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## 'I feel like I belong': WKU counting on new living-learning communities to boost retention

By AARON MUDD [amudd@bgdailynews.com](mailto:amudd@bgdailynews.com) 2 hrs ago





Ask Western Kentucky University freshmen Miranda Stone and April Schoenfeld what they're most excited about as Hilltoppers, and they'll tell you about the new Top of the Class "living-learning" community they're part of as teacher education students.

"That's really nice to have the community when you go into the larger campus," said Stone, a Lexington native studying elementary education. "It's nice to already know people when you walk into a class."

Stone said she likes bumping into other education students on her floor in Bemis Lawrence Hall, where she and Schoenfeld share a dorm room. For Schoenfeld, the chance to do volunteer work through the program was what sealed the deal. It's also helping her get over her shyness, she said.

"There's service opportunities that come along with the living-learning community," she said.

Increasing student persistence from the first to second year is one of WKU President Timothy Caboni's top priorities. An increased focus on pushing first-year students to join living-learning communities is a piece of that effort.

WKU is rolling out three new living-learning communities this year. They include Top of the Class, the WISE Living Community for Women in Science and Engineering and the Intercultural Student Engagement Center Academy for students of color, those who are first-generation students, Pell-eligible or who have an academic need.

Julia Mittelberg, an assistant professor in WKU's School of Teacher Education, said the goal of Top of the Class is to help students form connections to upperclassmen and professors in their major. Top of the Class aims to bring students together for shared classes and programming that will help them navigate college, she said.

“If we can catch them when they're younger they have a lot more support systems in place,” she said.

If students can get more involved in their majors sooner through living-learning communities, Mittelberg said, they'll have a smoother college experience.

Cheryl Stevens, dean of the Ogden College of Science and Engineering, described living-learning communities as one well-researched “high-impact practice” that campuses can use to help students persist and succeed in college.

In 2004, The National Study of Living-Learning Programs surveyed nearly 24,000 students and followed up with the respondents in 2007 as part of a longitudinal study of living-learning program efficacy.

Results showed that students in living-learning programs applied more critical thinking skills in their courses and better applied what they'd learned across their classes. Results also showed the students expressed more interest in civic engagement; that they followed up by volunteering or taking service-learning courses; and that they felt a smoother transition into college socially and academically.

“Students who participate in things like that really get to know the people in their departments,” Stevens said.

There's another important reason to recruit students into the program.

“Women in science and engineering are underrepresented,” Stevens said.

When it comes to why that is, Stevens said there are many reasons for the trend. It doesn't come down to ability, she said, but the social aspects and perceptions surrounding the fields.

“Culturally, it's better if women who are interested in the sciences have friends who are in the sciences,” she said, adding that girls shy away from the sciences because of how they think they'll be perceived.

Programming through the WISE Living Community will include a mix of social and professional events, Stevens said, including outings to complete an obstacle course at the WKU Farm and visits from women in science and engineering fields.



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Going to high school in Dunwoody, Ga., WKU freshman Amanda Maceyko didn't know a lot of girls interested in science or math.

“None of my friends loved math. I was the only one,” she said, adding she spent a lot of her time tutoring other students.

Now, as a middle school math education major, she's found a home in the WISE Living Community.

“I was shocked to see how many people love math,” she said. “I feel like I belong in a community now that likes me.”

Olivia Poynter, a freshman from Hiseville studying secondary education, said all of the girls in the program live on her residence hall floor. They study and hang out together, she said.

“We’ve been to the Great American Donut Shop a couple times,” she said.

Georgetown freshman Katie Cotterell, who’s studying middle school science education, said there’s a connection between the roughly 20 students living together on the same residence hall floor.

“I never had that experience in high school,” she said. “It felt so different, and I felt accepted.”

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