview of Current LLCs

Since the introduction of Global House in Pond Road Residence in 2006, Themed House/Living & Learning Communities (LLCs) have grown at York University. What began as a small pilot project moved into a curriculum-based pilot in 2010, and finally a campus-wide initiative in 2011. With the help of the Academic Innovation Fund (AIF), the program expanded into every undergraduate residence on both the Keele and Glendon campuses, with some residences hosting two LLCs. The funding was available for two years. As indicated in the AIF proposal, each College was allotted a certain amount of funding to hire a student staff programmer and to fund activities specific to the LLC community<sup>1</sup>. However, the use of those funds varied between each LLC, dependent on whether a programmer was hired, or the number of events held. Some Colleges chose to direct additional funding to the communities to allow for more programming. Some Colleges opted to include those not living in LLCs. According to theory, LLCs are designed to expand the experience of those interested students, and it is only through

---

<sup>1</sup> Global House is funded in large part through the Pond Road Residence Life Activity and Administration Fee (RLAAF) collected by Housing Services. Global House was the first LLC, and was started as a joint project between Residence Life and York International in 2006. Upon securing the AIF funding in 2011, New College contributed funds to hire an Assistant Programmer and to develop and contribute to programming initiatives. However, this program remains largely a Residence Life initiative.

intentional, specific, and well-supported programming for those students that the true value of an LLC can be embraced.

The memorandum of understanding (Appendix A) signed by the Housing Working Group (HWG) and the Council of Masters outlines overarching goals for the LLCs, as well as related roles for all involved parties. In the past, each College (mainly the Master and their respective office) determined the LLC theme they wanted to host, and made changes depending on student feedback, participation, and/or the interests of the Master. Also, in collaboration with the respective Residence Life Coordinator (RLC), the Colleges designed how they wanted their community to run, so the student experience varied from community to community. The RLC and Master worked together to support the Don and Themed House Programmer (THPs) where applicable, to guide appropriate programming to engage and support the co-curricular nature of the LLCs. The Don was selected and placed by the building RLC based firstly on program affiliation, and then on personal interest. The THP was hired by the Master's Office in a CLAY (College Life at York) position to "allow students to acquire skills and knowledge to prepare them for the working world while providing services to fellow students through the college system" (Student Financial Services, 2014). Specifically, these student staff served as a liaison between the students and academic supports available through the College and Master's Office.

It is our view that the LLC program would benefit from a coordinated curriculum with specific learning outcomes, job descriptions, and plans to measure success, learning and student satisfaction. For the THP, the start date of this position has varied, where some Colleges were able to secure both Summer and Fall/Winter term positions and some were not, leading to inconsistent program preparation, budget considerations, and start-up programming for students. Most importantly, varied job training and expectations cause further inconsistencies between LLCs, and therefore, student experiences. Furthermore, although some communities may have designed their own set of learning outcomes, lacking a broad definition of what LLCs at York have to offer has prevented the initiative from progressing with the same support, and showed limited opportunities for student development in, and assessment of each community.

In addition, a collaborative yet centralized effort in organizing and administering the LLCs is critical for their success. Important campus partners to Residence Life include Recruitment, Admissions, Housing and participating Faculties.

### **Academic Connection**

York has focused on two main types of LLCs: academic-based and theme-based, both of which required placing students on a designated floor(s) in residence. Academic communities may have had involvement from College academic advisors, or professors/Faculties. Two included supplemental programming, and/or a link to a faculty member providing additional support by placing students in the same courses sections to ensure that they are building peer connections both in and out of the classroom. In some cases, supplemental instruction (SI) was available through the College, but as an open service to all students, rather than specialized for the LLC participants. The interest-based communities were linked with the Master's Offices, but had no additional connection to professors, Faculties, or coursework. This would be an area to explore in the future, as faculty involvement is required in each LLC to provide mentorship and

make connections with the students. There may be professors or faculty members who are interested in interacting with LLC students, and could provide a connection to the academic world outside of their area of study/expertise. This would allow for students to see faculty members as more approachable beyond their role in the classroom.

