

Increasing First-Semester Student Engagement:

A Residential Community Retention Study

by

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to increase first year residential student engagement and participation in residence hall programs during the 2011 fall semester at the Downtown Phoenix Campus of Arizona State University. Six upperclassmen (Taylor Place Leaders) residing in a residence hall (Taylor Place) were matched by academic major with 17 first year students residing in Taylor Place. During the first eleven weeks of the fall semester 2011, first year students met regularly with their Taylor Place Leader to discuss residence hall program participation, living in Taylor Place, attending Arizona State University, and adjusting to their academic responsibilities. All 23 program participants completed a pre-survey inquiring about their satisfaction with their decision to attend Arizona State University, residence hall involvement, and knowledge of university services. The researcher met with Taylor Place Leaders throughout the study to learn about their experiences with mentoring the first year students. At the conclusion of the study, participants met with the researcher to complete a post-survey inquiring about the same information as the pre-survey and participated in individual interviews discussing their experience in the study. Two major findings were identified. First, participants reported that the Taylor Place Experience peer mentoring program assisted first year students in adjusting to college through identifying student support resources. Second, participants reported that living on campus during the freshman year, with mentoring support, could promote academic success, compared with living at home due to the close living proximity of their peers. Taylor Place also saw an increase in residence hall

program participation during the 2011 fall semester in comparison to the 2010 fall semester. However, six of the seventeen freshman study participants decided to move out of Taylor Place and live at home by the end of the 2011 fall semester, for various reasons, such as family and employment obligations as well as being homesick.

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

The first year of college can be an overwhelming experience for students. For students who live in a residence hall their first year of college, it could be their first time living on their own in a new environment. Some (Jeffres, Powers, & Lee, 2007) have stated that the key to being successful in college is to be able to navigate the institution inside the classroom as well as outside the classroom. The college experience for students who live on and off campus can be both similar and different at the same time. Both cohorts of students are embarking on a new educational experience on a collegiate level, but what can separate the two groups is what they do outside the classroom. Students who live off campus may have more challenges to their extra-curricular involvement due to their commute back to campus from their residence. Students who live on-campus have the opportunity to attend campus activities at the spur of the moment.

The transition to college from high school can be a challenge for many traditional age college students. The success of transition to college correlates with student retention and persistence toward graduation (Levitz & Noel, 1989; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). Because the first six weeks of the school year are critical for students' transition into college (Levitz & Noel, 1989), university officials and residence life staff members play a critical role in helping new residential students manage their transition success and to get their college years off to a good start.

## **Purpose of Action Research**

The purpose of this action research study was to implement a mentoring program designed to increase engagement of newly enrolled freshmen residing in the Taylor Place residential community at the Downtown Campus of Arizona State University. The study documents the implementation of the engagement program design and measured the amount and kinds of increased student engagement attributed to the new program. To determine benefits for the longer term, I measured how increased student engagement of first year residential students relates to expressed intention to return to the residence hall on the Downtown Campus residential community for a second year.

Through the Taylor Place Experience program, the researcher implemented a programming model geared toward the overall (social, cultural, and academic) integration of a cohort of Taylor Place residents. Similar to the President Barack Obama Scholars Program, which is in its third year of implementation at Arizona State University, the researcher worked with Taylor Place staff and students to promote programs geared toward first year residential students' active engagement with ASU and their residential community.

This chapter provides detailed information on the state of the problem, the importance of the study, questions guiding the research, definitions of terms, the researcher's assumptions, and limitations of the study. This chapter also describes the theoretical framework that organizes my approach to this action research study.

## **Statement of the Problem**

With student involvement being one of the keys to retention and, potentially, to graduation, improving the experience of first year students who live in residence halls on campus is an important topic (Franklin, 2002). Increasing program participation of first year students who live on campus can enhance retention of this group of students from their first academic year to their second, and also provide vital information for developing, continuing, and re-shaping opportunities for future students.

## **Purpose of the Study**

Arizona State University is comprised of four unique campuses. Although the institution lives up to the phrase “One University in many places” (Arizona State University, 2010), each place or campus provides a different experience for students who reside on each campus. Looking specifically at students who live on the Downtown Phoenix Campus, their social experience will be much different than those students who reside on the Tempe campus. Each student can share a similar college experience, but each experience will be unique due to location. In speaking with students who reside on the Downtown Phoenix Campus (DPC), students often say the campus is made for students to study, but not for outside of the classroom experience.

The first goal of the action research study was to implement a peer-to-peer mentoring model, aimed at increasing student participation in residence hall programming. A second goal of this study was to measure the effects of increased residence hall programming participation on students’ expressed interest in

returning to the residence hall for a second academic year. I used Astin's (1984) Student Involvement Theory as a framework to guide this study.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions for the study are:

1. How beneficial is a mentoring program for first year residential students in Taylor Place?
2. Has the implementation of a mentoring program in Taylor Place increased the engagement of first year residential students in residence hall programs?
3. As a result of the mentoring experience, are first year students inclined to return to the Taylor Place residence for their second year?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Astin's (1984) Student Involvement Theory predicts that students who are highly involved or engaged at their higher education institution typically are more successful socially and academically than their counterparts who are less involved. Astin's Student Involvement Theory is critical in guiding the study as the researcher investigates residence hall programming and its influence on persistence of first year residential students.

#### **Definition of Terms**

Community Assistant (CA): At many institutions of higher education the community assistant is often referred as the Resident Assistant or RA who is a

student leader residing in the residence hall. The CA serves as the student leader on the floors where students live within the residence hall.

Engagement: Defined by the researcher as the level of involvement of the student in their residential environment.

First year student: This term can be used interchangeably with the term freshmen as they both relate to students who graduated from high school and are in their first academic year at an institution of higher education.

Involvement: Involvement can be defined as participation opportunities the research participants are involved in during their first year in college. The involvement experience may come from involvement in the residence hall, classroom, and extracurricular activities (Astin, 1984).

Persistence: Camara (2003), defined persistence as successfully completing the first year of college by a college student and enrolling for classes the following year at the same institution. For the sake of this study, the researcher will define persistence as students who successfully complete their fall semester and return for the spring semester.

Satisfaction: the level of comfort, fulfillment or gratification of students in an educational setting.

Residential student: refers to students who live on the campus of the higher education institution they are enrolled in for the academic year.

**Assumptions:**

1. Residence Hall Programming developed for first year residential students is positively related to their persistence in college as well as to their decisions about returning to the residence hall for a second year.
2. Student self-report surveys can provide valid and reliable method of determining first year residential student satisfaction.
3. Students will openly discuss their satisfaction with residence hall programming.

**Limitations**

The study is limited to a single residence hall at the Downtown Phoenix Campus of Arizona State University. One particular population of students (first year residential students) is being studied and not the entire student population at Arizona State University. The study is not a longitudinal study. The study focused on the first year residential students' participation in residence hall programming during the fall semester of 2011.

**Summary**

This study focused on implementing and evaluating a new peer-mentoring approach to increasing program participation of first year residential students at Arizona State University on the Downtown Phoenix campus. The study was conducted in an attempt to improve the levels of engagement of first year undergraduates with residence hall programming at the Downtown Campus residence hall. A longer-term goal of the study was to increase the rate of



persistence of engaged first year students, as indicated by larger numbers of students registering for year two at the Downtown Campus.

## Chapter 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to examine published material about student engagement and involvement experiences of first year students who reside in residence halls. This section will provide information about the methods and services used to generate student engagement and promote persistence in their pursuit of a college degree at Arizona State University.

#### **College Persistence and Retention**

Although financial challenges contribute to the lack of persistence of college students, there are many other factors that affect student retention. Spradlin, Burroughs, Rutkowski, & Lang (2010) have also identified non-financial issues such as psychological and institutional challenges that affect student persistence. College students who do not have a sense of belonging or connection at their institution of higher education tend not to stay (Spradlin et al., 2010, p. 2). Therefore, the authors recommend that institutions of higher education create programs to integrate students into campus life. According to Kuh, Cruces, Shoup, Kinizie, & Gonyea (2007) freshmen who feel connected to their college or university (socially or academically) tend to remain at the institution. Besides social programming, Spradlin et al. (2010) recommend that institutions develop programs such as mentoring, transitioning, and advising. Each type of program is geared toward students meeting other students and helping one another in navigation through their college experience or promoting

student interaction with faculty and staff who can assist in students navigating through their collegiate experience.

### **Student Involvement Theory**

The first six weeks of a first year college students' collegiate experience are critical to their postsecondary academic and social experience (Levitz & Noel, 1989). Since the 1930s, college student involvement has been on the radar for higher education administrators (American Council on Education, 1937).

Although the study of college student involvement began in the early 1900s, higher education administrators began to take notice in the 1970s with Astin's research on college student involvement and its relationship to persistence, satisfaction, and graduation (Astin, 1977). Astin's (1993) Student Involvement Theory focused on methods to increase first year students' collegiate success. Through increasing academic involvement, interactions with faculty, involvement with peers, involvement with work, and other forms of involvement, students are more likely to return for a second year.

Astin (1993) defined academic involvement as class attendance, studying and completing class assignments. Examples of the physical and mental engagement college students put forth could be extracurricular activity participation along with preparing and attending classes (Belch, Gebel, & Maas, 2001). He believes students who attend classes regularly and who complete academic assignments increase their potential for academic success. Interacting with faculty outside of the classroom through conversations, student research opportunities, and assisting faculty in the classroom can also contribute to a

student success. Involvement with peers can contribute to success and retention of first year college students. By interacting with peers, first year students are thought to enhance their communication skills along with developing leadership skills.

Student involvement can range from daily communication with classmates, to involvement in student organizations, which could lead to students taking on leadership roles in student organizations. When referring to involvement via work, Astin (1993) defined work as part-time or full-time employment at an on-campus or off-campus workplace. The other form of involvement Astin discussed in *What Matters in College? Four Critical Years Revisited* focused on mental and physical involvement such as volunteering opportunities, exercise and intramural athletics, and activities related to hobbies. Any of these types of involvement can contribute to the first year college student's success. A combination of the several types of involvement may increase academic and social development even farther. Multiple types of involvement also contribute to the probability of the student returning for a second year, which may lead toward college completion.

