

HENRY KING STANFORD RESIDENTIAL COLLEGE

# FOSTERING DIALOGUE AND DISCOVERY

## WITH RESIDENTIAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

BY DAVID VINSON, PhD

When prospective students envision living on campus, they often imagine the traditional college dorm—rooms with beds bunked over desks, shared bathrooms, and an RA living down the hall. However, one option not often known to students in search of their new “home away from home” is that of the residential learning community (RLC).

Rather than adjusting to a room shared among two or three people, the RLC can function as an appealing alternative, one that invites occupants to join a community of either like-minded people or a predetermined group. Such spaces can cultivate close-knit communities in which fellow students develop relationships not only among themselves but with faculty who live on site. Students have likened RLCs to the Hogwarts houses of

Harry Potter. Unlike the magical hat that assigns a student on the spot to Gryffindor or, say, to Slytherin, students in RLCs know their destinations prior to arrival on campus.

RLCs can offer vital support systems during what can be a daunting time for first-year students; this population often contends with homesickness or balancing the rigors of education amidst newfound independence. A general guideline for the number of students

in an RLC is 400-500, allowing students to experience a much smaller school atmosphere even if the institution itself is much larger. In addition to living among faculty, students benefit from having these faculty members available for support in both academic and personal matters. Faculty members in these settings have the opportunity to become part of the support system for students, and these relationships can go a long way to fostering dialogue and helping to break down potential barriers that may exist between students and faculty.

While RLCs are historically associated with Ivy League schools, they also exist on over thirty campuses in the United States. Two notable examples include Santa Clara University and the University of Miami.

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SANTA CLARA UNIVERSITY

Both institutions have embraced the benefits of RLCs, not merely by creating a culture of support and collaboration, but by making these spaces comfortable, stylish, and amenable to the technological needs of students and faculty alike.

### **Residential Themes at Santa Clara University (SCU)**

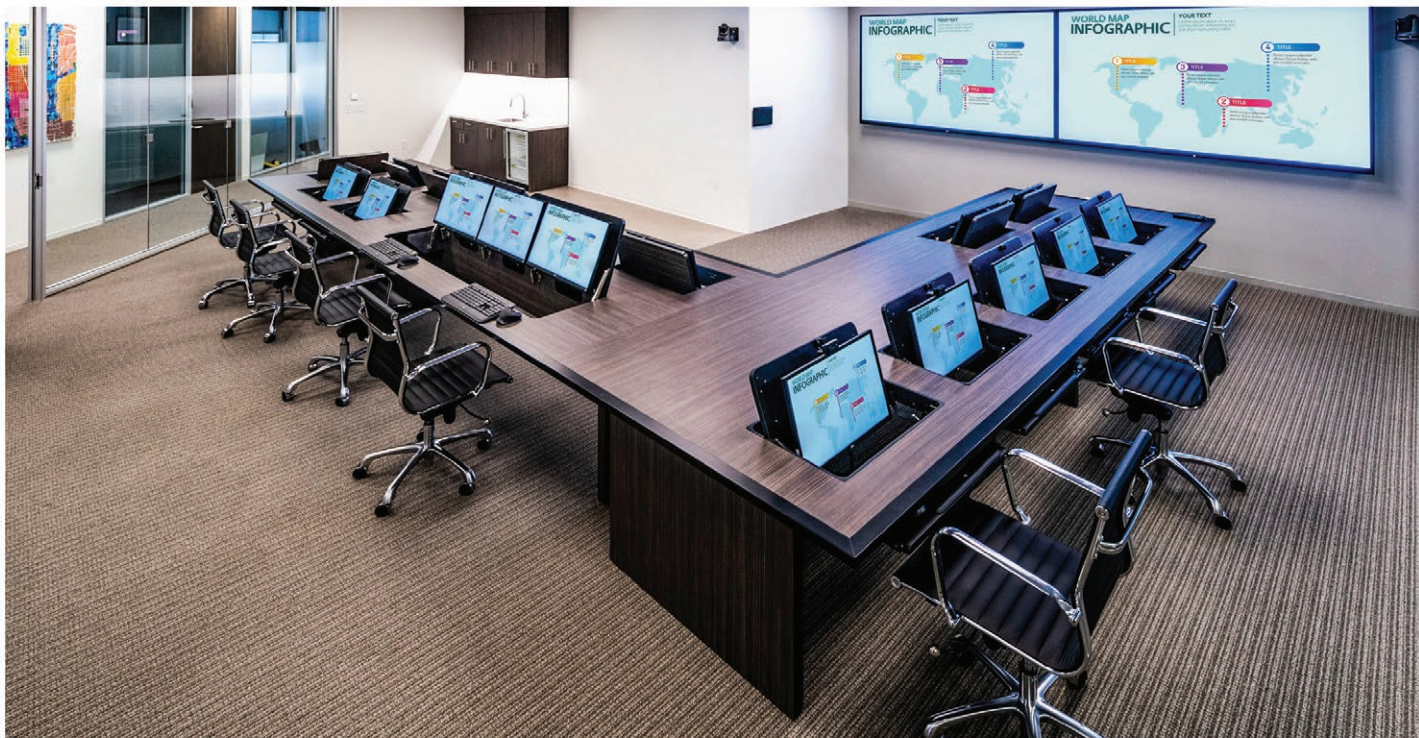
Santa Clara University (SCU) is the oldest operating higher education institution in California. The campus is located in the heart of Silicon Valley and spans 106 lush acres with pristine gardens and state-of-the-art facilities, all of which surround the historic Mission Santa Clara de Asís. Located at the southern tip of San Francisco Bay, Santa Clara is adjacent to San Jose, the 10th largest city in the country, and the region is known to offer nearly three hundred days of sunshine a year.