### **Application/Placement Process**

When applying for undergraduate residence, students have the opportunity to indicate a number of preferences on their application, but were also asked to indicate their interest in an LLC, and complete a supplemental application indicating their interest and goals by joining the program. These applications, reviewed by the RLC and Master, are shared with Housing Services accordingly in order to determine room placements or the need for a waiting list. Currently, there is no standard rubric used to evaluate the supplemental applications, posing challenges with regards to students' true interest, expectations, and understanding of the programming they have signed up for. In addition, there are currently gaps in communication with students once they have been accepted and placed into an LLC. There is an opportunity, therefore, to streamline communications in partnership with Housing, Admissions, Faculties, the Colleges, and Residence Life prior to students' arrival similar to the model used in YU Start.

In cases where student interest is lower than the available number of rooms on a floor, or students withdraw from residence at a late date, back-filling rooms is necessary to ensure occupancy in our residences. This leads to students being placed in the community who do not have any interest in or academic ties to the LLC. These students may not reap the benefits of the specialized programming offered, or may require more attention to be engaged in the social and community-building being organized by the student-staff (Dons and programmers). This raises questions regarding students' "best fit" in residence, and poses challenges for staff to further engage non-LLC students in a predominantly LLC-based floor. The University of Waterloo currently offers LLC clusters, where students are placed in close proximity to one another on a floor in residence. The LLC students make up approximately 24-30% of a 50 person floor, and are facilitated by a Peer Leader who does not live in residence. The case for providing clustered LLCs could not be stronger based on this best practice. Should a student withdraw from residence at a later date, their room can be easily back filled with minimal impact on the LLC or the larger residence floor community, as the Peer Leader plans LLC events for the students in the cluster and the floor Don plans events geared to the entire floor.

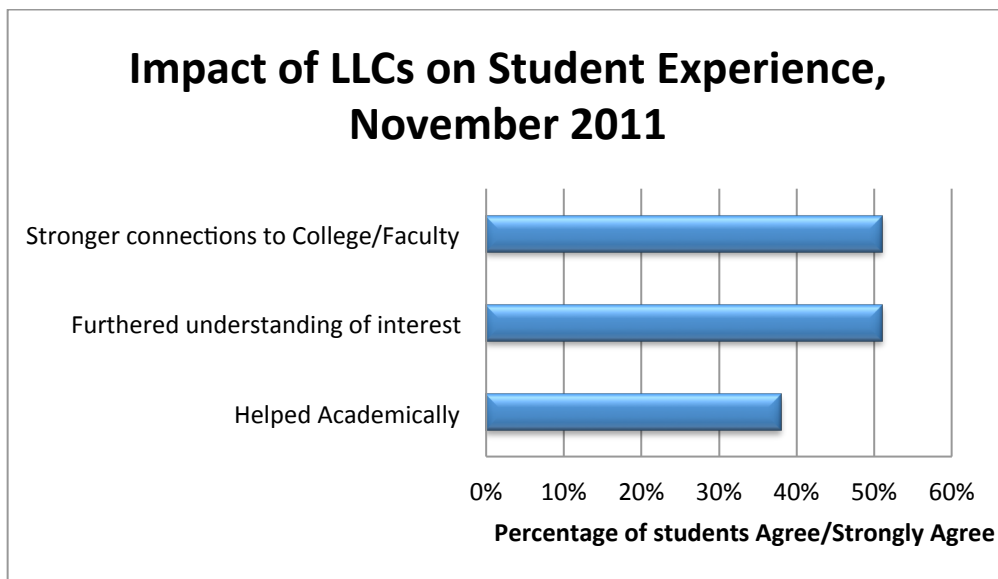
### **Assessment & Data**

Collecting data helps us to better understand our students, their needs, and how we can foster their success. Over the past few years, data has been collected through in-house surveys and EBI Benchmarking Assessments. Residence Life surveys were developed internally using best practices for assessment. EBI Benchmarking was conducted for the first time in Spring 2014, and is a survey used across North America and abroad, rooted in educational theory and research, and aligned with professional standards used by the Association of College and University Housing Officers – International (ACUHO-I) (EBI, 2014). As part of these assessments, data was collected regarding the students' choice to live in a LLC, the impact that choice had on other areas of their university life