This action research dissertation focused on developing, implementing and evaluating improved peer-to-peer approaches to promoting first year student involvement. The researcher chose to promote peer-to-peer mentoring because this study focused on out of classroom experiences in which students have staff to student interactions. This action research study focused on the implementation of peer-to-peer interaction used to increase involvement in residence hall programs.

## **First year Experience**

When entering college, first year students are entering their respective institutions of higher education with different levels of academic and social development. Factors that may have contributed to their development include their familial upbringing, socioeconomic status, and extra-curricular activities prior to entering college (Terenzini, Nora, Pascarella, Bernal, Crissman, & Cabrera, 2002). Although students enter college with varying levels of development, researchers (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) argue that the college experience provides a positive impact on their overall development and prepares students for life after college. The first year of college also sets the foundation of personal/independent growth of students (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) as well as determines whether they will return to college for a second year and ultimately graduate (Tinto, 1993).

Many institutions of higher education have created first year experience programs for first year college students, geared to address the challenges of adjusting to a new living and learning environment. Although each institution has differing institutional missions, most of the first year experience programs focus on developing the student academically and socially. Through intentional interactions with peers, faculty, and administrators, first year experience programs are intended to provide support, assistance, and encouragement during the first year of college (Upcraft & Gardener, 1989). Many of the first year experience programs focus on getting students involved in on-campus activities to increase

the likelihood of the student returning for a second year. On-campus experiences may also familiarize students with the resources of the institution.

### **Mentoring**

According to Kram (1985), mentoring is when an older person with experience in a certain area shares their experience with another person with less experience at the same area. At times, individuals who share their experience are considered “mentors” and the individuals learning from the mentors are considered “mentees” or “protégés” (Corella, 2010). Budge (2006) developed literature speaking to various types of mentoring such as formal, informal, traditional, and nontraditional. She stated traditional mentoring is the typical type mentoring in a higher education setting (Budge, 2006, pg. 75). This type of mentoring is usually between a faculty/staff member mentoring a graduate student. In a setting where undergraduates mentor their peers, the goal of this type of mentoring is to increase student involvement at the institution (Corella, 2010).

Sanchez, Bauer, & Paronto (2008) have conducted studies evaluating mentoring programs geared to increase student retention at higher education institutions. Results from their study showed student peer to peer mentoring programs could increase student satisfaction of their institution of higher education. As a result of these peer to peer mentoring experiences, students are more likely to return to their respective institution of higher education.

Although mentees are expected to achieve a worthwhile experience, mentors can gain something from their experience in mentoring their peer. Budge

(2006) concludes mentors can enhance their communication skills along with becoming more responsible in their actions and priorities. In regards to the benefits the mentee/protégé in the mentoring experience receive, her research has concluded self-esteem of mentees have increased as well as their time management was enhanced (Budge, 2006, pg. 40).

In this study, peer mentoring was expected to increase student participation in residence hall programs, which could result in student retention within the residence hall (Taylor Place) located on the Downtown Phoenix campus of Arizona State University. Researchers (Budge, 2006; Sanchez, Bauer, & Paronto, 2008; Corella, 2010) have concluded peer to peer mentoring could result in not only a beneficial experience for the mentee, but also a beneficial experience for the mentor. This study will provide data on how the Taylor Place Experience Program will not only contribute to the increase of student participant in residence hall programs by first year students, but also enhance the university experience of the mentors participating in this action research study.

## **Peer Mentoring Programs at Arizona State University**

### **Shades Multicultural Mentoring Program**

As stated earlier, traditional mentoring in higher education takes place between faculty/staff and graduate students (Budge, 2006). At Arizona State University, mentoring has been between faculty/staff and graduate students as well as peer to peer. Within the Graduate College at Arizona State University, peer to peer mentoring takes shape at the graduate student level with the Shades Multicultural Mentoring Program. The Shades Multicultural program was

originally created as a peer to peer mentoring program for minority students in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) studies (Shades, 2010). However, due to the demand of the program, Shades opened the program to all underrepresented graduate students and even to graduate students mentoring underrepresented undergraduate students at the university.

The goal for the peer mentoring program is create a peer support network, where students share information on opportunities to be successful at the university and beyond (Shades, 2010). Structured opportunities for peers to gather through the Shades program happens through Shades events.

Communication between Shades administrators and participants happen informally and formal. One method of formal communication with program participants is through Blackboard, which is an electronic forum used at Arizona State University for online courses, training modules, and university department and organization communication. Information provided on the Shades Multicultural Mentoring Program Blackboard consists of upcoming event such as lunchtime conversations, mixers, resources for mentors and mentees. Resources for mentor and mentees can consist of training material and FERPA guidelines, Success Coach Online Chats, and university resource information. Within the Blackboard site, mentors and mentees can discuss various issues via discussion board.

During the fall 2010 semester, Shades program participants fit the ethnicity backgrounds of Hispanic American, African American, White American, Asian American, and Native American (Shades, 2010). Upon Peer



Mentor Training, mentors are paired with a mentee. Ideally, mentors would be paired with a mentee with the same academic background. However, with the demand for mentor in the program, mentors could be paired with a mentee who is not a graduate student or in the same study field.

### **President Barack Obama Scholars Program**

Established in 2009 to create more educational opportunity and access to higher education, the President Barack Obama Scholars program was formed at Arizona State University (Obama Scholars, 2011). The Obama Scholars program is open to first time freshmen who are Arizona residents seeking an undergraduate degree. Although the program is created to serve Arizona residents, Native American first time freshmen who are Non-Arizona residents may be eligible for the program.

During the first academic year of participation in the Obama Scholars program, each recipient is paired with an Arizona State University employee for mentorship (Obama Scholars, 2011). Peer to peer mentoring is also incorporated into the Obama Scholars program. The purpose of the mentorship is to increase the potential of academic success of the recipients, by meeting personnel who could link them to university resources geared to promote their success. Mentors and mentees are to meet at least once a month to discuss the recipient's academic and personal progress at the university. Obama scholars' mentors may consist of university personnel such as administrators, faculty, staff and undergraduate students. Each month, the mentor is to complete a monthly report focusing on the student's progress at the institution. In the 2009-2010 academic year, there was

total of 1425 mentors. 613 of the mentors were peer mentors (Amy Golden, personal communication, March 6, 2012). In the 2010-2011 academic year 575 of the 1231 mentors were peer mentors and 84 of the 413 mentors are peer mentors during the 2011-2012 academic year. Due to the President Barack Obama Scholar program being the largest ASU mentoring program with a mentor to mentee ratio in the single digits (1:1, 1:2, and 1:3), I chose to model the Taylor Place Experience Program on this program.

Similar to Sebold's 2011 study, implemented a peer mentoring intervention, focused on retention. The participants in Sebold's study were commuter students at the ASU Downtown Campus and the goal of the study was to increase student retention. Through an action research study, Sebold developed a mentoring program called the Sky Leaders program, which focused on the retention of commuter students through intentional "faculty-and peer-led mentoring experiences" (Sebold, 2011, p. 3). One of the major results of Sebold's action research study was an increase in the participants' level of comfort with their field of study. Through conversation during their peer and faculty led mentoring meetings, mentees were able to learn more about their current field of study and determine if they foresee themselves in the field after degree completion (Sebold, 2011, p. 60). Some of the participants in the Sky Leaders program realized they were not in the appropriate major field of study, while other participants confirmed that they were in the appropriate field of study. Comprised of four campuses across the Phoenix, AZ metropolitan area, Arizona State University provides residential bed space to accommodate on-campus

housing for more than 12,000 students (C. Aska, personal communication, March 27, 2012). Each campus (Downtown Phoenix, Polytechnic, Tempe, and West) provides housing for students enrolled at the institution. As each residential community is operated by professional staff member, each residential community/floor is staffed by a student staff member.

### **Mentoring in the Residence Hall**

Community Assistants and Residential College Paraprofessionals are student staffing that is consistent across all four campuses at Arizona State University. Community Assistants (CAs) at Arizona State University are student staff employed by the Department of Residential Life. CAs serve as student leaders on each floor in the residential community. The CAs address community standards as well as assisting residents in academic and social engagement at the university. Residential College Paraprofessionals are student staff that live in the residential community with the first year students and CAs. Residential College Paraprofessionals are student staff that serve as liaisons between the college and the first year residential students. The paraprofessionals are compensated by their respective academic colleges as compared to their CA counterparts who are compensated by Department of Residential Life. What separates the position of the CA and Residential College Paraprofessional are the roles of the positions. Both student staff work collaboratively in engaging their first year student counterparts, but their reporting structures differ. CAs are supervised by Community Coordinators or Assistant Community Coordinators are live-in residential life professional staff members who are responsible for the operations

of the residential facility. Residential College Paraprofessionals report to a faculty member or professional staff members in the college affiliate with the residential college.

Taylor Place is the 12 floor, two tower residential community for on-campus residents residing on the Downtown Phoenix campus of Arizona State University. Opened in August of 2008, this residential community provides living spaces for first year student, upperclassmen students, and graduate students.

Although there are residential colleges in both towers one and tower two, tower one is the designate residential college communities for first year students. The residential colleges located in Taylor Place are affiliated with the academic colleges housed on the Downtown Phoenix campus of Arizona State University. The residential college communities represented in Taylor Place are University College (Explores), College of Nursing and Health Innovation (Nursing, Health Promotion Professional, Healthy Lifestyle Coaching, Kinesiology, and Pre-Health Central), the Walter Cronkite School Journalism and Mass Communication (Cronkite Village), Barrett, the Honors College (Barrett), and the College of Public Programs (Metropolis). On every floor of the residential college community, there is a CA and Residential College Student Leader (RCSL) serving as a peer mentor to the students in the community.

Unlike the Taylor Place Leaders in this study, each CA and RCSL receives some sort of compensation. Provided by the Department of Residential Life, CAs' compensation consists of a room and board, as well as a monetary stipend. RCSLs are provided a stipend by their affiliated academic college. CAs

and RCSLs mentor at least 50 students per floor. Whereas each Taylor Place Leader works with a maximum of three first year students, which allows more one on one time between each Taylor Place Leader and first year student.

This chapter provided information on college persistence and retention, student involvement theory, and first year experience programs. An example of a mentor program at the university as well as a similar mentoring study was also discussed in this chapter. Chapter Three will discuss the research design as well as the intervention for the action research study.