SCU attracts ambitious and talented students, faculty, and staff, and it has been nationally recognized for its outstanding commitment to diversity and inclusion. Moreover, the University

has received recognition for prioritizing sustainability and working to protect and preserve the environment. But another aspect of SCU's appeal, in particular for first-years students, is that it is home to nine residential learning centers. Nearly 95% of SCU's first-year students live on campus, and even those who have a residency requirement exception are invited to participate in a designated RLC. Each RLC is associated with a specific residence hall and organizes its community around one or two broad themes. The themes are not major-specific. For instance, Alpha RLC organizes its communal life and engagement priorities around the concepts of innovation, integrity, and impact. Students in Alpha RLC are encouraged to interrogate and discover ways to improve the lives, health, and wellbeing of others, and to do so in ways that align with the University's Jesuit educational values and Catholic social teachings. Alpha RLC would be especially appealing to students focusing on Social Entrepreneurship, Business and Marketing, Social Sciences, Social Justice,

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and Diversity and Multiculturalism, to name but a few. Alpha RLC is a mini-suite-style, co-ed community housed within Graham residence hall. The four-story Graham Hall is divided into twelve different “neighborhoods,” with approximately thirty-two residents and one Community Facilitator in each neighborhood. Each of the twelve neighborhoods have their own common room lounge, kitchen, and laundry facility, all of which encourage students to build relationships that culminate in a sense of community throughout the building. Larger communal spaces include a multi-purpose room, a movie room, several study rooms, and two classrooms. A large quad provides outdoor seating and barbeque space.

The da Vinci RLC is among several other RLCs at the University. This co-ed, mixed-style residence hall honors the prolific interests of Leonardo da Vinci, including engineering, science, and visual art. The culture of da Vinci RLC aims to engage students’ minds and to

connect their passions to a greater sense of purpose. The da Vinci RLC is home to Ciao da Vinci! —a community located on the fourth floor of Casa Italiana. The community, closely tied to the Italian department, hosts activities such as bocce ball tournaments, Italian movie nights, home-cooked family-style dinners, and trips to the nearby “Little Italy” neighborhood. First-years students in the RLC take a Cultures and Ideas sequence course called “Italy: Gateway of Cultures.” Via class discussions and guest lectures, the two-quarter course explores Italian culture from Ancient Rome to Italy today. Casa Italiana Residence Hall houses approximately 380 students and provides a variety of living options within its two sections, Casa Vintage and Casa Modern. The former has traditional-style, single rooms with community bathrooms; the latter has suite-style apartments, each of which has four bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a kitchen. The larger communal spaces include a common room, a fully equipped kitchen, a fourth-floor

terrace, commuter lounge, three classrooms, and several lounges with televisions, billiards, ping pong and foosball tables, and pianos. A large courtyard provides outdoor seating, charcoal barbeques, and a bocce ball court.

### Prolific Residential Options at the University of Miami

Located seven miles southwest of downtown Miami, Coral Gables is home to the main campus of UM, known otherwise as the University of Miami. UM is set on a gorgeous 239-acre tract that serves as a hub for two renowned colleges and seven schools. To the broader community, the main campus also serves as a prime destination for arts and culture. For instance, it houses South Florida’s largest and most varied art collection at the Lowe Art Museum. The Jerry Herman Ring Theatre brings vitality to the South Florida cultural community, and the Gusman Concert Hall and Clarke Recital Hall are the sites of hundreds of concerts. Moreover, the

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Cosford Cinema screens a spectrum of first-run, classic, rare, and art-house films. Of course, the Coral Gables campus is also home to the University's celebrated intercollegiate athletics program.

The appeal of UM to prospective students is perhaps self-evident, but first-year students may not initially be aware of UM's adoption of Residential Learning Communities. Housing and Residential Life offers on-campus housing in five residential colleges as well as a Lakeside Village and the University Village. These serve as housing options for all first-year students, each of whom is required to live in University housing for two academic semesters. Eaton Residential College is surrounded by oak trees and is set directly on the eastern side of Lake Osceola. The rooms are designed in a suite arrangement with two double rooms connected by a bathroom. Each floor includes single and double rooms with study lounges and laundry rooms on each floor. Students are encouraged to cultivate relationships

with Residential Faculty, which in the case of Eaton is a senior lecturer at the UM Biology Department who lives on site with his family and their dog, Super, and cat, Mimi.

Opened to students in Fall 2020, Lakeside Village rests on twelve acres and is comprised of twenty-five interconnected buildings, in addition to a multitude of outdoor spaces that include a grand courtyard, study areas, recreational spaces, and outdoor terraces. The first floor and mezzanine level of the main structure serve as retail, event, and office spaces. As a way of enjoying the space surrounding Lake Osceola, amenities include a large exhibition space for dynamic programming along with other meeting spaces—an auditorium, a classroom, and a multi-use pavilion. Above the first floor and mezzanine level are five floors of student housing occupied by primarily sophomores as well as some juniors and seniors. Unit layouts vary from studios to single and double suites, and even to suites comprised of four single

bedrooms, a communal kitchen and living room, two bathrooms, and a laundry room.

### Reflecting on the Benefits of RLCs

Not only can RLCs provide a sense of community and security for students who are adjusting to a new, formative stage in their adult lives, but the benefits of RLCs go beyond day-to-day conveniences. RLCs positively impact students' academic and social opportunities and GPAs. These living spaces facilitate increased commitments to learning, increased persistence to graduation, and enhanced satisfaction with the overall experiences of campus life.



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Dr. David Vinson has a PhD in English with specializations in transatlantic literature and cultural studies. He is a committed scholar, teacher, and dad. If you ever meet David, avoid the subject of soccer. His fandom borders on the truly obnoxious.

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