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Student Demographics and Experiences of Deeper Life Interactions within Residential Learning Communities

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Student Demographics and Experiences of Deeper Life Interactions within Residential Learning Communities

Abstract

In this article, we discuss the influence of demographic characteristics upon students' deeper life interactions with peers, faculty, and staff within the context of residential learning communities. When examining student demographic characteristics, we found that Students of Color and first-generation students have lower satisfaction with deeper life interactions with peers, but sophomores, juniors, or seniors had higher satisfaction with deeper life interactions with peers. Students did not differ on their deeper life interactions with faculty based on students' demographic characteristics. We discuss further the implications of the findings for student engagement and academic success across diverse populations and offer recommendations for maximizing the positive impact of residential learning communities on efforts to promote inclusive excellence. The article concludes with a series of recommendations for current practice and future research focused specifically on how different types of student interactions with different groups influence student outcomes.

Keywords

Living learning communities, first-generation, students of color, peers, faculty, academic success

Cover Page Footnote

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Residential learning communities (RLCs), which combine shared living arrangements with common educational opportunities, have been linked to favorable educational and developmental outcomes (Inkelas et al., 2018; Inkelas et al., 2006), including academic success and persistence to degree completion (Mayhew et al., 2016). The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has emerged as a strong proponent of both residential and nonresidential learning communities, as well as other *high-impact practices*, based in part on the links of these communities to student retention and success (Kuh, 2008). However, the Association has also emphasized *inclusive excellence*, defined as both preparing students for and providing them with access to high-quality learning opportunities with a particular focus on Students of Color and low-income students (AAC&U, 2015). As more is known about the positive impacts of RLCs, there is also an increased need to examine the conditional effects in educational impact for RLCs across diverse student populations (Inkelas et al., 2018; Talburt & Boyles, 2005).

The success of high-impact practices has been widely attributed to their facilitation of *student engagement* (Kuh, 2008), which reflects both the student's investment of time and energy in activities associated with success in college and the institution's investment of resources in promotion of such activities (Kuh et al., 2005). Closely related to student engagement is *student involvement*, defined by Astin (1984) as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 297). With direct application to student retention, Tinto (1993) examined the related concept of *integration*, which refers to students' sense of belonging within their social and academic environments. Schlossberg (1989) framed this sense of belonging in terms of two distinct conditions, which she termed *marginality* and *matteing*. Marginality refers to feelings of being peripheral to a group while matteing refers to feelings of one's own significance to others, either individually or collectively.

As a high-impact practice, RLCs combine academic activities with the residential experience by creating interactions among students, faculty, and staff. The interaction that occurs within RLCs has been cited as a critical factor in a variety of program outcomes (Mayhew et al., 2016), in addition to being valued as an end in itself (Wawrzynski et al., 2009). As concern for equity and inclusion has manifested itself in growing attention to the intentional provision of appropriate engagement opportunities for diverse student populations (Quaye & Harper, 2015), researchers have begun to parse these experiences of various student subpopulations.

Traditionally, student interactions have been categorized as either social or academic integration (Tinto, 1993). Sriram and McLevain (2016) proposed deeper life interactions (DLI) as a third, additional, category for understanding student interactions and the college student experience. Deeper life interactions reflect a level of engagement on a more personal level (e.g., conversations about identity,

relationships, family, spirituality, society, etc.) that prompt critical thinking about meaning, value, and purpose (Parks, 2011; Sriram & McLevain, 2016). Deeper life interactions are important because they contribute to student success and develop a sense of community.

The purpose of our study is to explore differences in experiences of deeper life interactions associated with various student characteristics. Specifically, our study seeks to answer the following two questions:

1. To what extent do demographic characteristics such as gender, race, academic level, age, and first-generation status predict deeper life interactions among students who live in residential learning communities?
2. To what extent do these demographic characteristics predict deeper life interactions between students and faculty/staff?

Literature Review

Research on RLCs illustrate the benefits for members of those communities. These benefits can be categorized into three types: academic benefits, faculty-student interaction benefits, and peer/social benefits. This section will briefly discuss each of these three types. It concludes with a discussion of the conceptual framework for the study.