## Chapter 3

### RESEARCH DESIGN

#### **Introduction**

This chapter provides a description of the design of this action research study. The study was designed as a qualitative study with a portion of the study being quantitative. The quantitative data collected in the study was used to provide supporting material to the qualitative data collected. Later in this chapter I provide information on how data was collected in identifying participants in the study as well as for shaping the design of the action research intervention.

Qualitative research is traditionally used when researchers conduct a study that consists of a small number of participants where they are asked questions to which they can respond in their own voice instead of choosing among pre-specified responses (Maxwell, 1996). In order to gather crucial data, participants completed a questionnaire in combination with being interviewed. Qualitative research methods were also used to provide the researcher with opportunities to ask more probing questions of the participants when necessary. Due to the young age of the Downtown Phoenix campus there has been no research on residence hall program participation of first year residential students on the campus. A total of 23 participants were interviewed for the study, consisting of six Taylor Place Leaders and 17 first year residential student participants.

#### **Participant Recruitment**

With approval from the Arizona State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Appendix A), the researcher worked with staff members in

Department of Residence Life at the Downtown Phoenix campus in acquiring a roster of all Taylor Place residents for the 2011 fall semester. By acquiring the residence hall roster, the researcher was able to identify students interested in participating in the action research study. With the action research study being approved prior to the beginning of the 2011 fall semester, the researcher contacted the participants through email, phone, and personal contact to inquire about their interest in participating in the study. Since the study focused on residential students, the criteria for students to participate in the study were they had to have lived in Taylor Place for an academic year (prior to 2011-2012 academic year; Taylor Place Mentor requirements) or they would be living in Taylor Place during the 2011 fall semester as a first year college student.

Upon revision of interview questions, the researcher made sequential screening calls to individuals on the list until 6 returning students to Taylor Place were identified. Once the returning students were identified, the researcher made sequential screening calls to individuals until a total of 17 first year students were identified as volunteers for the study. After participants agreed to participate in the study, a letter briefly explaining the study was sent to each program participant explaining the purpose of the study (Appendix B). A more detailed letter explaining the study and requirements for each participant was later sent to each participant (Appendix C & Appendix D).

Prior to the study beginning, all participants agreed to participate in the study by acknowledging they would participate and at any time could withdraw from the study without penalty. Each participant was then provided a brief survey

(Appendix E) inquiring about their residency classification, identity (gender and racial/ethnic) and range of agreement in attending ASU and being engaged at the university. At the conclusion of the study, participants completed the same brief survey to determine if there was a change in the participants' experience during the study. The surveys were used to gather qualitative data for the study to determine if there was a change in the experience and decisions by the program participants. As part of the study, each participant was identified as a Taylor Place Leader or a First Year Participant.

Inspired by Sebold's study (2011) of first year students, I developed a 25-item Likert scale survey (Appendix E) instrument focusing on student demographics, university attendance, and knowledge of university resources. I used this type of survey instrument to simplify participant selection as well as for descriptive purposes. Interview questions (Appendix I & Appendix J) were developed to reflect the research questions stated above. Interview questions focused on engagement in the residence hall, attending the university, and university academic and social resources.

### **Program Participants**

*Taylor Place Leader Participants.* Six students who are returning to live in Taylor Place for the 2011-2012 academic year were identified through purposive sampling. The researcher then invited and selected the Taylor Place Leaders to participate in the study (Appendix C & Appendix D). Upon the students' agreement to participate as a Taylor Place Leader, each participant completed a pre and post-survey (Appendix E) inquiring about their co-curricular involvement



and knowledge of campus resources. Prior to the beginning of the fall 2011 semester Taylor Place Leaders participated in a training session (Appendix F) in which I explained the purpose and design of the study in detail. The training session provided instructions and expectations for interacting with their first year student participants. Materials used for the Taylor Place Leader training are similar to material used for the President Barack Obama Scholars program mentor trainings. Taylor Place Leaders also received a meeting agenda and log (Appendix G & Appendix H) for use in their bi-weekly interaction with their first year participants. During the second week of the fall 2011 semester, Taylor Place Leaders met briefly with their first year students to introduce themselves and inform the first year students they would be in contact throughout the fall semester to assist in their engagement in Taylor Place and Arizona State University.

At the end of the eleventh week of the fall semester, Taylor Place Leaders were invited to participate in a closing interview where they completed a questionnaire (Appendix I) and discussed their responses to the questions on the questionnaire. With the agreement of each participants, the interviews were audio recorded. The questionnaire inquired about the Taylor Place Leaders' experiences in the action research study as well as requesting their feedback and recommendations for enhancing the Taylor Place Experience Program for a second year.

*First Year Student Participants.* Seventeen first time freshman students were identified to participate in the study. Eighteen students was originally the goal for

the study, but only 17 first year students agreed to participate in the action research study. Once the 17 participants were identified, the researcher sent each participant a description of the study (Appendix D). Upon their arrival to the university, each participant was invited to meet with the researcher to discuss the study, but only 4 first year students met with the researcher. All first year students completed the survey (Appendix E) prior to meeting their Taylor Place Leader. First year students who met with the researcher completed the survey in person. Surveys that were completed by the participants who did not meet with the researcher were returned via email.

At the end of the eleventh week of fall semester, first year students met with the researcher to participate in a closing interview where they completed a questionnaire (Appendix J) and completed a survey (Appendix E). The questionnaire inquired about the participants' experience in the study and requested their recommendations about revising the Taylor Place Experience Program for a second year. Similar to the survey of Taylor Place Leaders, the freshman survey was used to determine if there was change in their engagement with life on campus and change in their awareness of services available to them at the university.

### **Peer Mentor Training**

As stated in chapter 2, I was inspired by the peer mentoring aspect of the President Barack Obama Scholars Program at Arizona State University. Therefore, the researcher chose to use aspects of the President Barack Obama Scholars Program in developing the Taylor Place Experience Program. As part of

the Obama Scholars program, mentors meet with students once per month to discuss students' transition to college as well as involvement in Obama Scholar events. In the Taylor Place Experience Program, Taylor Place Leaders met with their first year student bi-weekly to discuss their adjustment to living in Taylor Place, attending Arizona State University, and attending residence hall programs. As part of the Obama Scholars Program, faculty/staff and students working with an Obama Scholar had to participate in a mentor training session. In the Taylor Place Experience Program, mentors also completed mentor training.

The Taylor Place Leader mentor training focused on mentoring relationships, the role of mentor, and boundary setting. Through a PowerPoint presentation, Taylor Place Leaders learned more about the Taylor Place Experience program's purpose and their responsibilities as mentors, which included establishing a positive relationship with their first year students, discussing the goal of getting freshmen involved in residence hall programs and assisting mentees in their academic success. Taylor Place Leaders were told that their role was to listen to the first year student in discussing their experiences at Arizona State University and to assist the first year students in adjusting to the institution and residence by providing information on university resources geared toward academic and social success. Taylor Place Leaders were also informed that they are not to date the student, to do their homework, or to share personal information about any students at the institution. As part of ethical conduct in working with their first year students, Taylor Place Leaders were also informed they were not to provide drugs or alcohol or to drink alcohol with their first year

students. Taylor Place Leaders are expected maintain a confidential and professional relationship with their first year students.

### **Research Questions**

The question that guided this research study is: How does mentoring of first year residents living in Taylor Place increase residence hall program attendance and retention in the residence hall from year 1 to year 2?

### **Timeline**

During the month of August 2011, the researcher recruited returning residents of Taylor Place for the 2011-2012 academic year to serve as Taylor Place Leaders for the Taylor Place Program. The four females and two male upperclassmen who agreed to participate as Taylor Place Leaders/mentors, majored in the field of Journalism and Mass Communication, Exercise and Wellness (two upperclassmen in this major served as Taylor Place Leaders/mentors), Nutrition (Dietetics), Healthy Lifestyle Coaching, and Criminal Justice. Each Taylor Place Leader received further information about the Taylor Place Experience Program (Appendix B & C) via email. Taylor Place Leaders then met individually with the researcher for mentor training (Appendix F) or received training presentations via email. The single Taylor Place Leader who received the presentation via email was trained by phone, where I discussed each slide with in detail as if they were in the same room with the other Taylor Place Leaders trained.

Similar to the Taylor Place Leader/mentor recruitment, during the month of August 2011, the researcher identified 17 first-year residential students to

participate in the Taylor Place experience program. First year students who agreed to participate in the study majored in the fields of their respective mentors. Recruiting of all the participants took place prior to the beginning of the 2011 fall semester (August 18, 2011). When each first year student agreed to participate in the study, the researcher provided further information about the study via email (Appendix B &D). Taylor Place Leaders and first year student participants completed the pre-survey (Appendix E) via email and returned the document to the researcher within the first week of the 2011 fall semester.

During the second week of the 2011 fall semester, Taylor Place Leaders and first-year student participants were formally introduced via email to each other, contact information was exchanged and the initial face-to-face meetings were scheduled. After the initial meeting the Taylor Place Leaders had with their first-year students, they then began meeting with the first year students bi-weekly. During the months of September 2011 and October 2011, Taylor Place mentors met with the researcher to discuss their experience in the intervention of working with the first year student participants. During the discussions, Taylor Place Leaders provided updates on the progress of their first-year students in adjusting to attending ASU, living in Taylor Place, and participating in Taylor Place Hall programs. In the months of November 2011 and December 2011, Taylor Place Leaders and first year student participants met with the researcher to complete the post-survey (Appendix E). As part of the meeting with the researcher, each program participant was interviewed using the questions from the questionnaire

(Appendix I & Appendix J). Figure 1 shows the timeline of the entire action research study.

Figure 1. *Timeline of action research study*

Figure 1. Study Timeline

AUGUST	SEPTEMBER	OCTOBER	NOVEMBER	DECEMBER
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☐ August 11-12, Participant Recruitment (n=23)</li> <li>☐ August 11-12, Participant Invitation &amp; Consent Form (n=23)</li> <li>☐ August 11-12, Pre-survey Completion (n=23)</li> <li>☐ August 15-17, Mentor Training (n=6)</li> <li>☐ August 25, Mentor/Mentee Introduction (n=23)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☐ August 25- November 11, Bi-weekly meetings between Mentors &amp; Mentees</li> <li>☐ Sept 26 – October 28, Mentor/Researcher Discussion (n=23 &amp; n=17)</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☐ Nov 11- Dec 7, Post-Survey (n=17)</li> <li>☐ Nov 11 –Dec 5, Participant1:1 Interview (n=17)</li> </ul>	

### Data Collection and Analysis

At the beginning of the interview with each participant, I asked for consent to audio record the interview session. The audio recordings were used to supplement note taking by the researcher in order to identify themes. Although there are many tools used in qualitative research including survey, case study, ethnography, and focus groups, the researcher used questionnaires to collect participants’ initial evaluations of the Taylor Place Program, then followed up on the questionnaires with interviews, to generate deeper understanding of the participants’ experiences.