including academics, and their feedback regarding the programming and structure of the LLC of choice. Moving forward, a comprehensive assessment plan needs to be developed based on learning outcomes and overarching goals of the LLC program to ensure relevant and informative data.

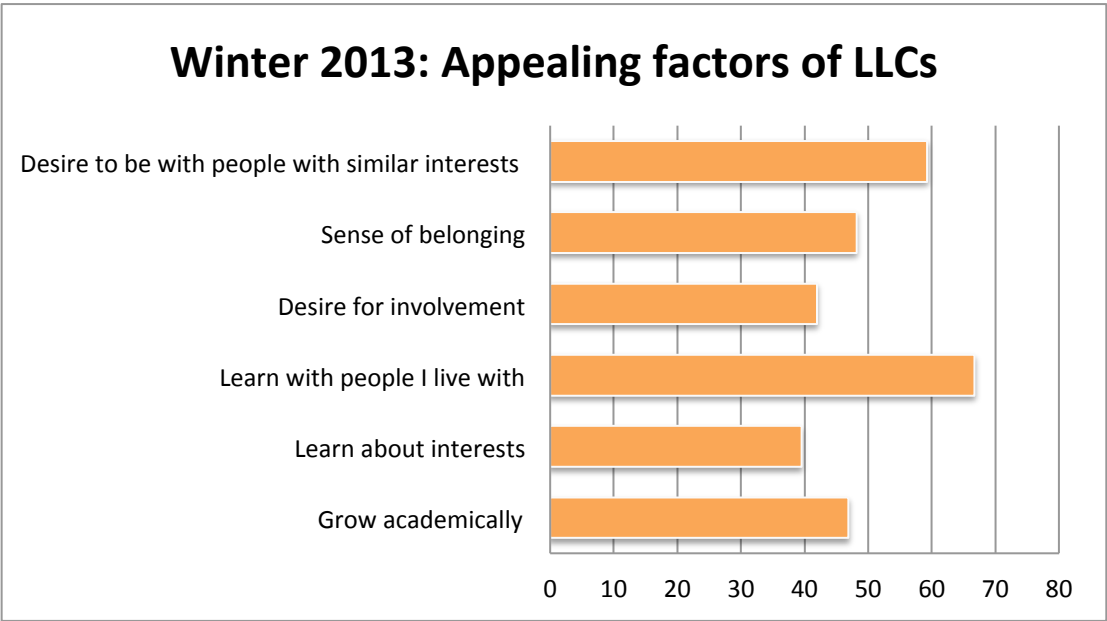
## Internal Surveys

Approximately 670 students completed a survey in November 2011, which was designed to assess the learning outcomes and domains of the Residence Curriculum. In this survey, students were asked to provide reasoning for applying to residence and various aspects of their LLC experience among other questions about the program as a whole. Only 5% of students surveyed indicated they chose residence because of the LLCs being offered and when asked to expand, many students indicated they did not know it was a choice or that none of the LLCs appealed to them at the time of application. In qualitative comments, many students were very satisfied with Global House and spoke very highly of it. The other LLCs were not as widely talked about and students provided suggestions for improvement.