Benefits of RLC Membership

The benefits of RLC membership vary across demographics. Although all RLC participants tend to have higher GPAs than non-participants, the impact is greater for male participants (Edwards & McKelfresh, 2002). Inkelas et al. (2006) found in a national study that men are significantly more likely than women to report gains in critical thinking skills, academic self-confidence, and interpersonal self-confidence from their involvement in an RLC; meanwhile, women report significantly higher gains than men do for the application of knowledge to other contexts.

When exploring the liberal arts outcomes of students in residential colleges (a type of RLC), Jessup-Anger (2012) found differences between various racial groups. Asian American students reported lower scores than White peers on an “inclination to inquire” scale, while Latinx students and Race-Other students (which included Native Hawaiian and Native American students) reported higher average scores than their White peers on the “capacity for lifelong learning” scale. Pasque and Murphy (2005) found that taking into account the intersectionality of RLC students’ demographics could change these results, however. They found that Women of Color reported lower academic achievement than their peers, while Students of Color who were lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) or non-Christian reported higher academic achievement than their peers.

A common concern about academic benefits gained from RLC participation is that students in RLCs often self-select to live and participate in these communities. Two studies have shown that academic benefits occur even when other variables are considered. Zheng et al. (2002) found that when controlling for self-motivation, RLC membership remained a significant predictor of academic success. Similarly, Pasque and Murphy (2005) found that RLC participation was a significant predictor for intellectual engagement when controlling for past academic achievement, socio-economic status, demographics, and the interactions between demographics.

Although there is typically strong emphasis placed on faculty-student interactions in RLCs, the research findings about the benefit are mixed. Students in RLCs feel that their interactions with faculty members outside of the classroom help them see faculty members as caring about their students (Blackhurst et al., 2003). They also noted that these out-of-class experiences demystified and humanized the faculty members. Students felt that RLCs promoted meaningful and fulfilling relationships with faculty and staff (Wawrzynski et al., 2009). Students in RLCs described their connections to faculty as more caring and mentor-like and were more comfortable with approaching faculty than non-RLC students (Arensdorf & Naylor-Tincknell, 2016). However, Inkelas et al. (2007) found that faculty mentoring relationships negatively affected social transitions for RLC students with first-generation status.

Although an increase in interactions with faculty is often cited as a benefit of RLC participation, there is disagreement on the impact of the type and frequency of interaction that occurs between faculty and students in RLCs. In a national quantitative study, Inkelas et al. (2006) found that students in RLCs were more likely to develop mentoring relationships with faculty. By contrast, in a yearlong qualitative study, Cox and Orehovec (2007) observed that most interaction between faculty and students in RLCs was little to no engagement between the two groups. In fact, the least observed type of interaction was mentoring. When interaction did occur outside of the classroom, it was incidental, or those interactions were associated with general acknowledgements, greetings, and waves. The most often discussed type of interaction was functional—interactions designed to meet a specific purpose.

According to Mayhew et al. (2018), students who lived in RLCs reported higher levels of peer interactions, co-curricular engagement, and sense of support. Further, students in RLCs were more likely to be involved in the residence hall community, perceived the environments more positively, and found the residence hall environment more supportive than students living in traditional halls (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003). Additionally, Inkelas et al. (2006) found that while Students of Color have a negative perception of the campus climate, they have a positive perception of their residence hall climate.

A common theme of literature on RLC students is the seamless learning connection between their curricular and co-curricular activities (Wawrzynski et al., 2009). RLC students were more likely to have discussions on class topics outside of the classroom (Blackhurst, et al. 2003). Students in RLCs were more likely to contact peers about academic work and engage in group projects (Domizi, 2008; Stassen, 2003). They were also significantly more likely to use residence hall resources and significantly more likely to discuss academic/career related issues or sociocultural issues with their peers (Inkelas et al., 2006). African American students in RLCs used residence hall resources at some of the highest levels in comparison to peers, while White students were the least likely to use residence hall resources (Inkelas et al., 2006).