This chapter described the methods used to collect data and described the action research intervention. Chapter 4 reports the results of the study.

## Chapter 4

### ANALYSIS OF DATA AND RESULTS

#### **Data Analysis**

The information collected from participants during the action research portion and interview sessions were compiled in Microsoft Word documents for analysis. Information collected from the pre-survey and post-survey (Appendix E) was compiled in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for analysis by the researcher. In order to identify themes, the researcher transcribed data from the individual interviews of program participants. The total time for the audio recording of the interview session was approximately 13 hours.

The researcher developed interview questions (Appendix I & Appendix J) based on Astin's (1984) Student Involvement Theory. Questions developed for program participants focused on student engagement in the residence hall on the Downtown Phoenix campus of ASU, university services used by program participants, feedback on the Taylor Place Experience program along with recommendations for future implementation of the program and involvement by students at Arizona State University.

#### **Fall Semester Data Results**

Through communication with Taylor Place professional staff, the researcher learned that retention for 2011 Fall semester, first time freshmen returning to Taylor Place for the 2012 Spring semester was 91percent (Appendix M). During the 2010-2011 academic year, 93% first time freshmen returned to Taylor Place from the 2010 Fall semester to the 2011 Spring semester (Appendix

M). The primary reasons for the decrease in student retention for the 2012 spring semester were students transferring to another institution of higher education due to losing their direct admit into the ASU Nursing program or because of affordability problems (B. Custer, personal communication, January 20, 2012). According to Taylor Place professional staff, the total occupancy of Taylor Place during the fall 2010 semester was 1065 (682 students were first time freshmen) (Appendix M). During the 2011 fall semester the total occupancy was 1043 (658 students were first time freshmen) (Appendix M).

Attendance at residence hall programs increased from the 2010 Fall semester to the 2011 Fall semester. The average attendance at hall programs during the 2010 Fall semester was 113 students (Appendix L). The average attendance in hall programs during the 2011 Fall semester was 176 students (Appendix L). In speaking with Taylor Place staff about the increase, I learned that Taylor Place staff intensified their marketing effort to attract larger attendance.

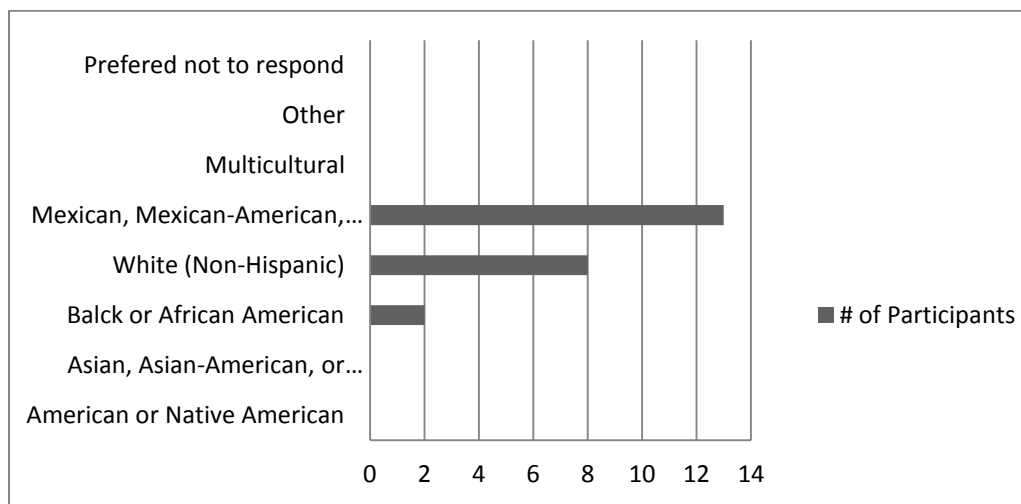
### **Quantitative Data Analysis (Pre-Survey)**

A total of 23 students participated in the study whose majors were Journalism and Mass Communication, Exercise and Wellness, Nutrition (Dietetics), Healthy Lifestyle Coaching, and Criminal Justice and Criminology. Six of the 23 participants were returning students to Taylor Place who resided in the residence hall during the 2010-2011 academic year. Sixty-one percent of the program participants were from Arizona. Of the 23 students who participated in the study, 14 were female. Four of the six mentors were female. Program



participants completed a survey (Appendix E) that inquired about their ethnic background. Of the 23 program participants, two participants self identified as black or African American, eight as white (non-Hispanic), and 13 self identified as Mexican, Mexican American, Puerto Rican, other Hispanic or Latino (Table 1). Program participants had the option to identify themselves as multiracial, other, or to not identify their ethnicity. No participant opted out of disclosing his or her ethnicity nor identified as multiracial or “other” ethnicity.

Table 1. *Self-Reported Racial or Ethnic Identity (Pre-Survey Completion) N= 23*



Prior to the meetings between first-year students and their Taylor Place Mentors, each study participant (first-year students and Taylor Place Mentors) completed a pre-survey (Appendix E). The survey required participants to report on their level of satisfaction with deciding to attend Arizona State University, the importance to their success of getting socially involved in the residence hall activities during their first year of college, and the importance of being knowledgeable about university student support services.

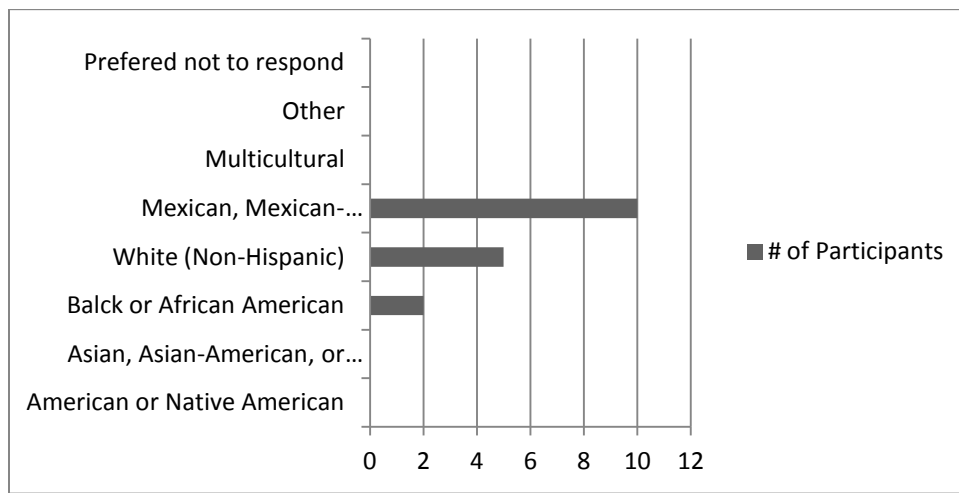
The survey questions were developed to determine whether participants were satisfied with their decision to attend ASU at the beginning of the peer mentoring intervention. Should the participants have chosen to attend ASU reluctantly, the researcher would assume their level of involvement in the residence hall and knowledge of university services would differ from participants who were satisfied with their decision to attend ASU. In completing the pre-survey (Appendix E), 100 percent of the participants (N= 23) responded that they were satisfied with their decision to attend Arizona State University. Thirty-five percent of the participants strongly agreed that getting involved socially in the residence hall was important while 65 percent of the participants agreed with the statement. Results of the pre-survey (Appendix E) showed that only 13 percent (n=3) of the participants strongly agreed that it was important to be knowledgeable about university services provided to assist in their success at the university. Of the 23 participants completing the survey, 87 percent (n=20) agreed that it is important to be knowledgeable about of university services provided for support of student success. In summary, at the beginning of the study, the 23 participants reported positive to very positive attitudes about their decision to attend ASU and about the importance of engagement in ASU-provided extra-curricular activities and awareness of available student support services.

### **Quantitative Data Analysis (Post-Survey)**

A total of 17 students completed the Taylor Place Experience program and post-survey (Appendix E). Eleven (65 percent) of the participants who completed

the post-survey were female. Fifty-three percent of the participants who completed the post survey were out-of-state students. Fifty-nine percent of the students completing the post-survey self-identified their racial or ethnic identity as being Mexican, Mexican American, Puerto Rican, other Hispanic or Latino (Table 2). Twenty-nine percent of the participants completing the post-survey were White (Non-Hispanic).

Table 2. *Self-Report Racial or Ethnic Identity (Post-Survey Completion) N=17*



After completing the Taylor Place Experience Program Post-Survey, all participants continued to be satisfied with their decision to attend Arizona State University. When responding to the survey question regarding the importance of involvement in residence hall programs as a first year student (Table 3), there was not much change from the pre-survey responses. However, including the six study participants who decided to move home before the end of the study would likely have changed this picture.. There was a slight increase (see Table 4) in participants agreeing strongly that it is important to be knowledgeable about university services provided to assist students in their success at the university.