**Figure 2: Impact of LLCs on the student experience.**

The Winter 2013 survey was targeted to the students living in an identified LLC at the Keele campus and had approximately 110 student responses. The survey indicated that students were not influenced by the current LLCs when deciding to attend York and live on-campus. Overwhelmingly students responded that they still would have attended York even if LLCs were not offered in residence; 73% definitely would. The same can be said about choosing to live on campus if LLCs were not offered: 67% definitely, 26% probably. Students had the expectation of living in a community with others who had similar interests and/or similar programs of study, they were expecting to have additional programming (which some indicated did not occur and they were disappointed), and were expecting to meet new people. Regarding programming, only 60% of students indicated that they were aware of programming related to their LLC theme. Our data does show that there was interest and some positive impacts of the current LLCs. However, there is room for growth in the program model and curriculum, and in assessment plans to help



**Figure 3: Reasons for applying to LLCs; factors that appeal to students**

measure not only student perceptions, but also the results that impact important student retention factors, such as connection to students, faculty, and staff, as well as overarching grade point average.

**EBI Resident Assessment, Winter 2014**

When the EBI survey was conducted in March of 2014, it covered areas such as facilities, services, programming, student staff, and the LLCs. The questions were scored on a 7-point Likert scale. Under the heading Learning: LLC Connections and Support, questions were asked regarding making connections with faculty/instructors, peer advisors/mentors, fellow students, form effective study groups, use academic resources. The mean for all questions asked was 4.03, landing in a neutral rating. When asked what they learned by living in a LLC, many students discussed living with and getting along with others, getting to know people of different cultures, participating in events with others who shared similar interests, etc. However, there were also students who were unaware that they were living in an LLC, and said that the LLC did not have an impact on their experience. Overall York was ranked 212 of 296 universities in the LLC category, making the case that there is room to grow and make improvements within our program in comparison to other competing local and regional institutions.

**Summary**

Based on the above surveys, the LLCs are having an impact on students in regards to connecting with others who have similar interests and building community around a common interest. However, we would argue that the opportunity to foster academic support networks with faculty/staff and academic advisors, and better academic performance overall has not been fully realized. A more purposeful approach would contribute to the institutional goal of achieving optimal enrolment through recruitment and retention.



## Case for Change

**“[Learning communities] change the manner in which students experience the curriculum and the way they are taught... [It] requires students to work together in some form of collaborative groups and to become active, indeed responsible, for the learning of both group and classroom peers” (Tinto, 1999).**

---

Institutional commitment to student success must be our top priority; that is “the willingness to invest the resources and provide the incentives and rewards needed to enhance student success. Without such commitment, programs for student success may begin, but rarely prosper over the long-term” (Tinto, 1999, pg. 2), LLCs can bolster the strategic programs and strategies already in place (e.g., YU Start, EE, SEM). Developing an intentional LLC model with strong academic involvement at York will positively impact the success of our residence students. In fact, LLCs could be an important piece of the puzzle that advances the FYE strategy, and impacts enrolment and retention.

An effective LLC program could contribute to the occupancy goals and strategy as laid out within the Housing Strategy. In fact, “An academically minded and culturally inclusive living atmosphere can be inferred to be vital in two important institutional goals: retention and tolerance for diversity” (Inkelas & Weisman. 2003, pg. 359). One concrete example is building a community that supports students in high risk courses. A York LLC that met some best practices and supported students in three high-risk courses was the Life Sciences House, hosted in Bethune Residence during the 2010-2011 academic year. This was an academic-based model designed to cluster students into the same tutorials of foundational courses: Math, Chemistry, and Biology. A double room was converted as a study space for LLC students, supplied with textbooks and desks, and each of the students was given key access to the space. In the first year of this program, 73% of the students in the community were in related majors. These students were highly encouraged to attend supplemental instruction offered through the college peer advising service. Of this initial group, 25% of the students returned to residence.

From this example, we can see York already has some of the experience and elements established to position us well for success.

The Village has impacted residence occupancy by offering upper-year students an alternative to returning to residence. In the Fall of 2011, Founders Residence was closed due to declining residence enrollment. It has since reopened to accommodate growing demand, primarily from the York University English Language Institute (YUELI). Related to the 10 Year Housing Strategy, it is reasonable to assume that the development of the third-party residences on campus and the future development plans of the York University Development Corporation (YUDC) will continue to impact residence occupancy. An effective LLC program provides a value added for students not found in other housing option.

