

Helping Students FIT In: Pilot Study of a Living-Learning Community

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Introduction

An important goal of colleges of agriculture is to promote student learning and personal development. Barriers to accomplishing this goal include retention of high quality students, demographic shifts, lack of public support, and greater demands for colleges and universities to accept more responsibility for student learning (Schroeder, et al., 1994). In an effort to provide a comprehensive environment for student learning and personal growth, Oklahoma State University, College of Agriculture Science and Natural Resources (CASNR) created a living-learning community for freshmen called *Freshmen In Transition* (FIT).

How Does the FIT Program Work?

The FIT program was created to challenge first time freshmen to “reach beyond their personal expectations and achieve a significant level of excellence in several areas” and to “provide CASNR freshmen with opportunities to excel in the university, community, and life” (W. Holley, personal communication, September 19, 2000). The goal of the FIT program is to develop strong academic, social, leadership, and service skills that will increase students ability to succeed in college.

The FIT program allows freshmen students with agricultural-related majors to live and learn together in a residential community for one academic year. The program requires participants (N=72) to reside on the third and fourth floors of Jones Hall (a.k.a. Ag House) along side the nine Student Academic Mentors (SAMs) who serve in a support role to students. Although the floors are co-educational, each suite houses four students of the same gender. A full kitchen, laundry room, and commons area are available to the students along with a community dining cart located on the first floor commons area of Jones Hall.

What is unique about the FIT program is that in addition to living in theme housing, students must participate in thirteen pre-determined activities including the allied arts, faculty discussions, Homecoming, wellness programs, academic excellence workshops, career development, social functions, university and college clubs and/or associations, leadership, community service, intramurals, and Camp Cowboy. They must also maintain a 2.5 GPA their first semester and 3.0 GPA their second semester.

Students are allowed to choose the activities that they wish to participate in as long as they fall within the 13 categories. In order to help students fulfill the expectations, a FIT web page was created and includes information about the program, news, a monthly calendar, student, faculty, and guest articles, pictures of the FIT students and SAMs, and an area for SAM discussion groups (<http://fit.okstate.edu/>). In the living-learning

community, the FIT students have access to two white dry-erase boards that include the activities for the present week.

FIT students are also actively engaged in local democracy. They have established an Advisory Council, a Judiciary Board, and small groups where eight FIT students and one SAM gather to reflect on their weekly activities and opportunities. The Advisory Council has proved to be invaluable in providing formative evaluative information to the program director and coordinator as well as allowing students to voice concerns regarding the program.

Many people have contributed to helping the FIT program succeed. Faculty and staff within CASNR, student affairs, and residential life have participated in the Advisory Board, as well as interacted with FIT participants in a variety of way. A program coordinator was hired for 10 hours per week to train and manage the SAM team as well as to act as intermediary among all parties involved. CASNR is highly committed to the program and has institutionalized positions and resources to ensure the success of the FIT program, including an evaluation study currently underway.

Potholes to Avoid In Developing A Living-Learning Community

As with any new program, there are lessons to be learned and potholes to be avoided. Through numerous informal conversations with the students, we have learned that the FIT program is a good program, but students suggested that the expectations are too structured and did not allow them meet their personal goals. Additionally, they felt that the SAMs had assumed a “policing” role, rather than the mentoring role conceptualized by the project director. During the October Advisory Council meeting it was recommended that students be allowed to structure their own list of activities in conjunction with their SAM and other students. Also, SAMs should not be involved with rule enforcement, but rather should align themselves as true mentors and support people.

Does the FIT Program Help Students FIT In? Plans for Evaluation

As the FIT program is unique in requiring a variety of activities for students to complete throughout the year, the impact of the program on students’ intellectual and psychosocial development is unknown. Therefore, an evaluation study will seek to determine the impact of the program on student learning and psychosocial development. The research design to be used by the evaluation team is a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest, equivalent group.

R ₁	O ₁	X ₁	O ₂	O ₃
R ₂	O ₁		O ₂	O ₃
R ₃	O ₁		O ₂	O ₃

Both quantitative and qualitative data will be collected to better understand the factors that affect the participants' academic achievement, retention rates, involvement, and psychosocial development, and the overall effectiveness of the FIT program in influencing these domains.

Reference

Schroeder, C. C., Mable, P., and Associates. (1994). Realizing the educational potential of residence halls. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.