Table 3. *Self-Reported Level of Importance of Residence Hall Involvement for First-Year Students (N = 17 Pre-Survey; N = 11 Post-Survey).*

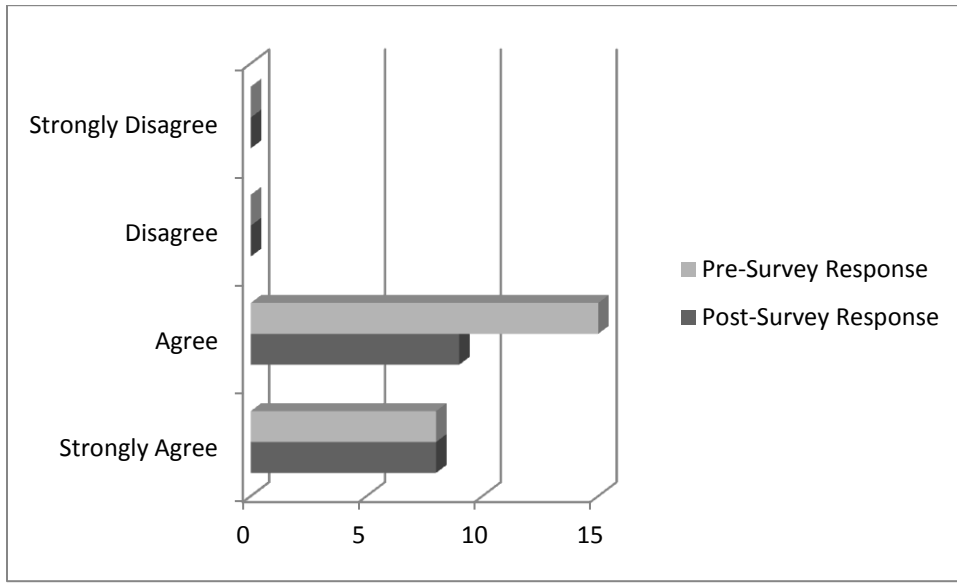
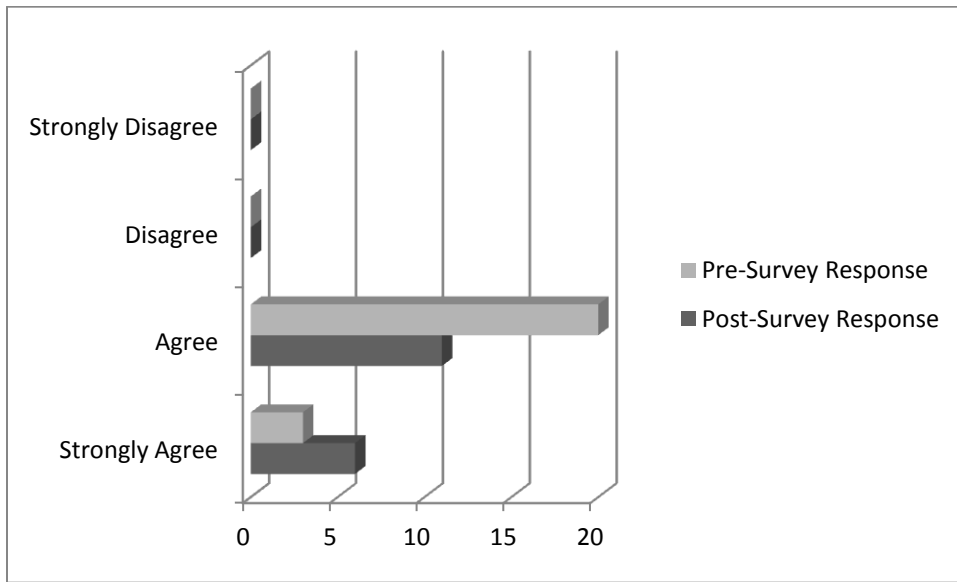


Table 4. *Self-Reported Importance of Knowledge of University Services for Student Success (N = 17 Pre-Survey; N = 11 Post-Survey)*



### **Discontinuation of Study by Program Participants**

Of the six freshman students who did not continue in the Taylor Place Experience Program for the entire 2011 fall semester, 50% were male. The college breakdown of the students stopping out of the study were one Journalism and Mass Communication student, four Nutrition and Health Promotion students, and one College of Public Programs student. Only two of the students stopping out of the program had an interaction with their Taylor Place Leader in the month of October, while the remaining four did not have communication with their Taylor Place Leader after the month of September. Fifty percent of the students stopping out of the program self-identified as Mexican, Mexican American, Puerto Rican, other Hispanic or Latino while the remaining students stopping out of the program self identified themselves as White (Non-Hispanic).

In speaking with Taylor Place Leaders in the month of October, I learned that the six students stopping out of the program no longer resided in Taylor Place. These students continued to have a housing assignment for the 2011 fall semester, but returned to their permanent residence instead of living in their on-campus residence. Taylor Place Leaders and program participants remaining in the program informed me that a few of the students returned to their permanent residence due to family obligations (caring for their parents and/or siblings) employment obligations (employment was closer to their permanent residence than their on-campus residence) or because of homesickness. In analyzing the grade point average (GPA) of the two groups (students stopping out vs. students

remaining in the study for the entire 2011 fall semester) there was no difference in GPA (students stopping out: 2.9254 vs. students remaining 2.932).

### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

During the program implementation, mentors and mentees were to meet bi-weekly to discuss the academic, social and residence hall experiences of the first-year student. Upon the completion of the meetings, mentors were to complete a contact log (Appendix H). Contact logs were developed for mentors to provide updates to the researcher about the progress of the mentees in the areas of residence hall experience, attending ASU, their academic courses, Taylor Place Hall program attendance, and any other information the mentor felt would be beneficial to the study. During the first month of the semester, mentors were consistent in meeting with their mentees and submitting completed contact logs. By the second month, mentors expressed reluctance to complete contact log entries after each meeting with their mentees.

Upon the discussion with Taylor Place Leaders/mentors about the completion of the contact logs (or lack of completion), the researcher learned from the mentors that completing the logs was more work than they were expecting. The researcher then agreed to speak with all mentors individually on a monthly basis to discuss their experience in the study as well as the experience of their mentees. During these meetings with the mentors, the researcher learned that the mentors were enjoying their interactions with their mentees.

During the Taylor Place Leader/mentor meetings to discuss the August mentee interactions, I learned that the mentors were enjoying their experiences in

interacting with the mentees, but were uncomfortable with the meeting structure. The mentors felt out of character scheduling a meeting with their mentees. Originally, the researcher charged mentors to meet with their mentees in the dining hall to discuss the mentees' transition from high school to college. Upon receiving recommendations from the mentors about revising the form of their meetings, mentors began to meet with their mentees in residence hall lounges, over lunch in the residence and at local eateries in the downtown Phoenix area, shopping malls in the city of Phoenix, and using social media such as Facebook. Upon adjusting the meeting interactions, the researcher was informed by the mentors that mentees felt more comfortable contacting their mentees via text messages.

While meeting with the mentors about their interaction with their mentees, the researcher found that during the month of August, mentees were still adjusting to living in Taylor Place, having a roommate, getting used to their course load and assignments. The most popular hall program attended by the mentor and mentees was the "Downtown Freeze" event. In speaking with Taylor Place professional staff, the researcher was informed The "Downtown Freeze" event was an ice cream social with music at which students were able to decorate their ice cream with various toppings and have an opportunity to meet other residents in Taylor Place (B. Custer, personal communication, August 20, 2011).

During the September interaction with the mentees to discuss the mentors, the researcher learned that the majority of the mentees were adjusting to living in Taylor Place, while a few were not having good experiences with their

roommates. The mentees whose majors were in the health science field were feeling the stress of their coursework, while participating journalism majors continued to enjoy their academic experience at ASU. The most popular residence hall program attended in the month of September was the “Mr. TP” program. In speaking with Taylor Place professional staff, the researcher learn the “Mr. TP” is a male pageant similar to a Miss America pageant where contestants (male residents of Taylor Place) participate in a formal wear session, casual wear session, talent session, and final questions session. Judges in the “Mr. TP” program consist of residents and student staff residing in Taylor Place (B. Custer, personal communication, September 20, 2011).

The October meeting with the mentors was interesting as both mentors and mentees were consumed with their course work as mid-term exams were scheduled throughout the month of October. Mentees continued to have similar reports about their residence hall experiences as they did in September. The most discussed hall program for the month of October was the “Health Education” program, in which a health education instructor spoke with residents on a having healthy relationships (B. Custer, personal communication, October 21, 2011). A few of the mentors mentioned that there were a few mentees whom they were not in contact with during the month of October. November was the final month mentors were scheduled to meet with their mentees. During the month of November, the researcher scheduled meetings with all 23 the program participants to discuss their experiences in the study; 17 of the 23 participants agreed to meet with the researcher. The researcher was informed by Taylor Place Leader/mentees



that six of the 23 first-year students/mentees had decided not to participate any longer in the action research study. These mentees continued to attend ASU, but decided to live at home and not in Taylor Place.

### **Interview Responses**

During the months of November and December 2011, the researcher interviewed the 17 remaining program participants (Taylor Place Leaders and first-year students). Interview questions (Appendix I &J) focused on engagement within the residence hall, use of university services to assist in student academic and social success, program recommendations, and university referrals.

#### **Interview Response – First Year Student Participants**

When speaking with first year residential students about the hall programs attended during the Fall 2011 semester, a majority of the students responded that they attended the Mr. TP program in October 2011 and the Ginger Bread House program in December 2011. The Mr. TP program and Ginger Bread House program were the highest-attendance programs offered during the 2011 Fall semester (B. Custer, personal communication, January 20, 2012). Mentees stated that the two programs were fun and relaxing. One first-year program participant stated that she did not attend any hall programs due to conflicts with other commitments she had. The same participant stated that she preferred to attend her residential college events since they focused on her academic endeavors. Similar to Taylor Place All Hall Programs, residential colleges program are programs for Taylor Place residents. What makes residential college programs different from Taylor Place All Hall programs is All Hall Program are open to all residents of

Taylor Place. Residential College programs are open only to residents living in the specified residential college community/floor. An example of a residential college program provided by the residential college student staff was an event that happened early in the 2011 fall semester where professional Physical Trainers and Physician Assistants spoke to students in the residential community about their professional field. During this time residents in the residential college community were able to ask the guests about their field and received recommendations on how to get experience in the field prior to graduation.

### **Influence in Attending Hall Programs**

The second question on the First Year Residential Questionnaire (Appendix J) focused on the influence of Taylor Place Mentors on first year students attending hall programs. First year students did not judge that the Taylor Place Experience program was influential on their hall program attendance. First year students did report that the program was beneficial in assisting them in adjusting to college. One first year student participant stated that she appreciated her mentor contacting her throughout the week to learn how she was adjusting to school as well as holding her accountable in completing her course work. She and her mentor communicated frequently through text (at least twice a week) or face to face talk about adjusting to school as well as chat while passing through the hall as they both were residents in Taylor Place. Another first year student participant stated that her interaction with staff, her Taylor Place Leader and with other upperclassmen encouraged her to get involved in student organizations on campus. By interacting with her mentor, she was able to get a sense of what

would be expected of her during the years to come. At times she would feel homesick, but interacting with her peers would take her mind off of missing her family.

