



Missouri

Faculty and Staff Involvement

Opportunities for faculty and academic staff to make a difference in Living-Learning communities

Benefits of becoming a stakeholder in an MU learning community

The goal of an educator is to help students learn. Education professionals enjoy interacting with students and watching them assimilate knowledge in a meaningful way. Many educators would even agree that the most rewarding experience is working with interested students who are committed to learning.

The Department of Residential Life can provide you with this experience. Volunteering time with a sponsored learning community enables faculty and academic staff to interact with students in diverse ways within several interest areas. There are many levels of participation, with varying time commitments.

Some of the benefits of becoming a stakeholder include:

- Direct experience with the current student culture, enabling more effective teaching
- In many cases, the opportunity to develop contacts between departments and across campus
- Revitalization of class material through interaction with committed students
- A positive rapport cultivated by a stakeholder that can facilitate a more positive classroom atmosphere



What are “learning communities”?

The term can mean different things. In the most general sense, it is a group of educators and students who “share a common commitment to each other’s success as they engage in intellectual interaction for the purpose of learning (Cross, 1998).” On the MU campus, a sponsored learning community is an organized community of one or more floors in a residence hall focused on a specific interest area. Some are directly tied to an academic unit such as Nursing or Pre-vet; others are more broadly defined such as Wakonse or Culture & Society. They all share a common goal: to draw undergraduates, staff and faculty together into a dynamic, interactive community that enhances the classroom.

Why are we doing this? Studies show that students are more successful when their academic experiences are integrated with other parts of their lives. The structure of sponsored learning communities allows interaction with others who share interests and talents. In addition, ongoing dialogue with peers and educators helps students draw personal meaning from their academic experiences. Sponsored learning communities also create opportunities for students to develop communication and leadership skills.

The Freshman Interest Group (FIGS) program has gained a national reputation. Every sponsored learning community has one or more FIGS which are aligned with the theme of the community. FIGS add an intentional curricular component and a connection to a Peer Advisor and a member of the faculty or academic support staff.



Who are stakeholders and FIG co-facilitators?

A stakeholder is an interested individual in the campus community who volunteers his or her time to help make a sponsored learning community successful. While the Residential Life staff is skilled at creating communities, it takes the specific knowledge and expertise of faculty and academic support staff to effectively connect it to the curriculum.

Stakeholders work together as a group to guide the community toward beneficial experiences. Because of their comprehensive view of the discipline, they are able to suggest objectives for the sponsored learning community that either complement or reinforce the objectives of the relevant curriculum.

It is important to understand that stakeholders assume joint ownership and responsibility for the sponsored learning community. There is no command hierarchy within the group — the input of faculty, academic support staff and students is equally necessary for success.

A FIG co-facilitator has chosen to contribute a little more time in order to help a group of first-semester freshmen adapt to life at MU. The co-facilitator works with a single, high-ability, upper-division student (a Peer Advisor) to co-design and co-instruct a one-credit, pass/fail seminar for 15–20 first year students. These students are also enrolled in the same sections of two to three other courses which provide a supportive network focused on academic and personal success. As in sponsored learning communities, most FIGs have an academic theme such as business, engineering or pre-journalism.



What does it mean to be a stakeholder?

Stakeholders include faculty, academic support staff, Residential Life staff and the students who live in the community. They all share ownership and responsibility for their community and promote its success and growth through the following:

- Stakeholder meetings: The stakeholder group for each community meets regularly to review the community's objectives and goals. They also consider the current status of the community, plan strategies for improvement and engage in open, direct discussions about issues concerning the evolution of the community.
- Direct interaction: Stakeholders interact with the residents of their learning community in a variety of formal and informal settings. These interactions have two purposes. First, they allow stakeholders to monitor and keep current on residents' experiences both in and out of the classroom. Second, they serve as opportunities to help students question and assimilate the meaning of those experiences.

Some of avenues for interaction include being a co-facilitator for a FIG housed within their sponsored learning community, leading or participating in a floor discussion or activity such as a study group, spearheading a career exploration program or facilitating an open-forum debate on a controversial topic.

- Ongoing communication: stakeholders are encouraged to maintain interaction with the community via e-mail and other means.



What is the time commitment?

Stakeholders are encouraged to become as involved as their time and other priorities allow. Typically, stakeholders enjoy the experience and the personal and professional benefits that come from it.

Specific time commitments range from one hour per month — the average time for stakeholder meetings — and can be as extensive as three to five hours per month. It is also recommended that stakeholders attend one community-sponsored event each semester. Depending on what the community has planned, additional communication within a month's time might range from one e-mail update to an e-mail discussion about last-minute planning for an upcoming event. Early fall tends to be the busiest time due to orientation events.

FIG co-facilitators can expect to contribute roughly one hour per week to their FIG, plus a couple hours in late spring/early August to help the Peer Advisor form the general outline for the fall seminar. We suggest that the co-facilitator continues to meet with the peer advisor through the fall semester in order to provide teaching guidance and support. It is not uncommon for FIGs and their faculty to continue to meet occasionally during the winter semester.

Of course, you can still make a difference in a student's experience with less available time. We have provided ideas for different levels of involvement and welcome your ideas on how you can contribute your time and experience.

With 1-2 hours once a year, you could:

- Attend a dinner
- Host a social event
- Participate in a field trip
- Facilitate a floor discussion

By reading a few e-mail messages a month, you could:

- Learn more about students' experiences in the residence halls
- Identify more connections between in- and out-of-class experiences
- Offer insights to those responsible for guiding a community

With 1 hour a month, you could:

- Become an official stakeholder and help guide a community
- Hold specialized study sessions
- Facilitate specialized discussion sessions

With 1 hour a week, you could:

- Be a co-facilitator of a FIG, helping 15–20 first-semester freshmen become successful Mizzou students.

Interested in getting involved? Contact the Residential Academic Programs office at (573) 882-4815





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