Inkelas et al. (2007) found higher reports of academic and social transition into college for first-generation students in an RLC than for those who did not live in one. However, they also found that informal peer interactions and co-curricular involvements were not significantly related to either academic or social transition for first-generation college students.

An oft-cited social benefit for students in RLCs is a genuine sense of community. Blackhurst et al. (2003) discussed how the community in the residence hall and in classes gave them an instant reference group and feelings of a place to belong. Domizi (2008) found that RLC students noted a social support that was available to discuss personal problems, while Spanierman et al. (2013) found that the activities that fostered this greater sense of community were making friends from different backgrounds, studying with hallmates, attending educational programs, and going on overnight trips. Women were more likely than men to interact frequently with peers in the RLC (Inkelas et al., 2006).

RLC students also gain an appreciation for diversity. Research on a civic engagement RLC found that RLC students reported higher scores on a measure of diversity and greater gains from the beginning of the academic year to the end, although neither of these differences was statistically significant (Longerbeam & Sedlacek, 2006). Through group projects, students gained experience working with peers of diverse backgrounds and learned how to interact with those who were different from themselves (Domizi, 2008). During this process, RLC students also examined their own beliefs around such things as drinking and work ethic and began to solidify these beliefs to align with their personal values. Women in RLCs were more likely than men to have more positive perceptions of the residence halls and of the campus racial climate (Inkelas et al., 2006).

Conceptual Framework

Historically, the literature on students' experiences within RLCs has centered around the two areas of Tinto's (1993) integration concepts, academic and social. The limitation of this two-category theoretical framework is that it fails to capture

more personal interactions around meaning, value, and purpose that do not fit the social and academic categories.

As higher education scholars have turned their attention to students' personal and spiritual development (e.g., Astin et al., 2011; Baxter Magolda, 2009; Nash & Murray, 2010), the significance of conversations about questions of meaning, value, and purpose has increasingly come to the fore. Focusing specifically on young people's interaction with significant figures in their lives, Parks (2011) introduced the concept of a *mentoring community*, which is characterized by a combination of challenging and supportive conditions that is optimally conducive to the exploration of major life questions.

Within residential learning communities, Sriram and McLevain (2016) used the term *deeper life interactions* to describe exchanges that relate to meaning, value, and purpose. Interactions of this nature are distinct from both social and academic interactions, which tend to be more superficial and outwardly focused. Sriram and McLevain found deeper life interactions to be an independent and statistically valid construct that could be reliably measured in students. Sriram et al. (in press) validly and reliably measured deeper life interactions between students and faculty/staff and between student peers. Our current study extends prior research (Sriram et al., in press; Sriram & McLevain, 2016) on three forms of interaction as they manifest themselves in students' relationships with peers, faculty, and staff within residential learning communities.

In their book on residential learning communities, Inkelas et al. (2018) write, "The needs for diverse student populations must be considered in structuring LLCs both in the communities formed for a general population and in communities designed specifically for marginalized populations" (p. 127). Scholars need to examine not only whether residential learning communities work, but for whom they work or do not work (Talbert & Boyles, 2005). By studying the conditional effects based upon student demographics, the current study can provide helpful information on how to make sure RLCs do not underserve particular student populations.

Methodology

To address our research questions about the relationships between student demographics and deeper life interactions for students who live in RLCs, we conducted a quantitative research study. This study stems from a post-positivist epistemology, a research philosophy that lends itself toward quantitative research and measurement for acquiring knowledge (Sriram, 2017). We utilized a non-experimental survey research design for analyzing the relationship among variables without the use of an intervention. Our aim was to identify patterns in the data from a large group of students living in residential learning communities from a variety of institutions.

Population, Sample, and Participants

The population of interest for this study was college students who live in residential learning communities at four-year institutions. We selected this population for two reasons. First, residential learning communities seek to foster different types of interactions among peers, faculty, and staff (Cho & Sriram, 2016). Second, they seek to foster not only a sense of belonging in students (Inkelas et al., 2018), but also a holistic education that develops values congruent with democratic ideals and the creation of lifelong learners (Jessup-Anger, 2012).