### **Future Hall Program Recommendations**

The third question on the First Year Student Residential Questionnaire (Appendix J) asked first year students to make recommendations about future hall programs. The common theme from interviews with the first year student participants was the need to meet others. One participant majoring in Healthy Lifestyle Coaching stated that bonding activities would be beneficial for first year students. Having more activities on the residential floor would be an opportunity for students to meet their peers living on the same floor. She provided an example of a residential floor program in which students made door decorations for room doors their floor. The students were able to come together for a craft activity and meet others as well as share their experience of living in Taylor Place and attending ASU.

In speaking with the 11 remaining first year student participants about their interactions with residence hall staff and whether they would recommend to others that they should live in Taylor Place, all participants interviewed would recommend attending ASU and living in Taylor Place their first year. A first year student majoring in Journalism and Mass Communication stated that she would urge students to attend ASU because of the many people one could meet by visiting the four campuses and taking classes on the four campuses. When discussing her interaction with staff in Taylor Place, another first year student

stated she found the interaction with the staff beneficial as she was able to learn more about their career aspirations and compare those with her own aspirations. Some of the student staff living in Taylor Place had similar career aspirations and she was able to seek their advice on how to get into their field of choice. Another student stated that she had utilized her community assistant's (CA) advice frequently. Her CA was welcoming and provided information on the courses the first year student was taking at the time and courses that would be needed in the future. Of course, these reports do not include information and recommendations from the six freshmen who dropped out of the study and moved home during Fall semester 2011.

All 11 first year student participants recommended that all their counterparts attending ASU should live on-campus at least their first year. One of the first year student participants majoring in Journalism and Mass Communication stated that she would strongly recommend that students live on campus Downtown due to the small size of this campus. Students are able to connect with their peers on a small campus and to develop study groups. She stated that some of her friends who live off campus have more of a challenge in making friends or developing study groups due to their commute time to campus. Another participant stated that she has had conversations with friends from her high school asking about living on campus and she recommended they live on campus. Living on campus provides the opportunity for students to meet more students along with being able to complete group projects quicker. She recommended that students live on campus because of the close proximity of

classes. In her experience, she is not far from her classes because most of the classes she took during the first semester were on the Downtown Phoenix campus and across the street from Taylor Place. Another first year student participant majoring in Healthy Lifestyle Coaching stated she would encourage students to try living on campus. She believes students coming to college should have different experiences than they did while in high school. Living on campus can provide them with that different experience. She recommended students live on campus at least one year. After their first year of living on campus, they can decide whether they want to live in the residence hall for a second year or move off campus (to their own place or back home with family).

### **Interview Response – Taylor Place Leaders**

Five of the six Taylor Place Leaders stated that their most memorable hall program during the 2011 Fall semester was the Ginger Bread House Program. One of the six Taylor Place Leaders stated he did not attend any hall programs due to the programs conflicting with his class schedule. All of the Taylor Place Leaders stated that they did not attend many hall programs due to class, work, or other obligations off campus. Even though the Taylor Place Leaders did not attend many hall programs, all stated that they encouraged their mentees to attend the programs to meet more peers living in the residence hall.

### **Taylor Place Leader Influence of Hall Program Attendance**

In speaking with the Taylor Place Leaders regarding their interactions with their mentees in influencing the mentees' attendance at hall programs, Taylor Place Leaders' responses were similar to the first year student participants'

responses. Taylor Place Leaders stated that most of their interaction focused on adjusting to college and less on attending hall programs. One Taylor Place Leader stated that, through her experience in the Taylor Place Experience program, she became interested in working more with first year students. While working with the students, she was able to see herself in them. In the spirit of giving back, she wanted to help first year students and to provide a kind of guidance for the new students that she did not receive during her first year. Some of the examples she provided included planning ahead for assignments and not waiting until the last minute. Another example she discussed was getting involved in organizations and attending events during freshman year. During this mentor's first year at ASU, she was not involved and did not establish many friendships.

Another Taylor Place Leader reported that interacting with first year students was fun and beneficial. She learned more about herself and about university resources by working with the freshmen. An example was using the Writing Center. The mentor was not aware that the services were one-on-one. She also discussed utilizing the Financial Aid department more as she was not familiar with the Work-Study program. One of the male Taylor Place Leaders stated he found the Taylor Place Experience program to be a great experience as he was able to interact with his mentees face to face as well as via email. His mentees would ask questions about classes and also contribute program ideas for their residential community. He was unsure if the programs in the residential communities ever took place, but he was able to provide example of events developed for his residential community when he was a freshman.

## **Taylor Place Leaders' Experience**

In interviewing the Taylor Place Leaders about their experiences in the Taylor Place Leader program, the researcher asked each Taylor Place Leader if each found the experience rewarding. The unanimous response to the question was “yes.” A Taylor Place Leader majoring in Healthy Lifestyle Coaching stated that she found the experience rewarding as it provided her an opportunity to meet new people. She admitted to finding it a challenge to meet new people, but being assigned mentees she was able to meet more people and establish relationships. She also mentioned that from time to time her mentees would text her to discuss classes and plans for the day and weekend. In working with the students she was encouraged by their determination. During her first year at ASU, she did not know what she wanted to do with her major. However in working with her mentees and discussing their aspirations, she learned that the new students knew what they wanted to do with their major upon graduation as well as what career related experiences they needed in support of successful employment after degree completion. Two of the six Taylor Place mentors stated that they had mentored students before and wanted the opportunity to mentor more students. All of the participants stated that they wished that they had had the opportunity to have a mentor during their first year in college. All Taylor Place Leaders felt that their first year at ASU would be have been enhanced by having an upperclassman assist them in transitioning from high school to college.

Speaking with Taylor Place Leaders about their recommendations on continuing the Taylor Place Experience program for a second year, five of the six

Taylor Place Leaders recommended having the program for a second year. One Taylor Place Leader who majored in Exercise and Wellness did not feel the program would be needed. Due to his experience as a first year student, he believes that first year students have enough opportunities to meet and make friends while living on campus. He believes the student staff and professional staff do a satisfactory job in providing information to first year students so that a mentoring program would not be needed. Others expressed the opinion that the program is needed in the future because first year students frequently are not aware of the many services available to them at the university. A Taylor Place Leader majoring in Nutrition (Dietetics) stated that first year students do not know all the services and resources at the university and having an upperclassman assist them in getting adjusted could be beneficial. She wished she had had a mentor as a first year student. An example she provided were tips on registering for classes during open enrollment. She believes that first year students can be overloaded with information and having a mentor assist them in processing the information can help. Sometimes first year students do not recognize the importance of university services because they may feel it is not an immediate need. An example of services not used enough was the Office of Career Services. As a senior, she now recognizes the importance of utilizing the Office of Career Services not only as a graduating senior, but also by first year students seeking employment and internships along with developing interviewing skills. Another Taylor Place Leader majoring in Journalism and Mass Communication believes that the program should continue for another year, but the students to be focused



on should be the out of state students. He believes that out of state students are less familiar than Arizona residents with university resources and also with community resources. He discussed the culture shock of coming from out of state and not knowing where he could go to get away from campus. A mentor who was from out of state could share their experiences and assist the out of state freshmen in getting adjusted to the new environment and climate. In state students could also assist students from out of state with advice on where to go and things to do while off campus.

### **Recommendations of Future Taylor Place Experience Program**

#### **Implementation**

While speaking with the participants about ideas to enhance the program for a second year, the major theme from the interviews was to create opportunities for all Taylor Place Leaders and first year student participants to meet one another face to face. Another recommendation from both Taylor Place Leader and first year students have the mentoring meetings be so structured. A Taylor Place Leader stated that she felt having a specific time to meet with the students had the feel of an obligation instead of volunteering. After agreeing on set days and times to meet, she and the mentees were more comfortable in meetings to discuss their experiences. “It no longer felt like we were in class” was the statement the mentor made. She also recommended to have scheduled activities with other mentees and mentors. Examples provided were outings and volunteering opportunities. The Taylor Place Leader who recommended the focus of the program be on out of state students, reported that he liked the program in its current structure, but

would like to see mentors pair with first year student participants by region (e.g., first year students from the east coast of the United States should be paired with a mentor from the east coast).

### **Limitations**

One potential limitation of the study was losing six first year student program participants before the end of the study. Six of the 23 (26 percent) participants stopped out of the program and the researcher was unable to gather their responses to the post-survey (Appendix E) or to interview them to learn about their experience in the Taylor Place Experience program. When speaking with two of the six departing participants regarding their decision to stop out of the program, the research learned that the students decided to live at home instead of in the residence hall for the remainder of the academic year. Students stopping out of the Taylor Place Experience program also reported lack of time to meet with their Taylor Place Leader due to prior family obligations.

A second potential limitation to study was the length of the study period. The timeframe for the action research study was from August 2011 to November 2011. Should the program have continued the entire 2011-2012 academic year, there may have been greater change in program participants' response to interview questions and post-survey questions. One recommendation from program participants regarding revising the Taylor Place experience for another academic year was to make the program last for an entire academic year. Taylor Place Leaders believe that the first year student experience not only changes throughout the first 16 weeks, but also each semester.

## **Summary**

The goal of this action research dissertation was to increase first year student participation in residence hall programs in Taylor Place Residence Hall at Arizona State University on the Downtown Phoenix campus. Another goal for this action research was to increase the retention of first time freshmen returning to Taylor Place in the 2012 spring semester. In reviewing data provided by Taylor Place professional staff regarding hall program attendance (Appendix L), there was a modest increase in program attendance. Data from Taylor Place staff also showed there was a decrease in retention of first time freshmen returning to the residence hall for the 2012 spring semester (Appendix M). Although there was a decrease in first year students returning to Taylor Place, the eleven remaining first year program participants were in favor of a mentoring program for all first year students residing in Taylor Place.

Taylor Place Leaders and first year student participants reported that they enjoyed their interactions with their mentor/mentee counterparts. First year student participants viewed their Taylor Place Leader/mentor as an individual to speak with regarding adjusting to college, preparing for classes, and identifying future courses to take while at the institutions. Through interaction with their mentees, Taylor Place Leaders recognized the Taylor Place Experience program as an opportunity to give back to the institution and provide guidance to first year students. Many of the Taylor Place Leaders stated that they wished they had had the opportunity to be mentored as freshmen, which was their main reason to choose to be part of the Taylor Place Experience program.