## Recommendations

In order to build a theoretically informed, evidence-based, and coordinated LLC program at York we recommend the following:

1. Suspend LLCs for the 2015-2016 academic year.

2. Establish guiding vision, mission, goals, and learning outcomes for LLCs that align with University strategic priorities and the core mission.
3. House the LLC program within the Division of Students, coordinated by Residence Life.
4. Establish a governance structure and staffing model that clarifies roles, responsibilities, decision-making authority, accountability, and revenue sources.
5. Adopt the curricular-based and transition-based LLC models as a theoretical framework (see Appendix B).
6. Develop a robust assessment plan for LLCs.
7. Establish a timeline for the implementation of the revised LLCs beginning with a pilot LLC in the 2016-2017 academic year.
8. Appoint a lead from within the Division of Students to advance the above recommendations.

## **Other Considerations**

Though in this paper we are investigating the purpose and potential of learning communities in residence, the success of this initiative could guide the development of learning communities for commuter students. Tinto accurately describes the conditions of the campus by explaining: “Least we forget, most students commute to college and a majority work while in college. For them and for many others, the classroom is often the only place where they meet other students and the faculty. If involvement does not occur in those smaller places of engagement, it is unlikely it will easily occur elsewhere” (Tinto, 1999, pg. 4).

While the focus of the Housing Strategy is the first year student population, there is something to be said of the upper year students who year after year choose to call residence home. These students have demonstrated their value; the ability to greatly influence the first year students by role modeling appropriate behavior and good study habits, providing guidance regarding transitioning to university and residence life, and adding a level of maturity within residences. Therefore an opportunity exists to explore upper year LLCs to continue to engage this population.

## Consultation

Through this process we have developed a keen interest in sharing our research and recommendations with key stakeholders, as listed below. These consultations are an integral part of the success of the LLC initiative at York. Through consultations with the following members of the York community, we hope that the LLCs will gain buy-in and drive enthusiasm for effective student programming. The following groups and individuals will be part of the consultation:

- Vice-Provost Students, Janet Morrison
- Council of Masters
- Housing Steering Committee
- Vice-President Academic & Provost, Rhonda Lenton
- FYE Working Group
- Residence Student Advisory Group
- Involved Faculties/Departments (Music, Psychology, Life Sciences, York International, Residence Life, etc.)
- Student-Staff
- Students

## References

- A Case for Change: A First Year Experience Framework at York University. Retrieved July 15, 2014 from York University Website: [http://www.yorku.ca/vpstdnts/initiatives/firstyearexperience/files/FYECASEforChange\\_FINALNov4.pdf](http://www.yorku.ca/vpstdnts/initiatives/firstyearexperience/files/FYECASEforChange_FINALNov4.pdf)
- A Case for Change: Experiential Education Integration at York University. Retrieved October 15, 2014 from York University Website: <http://avptl.info.yorku.ca/files/2013/10/2013-10-30-EE-A-Case-for-Change-DRAFT-FOR-CONSULTATIONS.pdf>
- Barr, R, and J. Tagg (1995), "From teaching to learning: A new paradigm for Undergraduate Education." *Change*, November--December, 13-25.
- Carini, R. M., Kuh, G. D., & Klein, S. P. (2006). Student engagement and student learning: Testing the linkages\*. *Research in Higher Education*, 47(1), 1-32.
- EBI MAP-Works (2014). Retrieved from <http://www.webebi.com/>.
- Housing Steering Committee. (2012). 10 year housing strategy. York University.
- Inkelas, K. K., & Weisman, J. L. (2003). Different by design: An examination of student outcomes among participants in three types of living-learning programs. *Journal of College Student Development*, 44(3), 335-368.
- Inkelas, K. K., Soldner, M., Longerbeam, S. D., & Leonard, J. B. (2008). Differences in student outcomes by types of living-learning programs: The development of an empirical typology. *Research in higher education*, 49(6), 495-512.
- Institutional Vision, Proposed Mandate Statement and Priority Objectives. Retrieved July 24, 2014 from York University Website: [http://www.yorku.ca/yfile/special/strategic\\_mandate\\_submission\\_york\\_university.pdf](http://www.yorku.ca/yfile/special/strategic_mandate_submission_york_university.pdf)
- Kuh, G. D. (1995). The other curriculum: Out-of-class experiences associated with student learning and personal development. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 123-155.
- Kuh, G. D. (2008). *Excerpt from "High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter"*. Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- McLean, Sandra. University Plans for Future Development. Retrieved Nov. 11, 2014 From the York University Website, <http://yfile.news.yorku.ca/2010/03/30/university-plans-future-development-beyond-the-subway/>,
- Nosaka T. (2005). Unlocking Student's Learning Potential: Outcomes of a Living-Learning Community at a Large Public Research institution.
- Pike, G. R. (1997). The Effects of Residential Learning Communities on Students' Educational Experiences and Learning Outcomes during the First Year of College. ASHE Annual Meeting Paper.