It is important to note that our unit of analysis for this study was the student living within a residential learning community. In other words, we were concerned with the extent to which students in these communities had deeper life interactions with peers and faculty/staff even if those interactions happened to occur outside of the residential learning community. We decided that it did not matter, ultimately, whether or not these interactions took place within the RLCs or elsewhere on campus because participation in an RLC could possibly influence interactions across campus. Therefore, we did not make such a distinction in our examination but instead asked students, more broadly, about their deeper life interactions.

To make inferences regarding the population, we administered our instrument to students at six institutions, located in six different states, representing the Southwest, Southeast, Midwest, and Northeast regions of the United States. Four of the institutions were private universities, and two were public. Three were classified as doctoral universities, and three were classified as baccalaureate institutions. The survey was administered by email from a faculty or staff member of each institution to multiple residential learning communities on that campus. Of the 6,761 undergraduate students who received the survey, 1,364 responded at least in part (20.2% response rate), and 801 provided complete responses, including the necessary demographic information for data analysis. Table 1 lists the *n* for each analysis.

The demographic information of study participants is based upon those who chose to provide such information; therefore, totals do not equal 100%. Participants had a mean age of 19.1 years. First-year students represented 63.2% of those who provided academic level information, followed by sophomores (13.9%), juniors (10.5%), and seniors (8.3%). Students who transferred to their current institution were 2.3% of the respondents. Regarding gender, 24.1% identified as male, 69.9% identified as female, and 0.6% identified as trans. Races and ethnicities represented in the study included American Indian/Alaska Native/Native Hawaiian (0.5%), Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islander/South Asian (8.8%), Black/African American (5.5%), Hispanic/Latina/Latino (6.7%), Multiracial/Multiethnic (2.9%), White/Caucasian/European American (68.5%), and Other (1.6%). International students comprised 2.8% of our participants.

Table 1**Participant Demographic Information**

Classification	Number	Percentage
First-year students	601	63.2
Sophomores	132	13.9
Juniors	100	10.5
Seniors	79	8.3
Gender		
Male	229	24.1
Female	665	69.9
Trans	5	0.5
Sex		
Man	236	24.8
Woman	668	70.2
Trans	2	0.2
Sexual Orientation		
Heterosexual	782	82.2
LGBTQIA	96	10.1
Race/Ethnicity		
American Indian/Alaska Native/Native Hawaiian	5	0.5
Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islander/South Asian	84	8.8
Black/African American	52	5.5
Hispanic/Latina/Latino	64	6.7
Multiracial/Multiethnic	28	2.9
White/Caucasian/European American	651	68.5
Other	15	1.6
International students	27	2.8

Data Collection Instrument

We collected data using *The Academic, Social, and Deeper Life Interactions Instrument* developed by Sriram et al. (in press). This instrument consists of 61 items measuring eight latent variables: Academic Interactions with Peers; Academic Interactions with Faculty; Academic Interactions with Staff; Social Interactions with Peers; Social Interaction Greetings with Faculty/Staff; Social Interaction Time with Faculty/Staff; Deeper Life Interactions with Peers; and Deeper Life Interactions with Faculty/Staff. Those variables were validated by an exploratory factor analysis in previous research (Sriram et al., in press). Each item of the survey, representing one of these eight latent variables, asked participants to state their level of agreement with a declarative statement using a six-point Likert-type scale (from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*). The three primary categories of the survey were academic interactions (e.g., “There are other students at my institution I can study with”), social interactions (e.g., “There are other students at my institution I have fun with”), and deeper life interactions (e.g., “I have discussions with other students that cause me to examine or reflect on my own beliefs or values”). Each of the interaction categories had a separate scale to

measure interactions with peers, interactions with faculty, and interactions with staff, thus forming eight scales. Sriram et al. (in press) measured the internal reliability of each scale by analyzing Cronbach's alpha, with scores above .7 considered acceptable (Sriram, 2017). Cronbach's alphas for all eight scales were above .9, indicating excellent reliability.