## Chapter 5

### CONCLUSION

#### **Summary of the Study**

The purpose of this action research study was to increase the participation of first year residential student attendance in hall programs and increase the retention of first year students residing in Taylor Place from the 2011 fall semester to the 2012 spring semester. In reviewing data provided by Taylor Place professional staff, the goal of increased program participation in the residence was achieved, although it is not clear that the Taylor Place Experience program was the sole reason for the increase. The second goal of increasing the retention of first year students returning to Taylor Place for the 2012 spring semester was not reached as compared to the previous year's data. Students who participated in the Taylor Place Experience program throughout the entire semester returned to the residence hall for the 2012 semester, but six of the original 17 freshmen moved home and dropped out of the study during Fall 2011. Two general conclusions were supported by the study: college adjustment support can be valuable and on-campus residence by freshmen can promote academic success. Participants in the Taylor Place Experience program characterized this study as a college adjustment program for first year students rather than a residence hall participation program. Both Taylor Place Leaders and first year student participants recommend that college students reside on-campus during their first year in order to increase their academic success at the university.

## **Discussion of Findings**

After conducting the study and receiving feedback from program participants, I can describe this action research study as a qualified success. The quantitative data gathered on program participation and student retention in Taylor Place during the 2011 fall semester suggest that this part of the program was a modest success. During the fall 2010 semester, residence hall program participation averaged 113 students. During the 2011 fall semester residence hall program participation was 176 students, an increase of 63 more students participating in residence hall programs, even though there were 24 fewer first time freshmen residing in Taylor Place in Fall. While I cannot determine the degree of influence of the Taylor Place Experience program on these results, testimony from study participants suggests that the program made a positive contribution to student engagement.

Although there was a loss of six program participants from the study, 100 percent of the remaining participants reported that they were still happy with their decision to attend Arizona State University. Ninety-four percent of the program participants would like for the Taylor Place Experience program to be implemented in the future. All of the program participants who completed the study have not only returned to the university for the 2012 spring semester, but have also returned to Taylor Place for the 2012 spring semester. All program participants either agreed or strongly agreed that they are knowledgeable about services at the university provided to assist in their success at the institution.

The original goal for the Taylor Place Experience program was to increase student participation in residence hall programs. Program participants, however, came to view the Taylor Place Experience program as a transition to college program for first year students residing in Taylor Place. Even with this changed perception of TPE being a transition program, student participation in residence hall programs increased during the 2011 fall semester. A program participant stated that she did not find the Taylor Place Experience program beneficial for programming in Taylor Place, but beneficial in adjusting to college. The same student who made this statement was also present at the majority of the residence hall programs due to her leadership role with the Residence Hall Association (RHA), which has the responsibility of engaging Taylor Place residents through developing residence hall programs in Taylor Place.

### **Recommendations**

After conducting an action research study on first year students living on-campus and implementing a program designed to increase student involvement in the residence hall, I have identified two recommendations that could be beneficial to first year students as well as to returning students at Arizona State University.

The first recommendation is to have a yearlong mentoring program between first year students and upperclassmen. As stated earlier by a Taylor Place Leader, the freshmen year is not a one semester long experience, it is a yearlong experience in which first year students living on campus encounter many milestones and challenges throughout the academic year. Milestones include living in an on-campus residential community with a roommate, first academic

exams, homecoming activities, mid-term exams, enrolling for spring semester courses, returning for the second semester, spring break, and preparing for a second year of college. Taylor Place Leaders and I have come to recognize that each semester in an academic year for a first year student is different. Therefore, a full academic year mentoring relationship with a Taylor Place Leader could be even more beneficial to the first year students than a first semester only experience.

The second recommendation is to provide opportunities for all Taylor Place Leaders and first year students participating in the Taylor Place experience to meet one another face to face in a group setting. Having the opportunity for program participants to meet one another creates the opportunity for ideas to be shared, social connections to be made, and suggestions to be offered that might make the Taylor Place Experience program a better program for the future and also could enhance the freshman experience for the students (Brereton et al., 2000). I recommend that the program participants meet twice per semester for socialization and service learning opportunities, which was suggested by a first year student participant majoring in Healthy Lifestyle Coaching.

### **Implication for Future Research**

This action research study was developed to increase first year residential student participation in residence hall programs. Areas investigated in the study were residence hall program participation, university services, and student retention in the residence hall on the downtown Phoenix campus of Arizona State University. Future research could involve:

1. A study focusing on Arizona resident students with on-campus living assignments, who choose to return to their permanent residence instead of living on campus. By conducting this research, we could gain a better understanding of why students choose not live on campus as well as why students choose to leave their on campus housing assignments.
2. A longitudinal study following the Taylor Place Leader participants as well as first year student participants. This research would determine whether the Taylor Place Experience program made a lasting impact in their college experience as well as determining whether program participants mentored future students attending Arizona State University or others through community programs.
3. A study on mentorship of students who do not live on campus during their entire academic career at Arizona State University. Research on this subset of students could provide critical data on the student experience of Arizona State University's non-residential students. Data gathered from this study could provide university administrators critical information useful in serving this important subset of students.
4. A study focusing on best practices for training student residential staff could prove beneficial for not only Arizona State University, but also for residence life programs at institutions of higher education more broadly.



## **Conclusion**

Overall, this study was a learning experience for the student participants and for the researcher. As a result of this action research study, program participants have learned more about university services developed to support the success of all university students. Through the study the researcher was able to contribute to a modest increase in program participation in residence hall programs for the 2011 fall semester. As a researcher, I have learned more about action research and how this approach can be implemented in many areas of my professional career.

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APPENDIX A  
STUDY APPROVAL BY THE OFFICE OF RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND  
ASSURANCE





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Office of Research Integrity and Assurance

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**To:** Christopher Clark  
LSE 218

**From:**  Mark Roosa, Chair   
Soc Beh IRB

**Date:** 06/06/2011

**Committee Action:** **Exemption Granted**

**IRB Action Date:** 06/06/2011

**IRB Protocol #:** 1105006477

**Study Title:** First Year Residential Student Programming Participation Implementation

The above-referenced protocol is considered exempt after review by the Institutional Review Board pursuant to Federal regulations, 45 CFR Part 46.101(b)(2).

This part of the federal regulations requires that the information be recorded by investigators in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects. It is necessary that the information obtained not be such that if disclosed outside the research, it could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability, or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

You should retain a copy of this letter for your records.

APPENDIX B  
PARTICIPANT INVITATION

Dear [Potential Participant]:

I am Ronald Briggs, a staff member in the division of Educational Outreach and Student Services (EOSS) at Arizona State University. I am also in the process of earning my Ed.D. in Higher & Postsecondary Education under the supervision of Dr. Christopher Clark. My dissertation study will begin in the 2011 summer semester; I am proposing a student engagement intervention, focused on a sample of first year college students residing in Taylor Place during the 2011-2012 academic year.

I am writing to request a brief meeting with you to discuss my proposed intervention and request your support and participation in the study. You must be 18 or older to participate in this study. Please let me know if you would be available to discuss your possible participation during a 30 minute meeting next week.

Sincerely,

Ronald Briggs



APPENDIX C

CONSENT FORM RETURNING TAYLOR PLACE RESIDENT

First Year Residential Student Programming Participation Implementation: A  
Residential Community Retention Study  
May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011

Dear Potential Participant:

I am a doctoral student in the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study to increase first year residential student participation in residence hall programs.

I am inviting your participation, which will involve up to one and one half hours of your time over the course of two interviews and bi-weekly interactions with three (3) first year residential students in Taylor Place.

The initial interview will be no more than 30 minutes to complete a pre-survey inquiring about your knowledge of university resources for students. The second interview will be a follow-up of the initial interview and possibly further clarification. The bi-weekly interaction with the first year residential students will consist of contacting the students encouraging their participation in residence hall programs along with discussing their adjustment to living in Taylor Place and attending Arizona State University.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. You must be 18 or older to participate in the study.

Responses from your interview will be used to make informed recommendations on enhancing the residential experience of first students living on the Downtown Phoenix campus. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation.

Your responses will be confidential. The field notes will not use participant's names, but will be coded. Audio recordings of the interviews will not be transcribed, but utilized for verification of notes, and specific quotes may be used and attributed to "first year student" or "Taylor Place Leader". The code key will be handwritten and retained by the Co-Investigator in a separate locked file from the audiotapes and field notes. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name will not be used.

I would like to audiotape this interview. You will not be recorded, unless you give permission. If you give permission to be taped, you have the right to ask for the recording to be stopped. Tapes will be deleted upon completion of the study in July 2012.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact me at:

Co-Investigator: Ronald Briggs (602)496-1203. If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788.

Ronald Briggs  
Doctoral Candidate  
Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College  
Arizona State University

APPENDIX D

CONSENT FORM FIRST YEAR RESIDENTIAL STUDENT

First Year Residential Student Programming Participation Implementation: A  
Residential Community Retention Study  
May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011

Dear Potential Participant:

I am a doctoral student in the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study to increase first year residential student participation in residence hall programs.

I am inviting your participation, which will involve up to one and one half hours of your time over the course of two interviews and bi-weekly interactions with a returning Taylor Place resident (Taylor Place Leader).

The initial interview will be no more than 30 minutes to complete a pre-survey inquiring about your knowledge of university resources for students. The second interview will be a follow-up of the initial interview and possibly further clarification. The bi-weekly interaction with the Taylor Place Leader will consist of discussing upcoming residence hall programs along with discussing your adjustment to living in Taylor Place and attending Arizona State University.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. You must be 18 or older to participate in the study.

Responses from your interview will be used to make informed recommendations on enhancing the residential experience of first students living on the Downtown Phoenix campus. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation.

Your responses will be confidential. The field notes will not use participant's names, but will be coded. Audio recordings of the interviews will not be transcribed, but utilized for verification of notes, and specific quotes may be used and attributed to "first year student" or "Taylor Place Leader". The code key will be handwritten and retained by the Co-Investigator in a separate locked file from the audiotapes and field notes. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name will not be used.

I would like to audiotape this interview. You will not be recorded, unless you give permission. If you give permission to be taped, you have the right to ask for the recording to be stopped. Tapes will be deleted upon completion of the study in July 2012.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact me at:

Co-Investigator: Ronald Briggs (602)496-1203. If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788.