Schroeder, C. C. (1994). Developing learning communities. *Realizing the educational potential of residence halls*, 165-189.

Smith, B. L. (2001). The challenge of learning communities as a growing national movement. *Peer Review*, 4(1), 4-8.

Tinto, V. (1999). Taking retention seriously: Rethinking the first year of college. *NACADA journal*, 19(2), 5-9.

Tinto, V. (2011). Taking student success seriously: Rethinking the first year of college.

University Academic Plan (UAP). Retrieved July 24, 2014 from York University Website:

<http://www.yorku.ca/univsec/senate/committees/apprc/documents/UAP2010-2015.pdf>

White Paper Overview. Retrieved July 24, 2014, from York University Website:

[http://vpap.info.yorku.ca/files/2012/09/White\\_Paper\\_Overview\\_April\\_15.pdf](http://vpap.info.yorku.ca/files/2012/09/White_Paper_Overview_April_15.pdf)

Wawrzynski, M. R., & Jessup-Anger, J. E. (2010). From expectations to experiences: Using a structural typology to understand first-year student outcomes in academically based living-learning communities. *Journal of College Student Development*, 51(2), 201-217.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: Themed House Living-Learning Communities Memorandum of Understanding 2012-2013

#### **1.0 Purpose of MOU**

This Memorandum of Understanding is an agreement between the Housing Working Group, Housing Services, Residence Life, and the Council of Masters. This memorandum's purpose is to identify roles and responsibilities regarding the Themed House Living-Learning Communities (THLLC) in York Residences for the 2012-13 academic year and to reflect support in principle by all parties to the success of the program.

#### **2.0 Programs Goals and Student Outcomes:**

Themed House Living- Learning Communities have been established in each undergraduate residence at York, focussing on an academic theme directly related to one or more of the undergraduate programs affiliated with each College and in which students will have the opportunity to live and interact outside of the class with other students sharing their common interests in an academic theme and, in some cases, one or more of the same classes.

The general purpose of Themed House Living-Learning Communities is to

1. Enhance the overall student experience of those residing in THLLCs and to improve their retention rate both at the University and within residence.
2. Help students establish peer support outside the classroom through intentional placement of students by academic themes in the Living-Learning Community clusters.
3. Provide mentorship, guidance and support with respect to a particular academic theme to students in the THLLCs by upper-year student leaders (THLLC Programmers) who are generally from the academic theme.
4. Provide opportunities for students to grow through appropriately themed events, some of which will be intended only for THLLC participants and some of which will be open to general student participation in addition to THLLC participants.
5. Provide ongoing support and involvement by faculty and/or staff with the development of the THLLCs and related events.

