

Feeding the Future Research Grant

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Introduction

Since the Sense of Community Questionnaire was created in 1986, there has been extensive research into young students' sense of belonging and their overall success. However, there has been limited research on undergraduate students' sense of community at university. The Feeding the Future Grant is exploring the connection between college students' sense of community and food systems. This qualitative research focuses on students within the Residential Initiative for the Study of the Environment (RISE) program at Michigan State University.

Research Design

A number of open-ended questions about sense of community, experiences with the RISE program and food systems, and hopes for the future of the program were developed for an interview protocol. The protocol was vetted for face validity by two content experts. Focus group interviews were conducted during Fall Semester 2013 and are scheduled to be conducted again in Spring Semester 2014. In between the fall and spring interviews, RISE has organized 6 workshops and engagement opportunities for students to work together in a safe space conducive to learning about food systems/agriculture and building communities. Comparison between the fall and spring focus group findings will be made to identify what interventions contributed to community development within the RISE program.

Recruitment and Sample

Twelve student interviewees were identified first by their membership in the RISE program. Secondly, students were chosen who had attended all, some, or no RISE workshops, thus allowing evaluation of the sense of community between students who were fully and actively engaged in RISE and those who were not as formally involved. These identified students were initially contacted by email in early November, and interviews were conducted within the month. Participants were offered a Starbucks gift card as an incentive for participating.

Data Collection Methods

The twelve interviews were initially recorded on a computer and ranged from six to fifteen minutes in length. Students were asked to give basic background information along with their views, experiences and feelings regarding RISE, their definition and sense of community, and their hopes for the future of the RISE program. The recorded interviews were then transcribed for later reference and analysis.

Type of Analysis

Conducting a content analysis on the interviews, the transcriptions were coded based on five major themes: draws of the RISE program, experiences within the program, personal definitions of community, how RISE activities/workshops foster a sense of community, and how this community contributes to overall student success. These themes guided the content analysis and interpretation of the results.

"Living with people that kind of share the same views as me, it's a great start to the year." – Joe

- RISE is a great way to make the big university feel smaller.
- RISE is different from other residential programs in that students from all majors are welcome, and all share a passion for the environment, allowing students to approach challenges from multiple disciplines.
- Students appreciate having access to the program's offices, peer mentors, and evening tutoring on the same floor of Bailey Hall where they live.
- RISE attracts students who are passionate and dedicated to each other and the environment, creating a very unique experience for those involved in the program.



"...a warming environment of people." – Jeff

- RISE students repeatedly mentioned interpersonal relationships, working together, supporting each other, mutual respect, and overall responsibility for oneself and others in the community as important aspects of a strong community.
- Common goals were not mentioned as a crucial part of community building, but a shared interest in environmental issues allowed students to initially connect with one another.
- Working on shared projects and forming meaningful friendships helped foster a strong connection between RISE students as the semester progressed.
- "[RISE] just gives you a sense of home."



Conclusions

The analysis of the Fall 2013 interviews suggests that the RISE living-learning setting fosters a tight-knit community, and the freshman seminar and workshops, volunteer sessions, and activities strengthen this community. In the Spring 2014 interviews, the researchers expect to see a stronger sense of community after students have participated in more activities and opportunities.

Based on the content analysis and identified themes, the biggest strengths of the RISE program are:

- Access to resources across campus made easy
- Living environment is open and inviting and makes the university feel smaller
- RISE workshops/activities provide meaningful engagement opportunities

Areas where the RISE program can improve are:

- Include more current environmental issues in the freshman seminar
- Outreach on campus to promote environmental sustainability
- Volunteer on and off campus to provide real-world experiences for students and get involved in larger MSU/East Lansing community

Themes

"...it's sort of awakening for me." – Alex

- "...you get involved right away instead of having to wait and find [opportunities] yourself."
- RISE students overwhelmingly expressed their relationships with the people on their floor as being a huge advantage of joining RISE.
- RISE students are open to learning about anything and everything related to environmental issues and sustainability, especially where their food comes from and how agricultural practices effect our environment.
- Students are able to explore different cultures and learn new culinary and horticultural skills through RISE and its opportunities, forming a unique space where a food-conscious community can flourish.



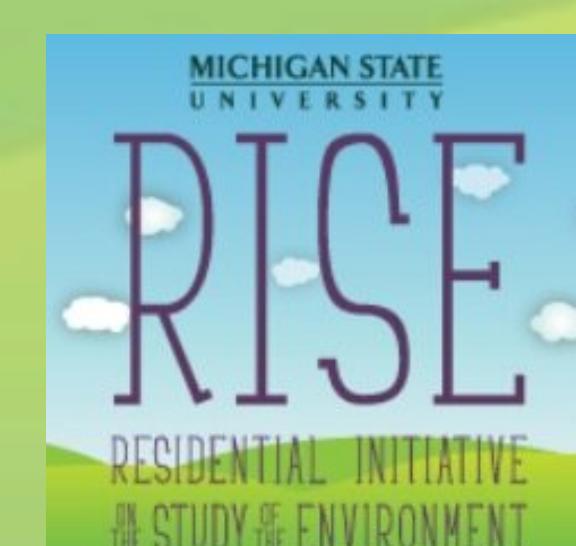
"We work together to do a good thing for the community." – Sue

- "[The RISE freshman seminar is] really centered around leadership and finding our place in the RISE community, and so it helps us form that community more."
- RISE organizes bi-monthly activities that are open to all students and include cooking workshops, skill sharing among students, volunteer opportunities in the Bailey GREENhouse and Urban Farm, and other avenues for students to engage and work together.
- Cooking workshops and helping in the GREENhouse appear to be students' favorite creative and constructive outlets where they can learn new skills.
- "The connection that you can make through food, which is kind of a weird thing to think about, [is] very cool."



"There's a whole bunch of stuff going on across campus that we're directly connected to through the people here." – Alex

- RISE students can get advice about career options, tutoring, help with scheduling classes, connecting with professors and employers, and anything else they could possibly need.
- The social and academic advantages of the program were repeatedly cited as reasons that students felt RISE had contributed to their success thus far at MSU.
- Overall, the consensus of the students interviewed was that RISE is a wonderful learning community. Students' relationships, community, and sense of belonging have allowed them to pursue their potential to be amazing in their current and future endeavors.



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