Ronald Briggs  
Doctoral Candidate  
Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College  
Arizona State University

APPENDIX E  
PRE AND POST SUVEY

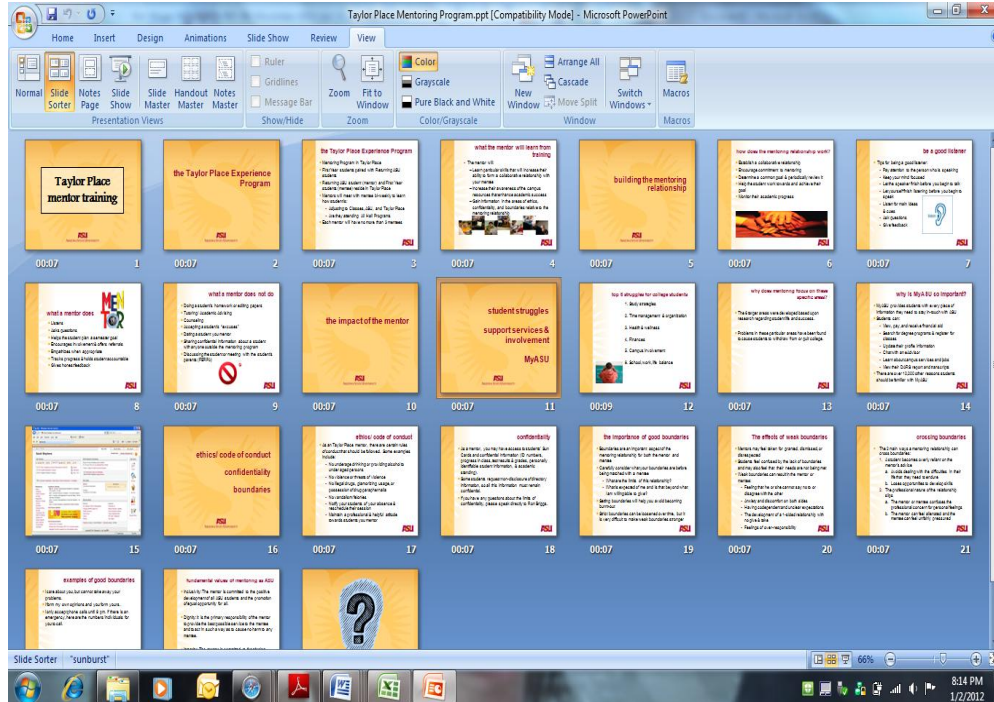
1. Code Number (ASU ID):
2. Gender:
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
3. In regard to my residency classification, I am considered:
  - a. In-State
  - b. Out-of-State
  - c. International
4. Racial or Ethnic Identity:
  - a. American Indian or other Native American
  - b. Asian, Asian American or Pacific Islander
  - c. Black or African American
  - d. White (non-Hispanic)
  - e. Mexican, Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Other Hispanic or Latino
  - f. Multiracial
  - g. Other
  - h. I prefer not respond
5. I am satisfied with my decision to attend ASU:
  - a. Strongly Agree
  - b. Agree
  - c. Disagree
  - d. Strongly Disagree
6. It is important to assist in the engagement of first year college students at ASU:
  - a. Strongly Agree
  - b. Agree
  - c. Disagree
  - d. Strongly Disagree
7. I feel knowledgeable about the university services provided to assist in my success at ASU:
  - a. Strongly Agree
  - b. Agree
  - c. Disagree
  - d. Strongly Disagree
8. I feel comfortable assisting in assisting first year students in getting adjusted to being a college student at ASU:



- a. Strongly Agree
- b. Agree
- c. Disagree
- d. Strongly Disagree

APPENDIX F

TAYLOR PALCE MENTOR TRAINING PRESENTATION AND TAYLOR  
PLACE LEADER EXPECTATIONS



1. Attend training session and receive meeting agenda and participant log
2. Wait for co-investigator to confirm that your first year students have agreed to participate in the study.
3. Visit your first year student during move-in to introduce yourself and exchange phone numbers and email addresses to schedule a day and time to meet during the first week of classes.
4. Conduct your first meeting with your first year students and follow agenda. Schedule next meeting for two weeks later
5. Complete contact log after first meeting
6. Contact first year students weekly to inform them of the upcoming residence hall programs and confirm their attendance.

7. In week11 attend the Taylor Place Experience Program debriefing session  
in November.
8. Complete post-survey and attend interview session with co-investigator  
Contact Co-Investigator if there are any questions.

APPENDIX G

TAYLOR PLACE LEADER TEAM MEETING AGENDA

Meeting Agenda:

- I. Informal introductions and small talk
- II. Discuss the First Year student's experience at ASU thus far
  - a. Academic Experience
  - b. Co-curricular Experience
  - c. Residence Hall Experience
    - i. Program Participation Experience
- III. Questions and Comments
- IV. Closing

**NOTE: Contact Ron if you have any questions or concerns**

APPENDIX H  
TAYLOR PLACE CONTACT LOG

Date:

Location:

Time of Meeting:

Length of Meeting:

Participant's ASU ID (last 4 digits) or first name:

Taylor Place Leader ASU ID (last 4 digits):

1. How is the student adjusting to living in Taylor Place?
2. How is the student adjusting to attending Arizona State University?
3. How is the student adjusting to their classes and major?
4. Is the student attending Taylor Place Hall Programs (Thursday night events)?
5. Is there anything else you would like to add?



APPENDIX I

TAYLOR PLACE LEADER QUESTIONNAIRE

Engagement (Residence Hall)

- 1) What residence hall program(s) have you attended that you found to be socially engaging for your first year students?

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- 2) Do you believe your interaction with your first year participants in this study will increase interest in working with other first year students?  
Why?

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- 3) Do you feel participating in this study has been a rewarding experience?  
Why?

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Recommendation (University)

- 4) Do you feel a mentoring program in Taylor Place should be implemented?  
Why?

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Recommendation (University)

5) If any, what recommendations do you have in order for the Taylor Place Experience Program to be better for the next academic year?

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APPENDIX J

FIRST YEAR STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Engagement (Residence Hall)

1. What residence hall program(s) have you attended that you found to be socially engaging?

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2. Do you believe your interaction with the Taylor Place Student Leader will increase student attendance in hall program? Why?

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Service

3. What type of residence hall programs do you believe first year students need throughout the semester to help them adjust to the college environment?

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Recommendation (University)

4. Through your interaction with residents and residence hall staff, would you recommend Arizona State University to others? Why?

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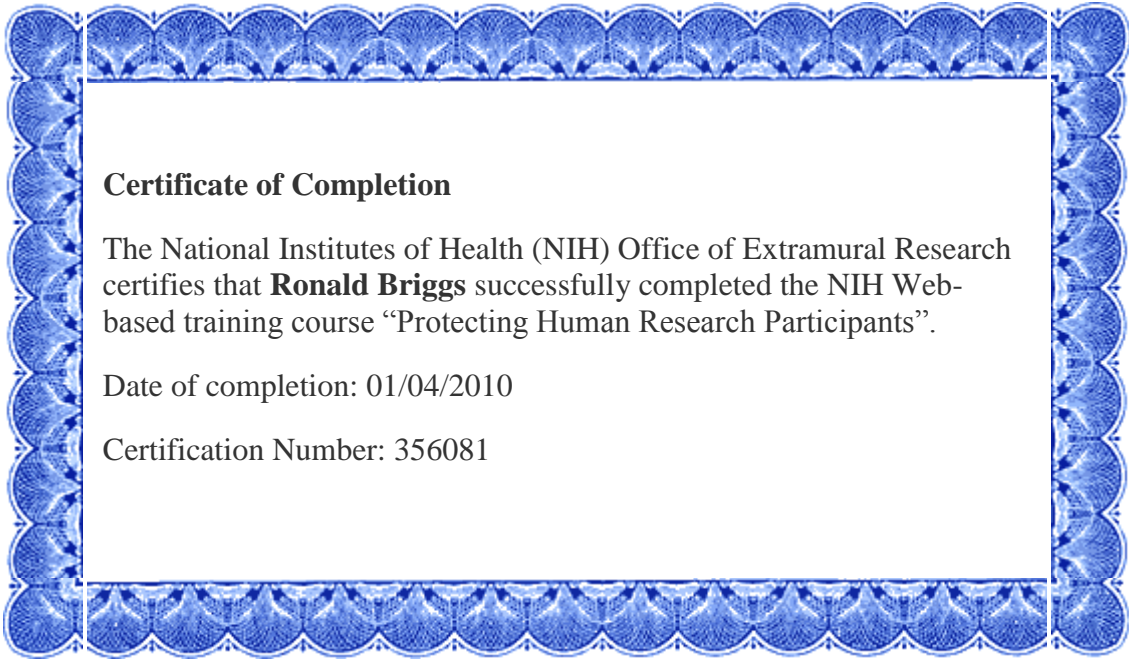
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Recommendation (University)

- 5 Would you recommend living on-campus at the Downtown Phoenix campus to others? Why?

APPENDIX K

COMPLETION OF HUMAN SUBJECT TRAINING



**Certificate of Completion**

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that **Ronald Briggs** successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course “Protecting Human Research Participants”.

Date of completion: 01/04/2010

Certification Number: 356081



APPENDIX L

HALL PROGRAMMING INFORMATION FALL 2010 AND FALL 2011

Programs:

**Fall 10: (all numbers approx)**

8/19 downtown freeze 300  
8/26 open mic (Louanna) 50  
9/2 talent show 30  
9/9 mural 200  
9/16 mr tp 200  
9/23 finger paint 15  
9/30 medal of honor 20  
10/7 50's night  
10/14 health education 110  
10/28 pumpkin carving 150  
11/18 tunnel of oppression 50

**Fall 11: (all numbers approx)**

8/18 downtown freeze 300  
8/25 gold rush(tempe) 40  
9/1 usc vs asu (tempe) ?  
9/8 rcab mercury game 150  
9/15 mr. tp 220  
9/22 rcab randy Christensen 150  
9/29 mural painting 120  
10/13 health education 160  
10/20 ice cream social 80  
10/27 masquerade ?  
12/1 ginger bread 360

APPENDIX M

FIRST YEAT STUDENT TAYLOR PALCE OCCUPANCY AND ATTRITION  
FOR FALL 2010 AND 2011

Hall occupancy:

Fall 10 1065

Fall 11 1043

Attrition of first time freshmen:

Fall 10- spring 11: 682-637

Fall 11-spring 12: 658-600