#### **3.0 Responsibilities**

Each party recognizes and accepts accountability for the following responsibilities:

##### **3.1 Housing Working Group**

1. With the assistance of partners, coordinate the development of program documentation and a guiding framework (e.g. THLLC descriptions, goals, learning outcomes, activities)
2. Organize meetings of all pertinent parties at least once per term, or as needed
3. Review the program in the context of the overall housing strategy, address issues and make recommendations to the Housing Steering Committee on all aspects of THLLCs including the addition of new THLLCs.
4. Ensure coordinated marketing for Student Housing, including THLLCs
5. Confirm application process, including supplemental application for THLLCs

6. With the assistance of partners, ensure appropriate, timely, and coordinated THLLC assessment activities
7. Review and make decisions on any proposals related to facilities resources and space allocations with respect to THLLCs.

### **3.2 Colleges**

1. Recruit and hire Themed House Programmers who will oversee living-learning community programming.
2. Provide / secure funding to pay Themed House Programmers - \$1000 (Summer), \$2500 academic year.
3. Provide / secure funding for THLLC programming for 2012-13.
4. Maintain a common webpage for THLLCs, ensuring it is up-to-date and relevant.
5. Provide ongoing support and supervision for Themed House Programmers (e.g. regular meetings/feedback).
6. Working collaboratively with RLCs, provide training to Themed House Programmers.
7. Where required, coordinate with applicable academic department and faculty enrolment advising office.
8. Master or designate meet with RLCs to review supplemental applications and make final decisions per 3.4.1.6 below.
9. Manage administration of the THLLC's including Programmer wages and general program purchases.
10. Encourage Masters to attend at least one THLLC event in their respective college THLLC.
11. In order to support communication between Housing Services and prospective students, provide detailed description of past THLLC activities and possible plans for coming year by 15 April 2012.

#### **3.2.1 Themed House Programmers**

1. Working with Masters, RLCs, and, where possible, Dons, develop programming through the summer for applicable THLLC.
2. In coordination with Masters, RLCs, and Dons, oversee implementation of the program.
3. Ensure program engages students at different levels, both personally and within the overall THLLC.
4. Program to include events geared to THLLC only and events geared general students as well.
5. Meet regularly (at least twice per term) with Masters and RLCs to review development of program and its implementation through the year.
6. Participate in regular meetings with Masters, RLCs, and/or Dons.
7. Participate in assessment / evaluation programs.
8. Refer all non-THLLC student-related issues to Dons and/or RLCs.

### **3.3 Housing Services**

1. Select THLLC locations in consultation with partners understanding that THLLCs are generally geared to first year transitional experience
2. Include supplemental application as part of residence application
3. Vet THLLC applications against conflicting preferences, confirming key preference, without consideration of academic program except in the case of Current Trends in Psychology and Life Science THLLCs.
4. Provide vetted supplemental applications to the respective RLCs (to be returned to Housing Services in accordance with the schedule outlined below.



5. Assign THLLC rooms through the intentional placement of students in clusters based on recommendations from RLCs and Masters.
6. Develop strategy to communicate with returning students whose application deadline was 28 February 2012.
7. After each THLLC is full, maintain a waiting list and endeavour to assign rooms according to THLLC requirements, but without guaranteeing such assignments; After 15 July, room assignment priority will be based on efforts to fill all vacancies.

### **3.4 Residence Life**

Residence Life staff will play a supportive role in this program as it compliments their programs and responsibilities. Residence Life will offer additional developmental opportunities to Themed House Programmers.