This study specifically examined deeper life interactions with peers and deeper life interactions with faculty/staff. Deeper life interactions with peers was a nine-item scale with a Cronbach's alpha of .95. Items on this scale included: *I have discussions with other students that cause me to examine or reflect on my role in society; I have discussions with other students that cause me to examine or reflect on my own beliefs or values; If I was having a crisis, I know other students at my institution I can talk to; I feel very comfortable engaging in conversation with other students about life's big questions (e.g., Who am I? Does God exist? What is the meaning of life? What is my purpose?); I feel very comfortable asking other students for personal advice; I feel very comfortable engaging in conversation with other students about my family and/or personal life; I feel very comfortable engaging in conversation with other students about my past or current romantic relationship(s); I feel very comfortable engaging in conversation with other students about what I should do with my life; I feel very comfortable "venting" to other students at my institution about a bad day that I am having.*

Deeper life interactions with faculty and staff was originally intended as two scales, but Sriram et al. (in press) found that they did not statistically differentiate in their factor analysis. Therefore, the nine-item interactions with faculty scale and the nine-item interactions with staff scale were combined into one 18-item scale with a Cronbach's alpha of .97. Items on this scale were worded in parallel fashion to the deeper life interactions with peers scale. For example, *I have discussions with faculty [staff] that cause me to examine or reflect on my role in society.*

Methods for Data Analysis

Our research questions pertained to whether RLC student demographics influence students' deeper life interactions with peers and their deeper life interactions with faculty and staff. Our predictor variables for this study consisted of five demographic variables: gender, race, academic level, age, and first-generation status. In order to use these variables in our multiple regression, we dummy-coded the variables with more than two categories. Gender was coded as male or female, race was coded as Student of Color or White, academic level was coded as first-year student or upper-division student (i.e. sophomore, junior, or senior), and first-generation status was coded either as first-generation or not. Categories that contained too few participants for analysis, such as transgender and graduate students, were removed from the dataset. Age was entered into the model as a continuous variable.

We then conducted two multiple regressions. In our first multiple regression, our outcome variable was deeper life interactions with student peers. In the second multiple regression, our outcome variable was deeper life interactions with faculty and staff, which was combined into one scale (as opposed to two) because of previous research (Sriram et al., in press).

Limitations

There are several limitations in this study that should be considered when interpreting results. One limitation of this study is the inherent difficulty in measuring *latent*, or hidden, variables. Although a postpositivist epistemology acknowledges this limitation, error is always involved in psychometrics. Therefore, the scales used are statistically valid and reliable, but we cannot know with absolute certainty the true score of any latent variable in students (DeVellis, 2017). The scales also rely upon self-reports, making it possible that participants did not provide accurate information about themselves or their views. However, valid and reliable scales using self-reports are the best-known methods for accurately measuring latent variables (DeVellis, 2017; Sriram, 2017). A related limitation of this study is that the people who chose to participate could be different in unknown ways from non-responders.

Multiple Regression Results

To answer our research question regarding the influences of student characteristics upon their deeper life interactions with peers, we conducted a standard multiple regression with gender, race, academic level, age, and first-generation status as the predictor variables. As shown in Table 1, regression results indicated that the overall model significantly predicted deeper life interactions with peers, $R^2 = .03$, $F(5, 796) = 5.17$, $p < .001$. This model accounts for 3.1% of the variance in students' deeper life interactions with peers, which we interpret as a small overall effect size. The model indicates that 3 of the 5 predictor variables significantly contributed to deeper life interactions with peers (listed in order of impact): academic level, first-generation status, and race. All three of these variables had effect sizes (standardized regression coefficients) that were between small and medium in impact (Mayhew et al., 2016). Predictors that were not significant in explaining deeper life interactions with peers were age and gender.

Table 2**Regression Analysis Summary for Demographic Characteristics Predicting Deeper Life Interactions with Peers**

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% CI	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Academic Level*	.24	.12	[.00, .47]	.10	1.99	.047
First-Generation Status**	-.29	.11	[-.49, -.08]	-.10	-2.70	.007
Gender	.04	.09	[-.14, .22]	.01	0.41	.685
Race*	-.24	.09	[-.42, -.06]	-.09	-2.60	.010
Age	-.03	.05	[-.12, .07]	-.03	-0.50	.615

Note: $R^2 = .03$ ($N = 801$, $p < .001$); * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

To answer our research question regarding the influences of student characteristics upon their deeper life interactions with faculty/staff, we conducted a standard multiple regression with gender, race, academic level, age, and first-generation status as the predictor variables. Regression results indicated that the overall model did not significantly predict deeper life interactions with faculty/staff, $R^2 = .01$, $F(5, 796) = 1.89$, $p = .093$; therefore, none of the predictors were significant in explaining deeper life interactions with faculty/staff.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to add to the empirical research on deeper life interactions in the context of RLCs by answering two questions: (a) to what extent do student demographic characteristics influence students' deeper life interactions with peers? and (b) to what extent do student demographic characteristics influence students' deeper life interactions with faculty and staff? Our models demonstrate that status as an upper-division student (i.e., sophomore, junior, or senior) contributes to satisfaction with deeper life interactions with peers, but status as a first-generation student or a Student of Color negatively influences deeper life interactions with peers. Each of these variables had an effect size between small and medium based upon standardized regression coefficients (beta weights). None of the student characteristics examined influenced deeper life interactions between students and faculty/staff. The findings of this study have implications for theory, current practice, and future research.

These findings also suggest that students do not differ in their levels of satisfaction regarding deeper life interactions with faculty/staff with respect to race, gender, age, or first-generation status, nor do students at higher academic class levels (i.e. sophomores, juniors, or seniors). However, Students of Color and students with first-generation status report dissatisfaction with deeper life interactions with peers. All of these findings have practical implications for faculty, student affairs professionals (SAPs), and other campus educators interested in incorporating high-impact practices, such as RLCs or other student learning experiences meant to enhance peer relationships and mentoring.

First-Year Students

This study attests to the idea that first-year students—as opposed to upper-division students like sophomores, juniors, and seniors—need some time to adjust academically and socially to the college experience before they are inclined to have DLIs with peers. Our research adds to the existing knowledge that these students need to develop strong relationships with both faculty/staff and peers since that contributes to their sense of belonging and institutional connections (Schreiner, 2010). Our findings suggest that, because first-year students are new to campus, they may be less connected with peers and may feel limited in having deeper life interactions with peers. Also, because the survey was administered after their first semester of college, they just may not have been on campus long enough to develop a peer group in which to have these types of conversations. Conversely, upper-division students have had more time and opportunities at the institution and potentially have stronger peer relationships and, therefore, may be open to exploring deeper life questions.

Our findings extend prior research on RLCs. Residential life staff, SAPs, and faculty can use our findings in complement with other research in order to cultivate deeper life interactions. They need to look no further than the noted sense of community created within RLCs by their instant reference groups from classes associated with the communities (Blackhurst et al., 2003) and the social support networks that allow RLC students to discuss personal problems (Domizi, 2008). Those working in RLCs can help first-year students create a sense of community that will lead to DLIs between peers by building on the work of Spanierman et al. (2013) and offering activities where residents study with hallmates, attend educational programs, and go on overnight trips. Additionally, student affairs professionals and faculty should continue to be innovative and create different cocurricular experiences that encourage interactions across academic levels in order to develop mentoring communities that will lead students to discuss academic/career related issues or sociocultural issues with their peers (Inkelas et al., 2006).

Students with First-Generation Status

Our findings indicate that status as a first-generation student negatively influences deeper life interactions with peers, which partially contradicts the work of Inkelas et al. (2007); however, Inkelas et al. noted that peer interactions are not significantly related to social transition. More so than their peers, first-generation students feel isolated, disconnected, and enter the college environment at a disadvantage. Better training for residential life staff and SAPs on how to meet the specific needs of these students could be a significant catalyst in improving programs designed to assist this population.

Our findings advance the conversation begun by Inkelas et al. (2007) about faculty interactions with first-generation students in RLCs. Inkelas et al. found that faculty mentoring relationships negatively affected social transitions for RLC students with first-generation status. By contrast, our findings indicate that first-generation status did not predict deeper life interactions with faculty or staff. Therefore, there were not meaningful differences in faculty interaction based on first-generation status in our sample. To continue developing opportunities for deeper life interactions, student affairs professionals and faculty should continue to provide opportunities with students that meet the level of personal interactions and mentoring interactions as described by Cox and Orehovec (2007).