#### **3.4.1 Residence Life Coordinators**

1. Participate in the selection of THLLC Programmers.
2. Wherever possible, ensure Dons selected for the THLLCs reflect the theme of that particular THLLC.
3. Meet at least twice per term with College Masters to discuss these communities.
4. Help wherever they can to support the programming planning and delivery by the Themed House Programmers by offering expertise in residence life operations and activities.
5. Collaborate with Colleges to provide training to Themed House Programmers.
6. Receive supplemental applications from Housing Services; coordinate meeting with the applicable College Masters, or their designates, for deliberation and decision; communicate successful applicants for THLLCs to Housing services based on the following schedule:

<b>Receipt of Applications from Housing</b>	<b>Return Date to Housing (by 12 noon)</b>
May 8	May 11
May 15	May 18
May 30	June 1
June 5	June 8
June 12	June 15
June 19	June 22
June 26	June 29
July 3	July 6
July 10	July 13

#### **3.4.2 Residence Dons**

1. Where possible, work with Themed House Programmers to help develop programming through the summer for applicable THLLC.
2. Help wherever they can to support the programming, planning, and delivery by the Themed House Programmers by offering expertise in residence life operations and activities.
3. Endeavour to develop house programming that relates to and complements THLLC programming in such a way that engages students at different levels, both personally and within the overall THLLC.

4. Work collaboratively with Themed House Programmers on two events per term (where possible) in lieu of attending College-specific events as outlined in normal Residence Life Programming.
5. Participate in regular meetings (at least twice per term) with Themed House Programmers, Masters, and RLCs, to review and monitor THLCC program.
6. Participate in assessment / evaluation programs for THLCCs.

**4.0 Global House**

The parties recognize that Global House is a pre-existing THLLC coordinated by Residence Life and York International. Notwithstanding the processes laid out in this Memorandum, York International will continue to play a partnership role in the ongoing development and management of Global House including: the review and selection of applicants and the provision of programming expertise. The Global House Programmer is hired and supervised by Residence Life. Unlike all other THLLCs covered by this memorandum, the CLAY position at Global House will act as an assistant programmer supporting the work and programs of the Global House Programmer and be guided by the RLC on day to day activities.

**5.0 Communication Protocol**

1. Requests for detail information with respect to THLLC applicants will be made to the Director of Housing, or their designate, through the RLCs.
2. Notwithstanding point 1, the parties recognize the need for a distinct process to exchange information with respect to the Emerging Trends in Psychology and the Life Sciences THLLCs, to coordinated between the Director of Housing, RLCs, and respective Masters.
3. Since Dons are employees of Residence Life, communications and requests to Dons from the Colleges should only be made through their respective RLCs.

**6.0 Review**

This Memorandum of Understanding will be reviewed on an annual basis by the parties and revised as required.

**7.0 Acknowledgement and Agreement**

As of the \_\_\_ of May, 2012.

On behalf of:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Housing Working Group

\_\_\_\_\_  
Housing Services

\_\_\_\_\_  
Residence Life

\_\_\_\_\_  
Council of Masters

## Appendix B – LLC Models for York Recommendation

Extrapolated from: Inkelas & Weisman, 2003.

LLC Type	Description	Goals	Offers	Outcomes
Transition Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enroll first year students and focus on facilitating successful transition from home to college.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To facilitate a smooth academic transition for first year students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Academic Support</li> <li>Skill development</li> <li>Intimate learning environment</li> <li>Academic and Socially supportive</li> <li>Requires community Service Opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Smoother transition into University</li> <li>More likely to express a preference for engaging in intellectual pursuits</li> <li>Met socially with a faculty member outside of class</li> <li>Discussed sociocultural issues outside of class</li> <li>Performing community service activities were positively associated with an interest in learning new or different sociocultural perspectives</li> </ul>
Curriculum-based Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focuses on specific topics of study or research.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Through a particular disciplinary focus or theme, seek to provide stimuli to broaden students' sociocultural perspectives and horizons.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Opportunities to work on research projects with faculty</li> <li>Academic discussions with faculty members</li> <li>Group study sessions</li> <li>Service Learning offered, not required</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Utilized study groups more frequently than students in any of the other samples.</li> <li>Discussing sociocultural issues with peers</li> <li>Openness to new or different perspectives</li> <li>Performing community service activities were positively associated with an interest in learning new or different sociocultural perspectives</li> </ul>