Students of Color

Our research adds to the conversation begun by Jessup-Anger (2012) and Pasque and Murphy (2005) about the importance of peer group interactions in RLCs. Although Inkelas et al. (2006) found that Students of Color have a positive perception of the residence hall environment, we found that Students of Color are dissatisfied with their deeper life interactions with peers, as distinct from such interactions with faculty/staff. This difference may be due in part to feelings of marginality in relation to the peer group, as conceptualized by Schlossberg (1989). White and continuing-generation students should continue to be educated on these types of issues, and efforts toward increasing social engagement and sense of community for Students of Color and first-generation students should be evaluated and improved in order to cultivate deeper life interactions.

Our findings indicate that students do not differ in having deeper life interactions with faculty/staff based on academic level, race, gender, age, or first-generation status. Our findings complement the work of Wawrzynski et al. (2009) and Arensdorf and Naylor-Tincknell (2016), which found RLCs promote positive interactions with faculty members outside of the classroom. The lack of significant differences in our findings could mean that faculty and staff are better equipped to engage a diverse range of students in meaningful conversation. Under Schlossberg's (1989) framework, affirmation that minority and first-generation

students matter to faculty/staff might create openings for deeper life interactions, even amidst feelings of marginality within peer relationships.

Implications for Model of Integration

Tinto's (1975; 1993) model that categorizes the college student experience as academic integration or social integration continues to be the standard for understanding how college affects students. However, this model has been critiqued, improved, and refined (Braxton, et al., 2014), suggesting that a new model is needed for understanding the college student experience. Recent research demonstrates that this two-category framework is not adequate and offers a third category—deeper life interactions—to capture student interactions that occur around meaning, value, and purpose (Sriram et al., in press; Sriram & McLevain, 2016). This third category connects with other notable research discussing the importance of purpose and spirituality in college student development (Astin et al., 2011; Parks, 2011).

When the findings of this study are connected to previous literature (Sriram et al., in press; Sriram & McLevain, 2016), there is compelling evidence that a model for describing the college student experience with three categories—academic interactions, social interactions, and deeper life interactions—provides a better explanation of the college student experience than a two-category model. Although the experience of deeper life interactions is important for student outcomes, such as psychological sense of community (Sriram et al., 2020), the research on what contributes to deeper life interactions is limited. The current study adds another piece to the theoretical puzzle by demonstrating how student demographic characteristics uniquely contribute to the important outcome variable of deeper life interactions.

Conclusion and Future Research

Deeper life interactions are an important aspect of the college student experience. Although other scholars have studied these kinds of interactions using terms such as meaning-making or spirituality, previous scholarship does not examine the association between student demographic characteristics and these interactions. This study found a relationship between student demographic characteristics and students' deeper life interactions with peers. Both identifying as a first-generation student and identifying as a Student of Color negatively influenced deeper life interactions among peers. In other words, first-generation students and Students of Color were significantly less satisfied with their deeper life interactions with other students, with effect sizes between small and medium in impact. Because there is limited research on academic level as a demographic variable beyond first-year students, more research is needed on students who live

in RLCs for multiple years. We conducted our research at historically White institutions, which may have affected the results of Students of Color around their interactions with peers. Future research could include minority-serving institutions.

We found that gender, race, academic level, age, and first-generation status did not influence deeper life interactions with faculty and staff. We believe this finding reflects favorably on RLCs and their promotion of students' relationships with faculty and staff on campus. This finding demonstrates equity in student interactions with faculty and staff that involve meaning, purpose, and values.

As college campuses continue to seek equity, diversity, and inclusion, scholars and campus leaders must pay attention to how the experience of marginalized students might differ from majority students. The findings of this study suggest that college campuses must do more to help Students of Color and first-generation students relate to peers on a deeper level. A good place to start may be teaching majority students the role they can play in including underrepresented students.

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