**The Future of University Housing: Why Values-Based Residential**

**Living Fosters Belonging Among Undergraduates**

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**Abstract:**

At universities in the United States, fostering a sense of belonging among students is a top priority. Many universities utilize residential communities to increase feelings of connection, belonging, and camaraderie. This study uses an action research paradigm to analyze the particular potency of values-based residential housing for undergraduate students. Theme Housing (i.e. student organizations and clubs living together in apartment-style housing), is an approach to values-based residential living taken by the University of the South, a rural small liberal arts college in Tennessee. In response to several Theme Houses being removed from the campus ahead of the 2023-2024 school year, we drew on qualitative action research methods to understand students’ perceptions of the impact of Theme Housing on campus-wide sense of belonging and the metrics used in the decision to remove Theme Houses. We engaged students as co-researchers in considering community-generated methods of allocating student-themed housing to increase process equity in the future. Drawing on focus group data, we discovered that students cared deeply about the future of housing on campus and its implications for sense of belonging. In focus groups, students shared a variety of practical strategies for leveraging Theme Housing and the housing selection process to improve programming, infrastructure, and relationships that are central to supporting students’ sense of belonging on campus. These student co-researchers mapped pathways for sustaining engagement, including drafting an equitable selection process and longevity plan for Theme Housing. The study concludes with implications for other universities to promote student well-being through values-based residential communities and equitable housing processes.

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**Living Fosters Belonging Among Undergraduates**

Fostering a sense of belonging, community, and camaraderie should lie at the core of university objectives for undergraduate students. To achieve this, it is imperative to establish residential communities on campus that are grounded in shared values and interests. These communities serve as the bedrock for supporting a sense of belonging within the university environment. Comprising diverse individuals, physical spaces, student organizations, and tailored programming, residential communities collectively contribute to the well-being of all campus community members. Recognizing the pressing need for residential communities to support student wellbeing, this study is designed to empower students as community stakeholders in the residential housing allocation process and involve them in shaping the future of student residential communities.

Employing a participatory action research approach, this study aims to collaboratively determine the path forward for enhancing sense of belonging through values-based residential living. Action research (AR), is often described as “an orientation to inquiry rather than a particular method” (Kagan et. al., 2017, p.104). It challenges notions of who a researcher is and who can be involved. Traditionally, academic research focuses on participants as data points rather than as research partners. This study relies heavily on theories of critical participatory action research (CPAR) such as the thorough involvement of community stakeholders in the entire research process (Fine & Torre, 2021). Additionally, we leverage a qualitative research design to understand systemic problems within the university and hear as many different student voices and perspectives as possible about what should be done within our community. No action research study is complete without the inclusion of individuals the desired change is most likely to impact, making the inclusion of other students joining as co-researchers crucial. CPAR centers “working with” community members instead of “on,” and this study aims to engage community members as the key stakeholders in understanding their perceptions of values-based residential communities and advocating for change that responds to their perspectives (Fine & Torre, 2021, p. 17).

**University Housing for Finding Purpose, Belonging, and Community**

The literature surrounding university housing opportunities for students centers around a common theme of fostering community as an important tenet of student sense of belonging within campus housing. Specifically, research points to the ways that residential communities have been successful in fostering academic success among students, but also shows that students from historically marginalized backgrounds often struggle to find residential living opportunities that reflect their lived experiences and support their sense of belonging.

**Academic Success.**

When thinking about community belonging, housing opportunities greatly impact a student’s educational outcomes. Student academic success can be a direct result of thriving themed community living opportunities (Frazier & Eighmy, 2012), and learning communities have great potential to foster higher student academic success if students feel a sense of camaraderie in their living situation (Blimling, 2014). Strong faculty-advisor relationships within communities lead students to feel more supported in academic endeavors which simultaneously contributes to academic success. Students are more likely to be academically successful when they live in an environment where they feel connected, supported, and challenged by like-minded peers and caring mentors (Blimling, 2014; Heasley et al., 2020). Additionally, sense of community (SOC), “composed of four elements: membership, influence, integration, and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection,” (Heasley, et. al., 2020, p.50), is an essential proponent of a successful residential community program. Students seek housing that supports them outside of their academic endeavors; demonstrated by the fact that upper-division students or students within the top percentiles of their classes were most drawn to living in spaces where their autonomy wasn’t threatened (Heasley, et. al., 2020). Students are more successful when their SOC needs are met, emphasizing the importance of university housing efforts that create a sense of community and attend to student well-being holistically (Devlin et al., 2008; Erb et al., 2015)

**Unequal Opportunities to Find Community.**

Students with a variety of lived experiences might benefit from values-aligned housing. Allowing students an environment such as a values-based theme house can continue to promote autonomy, belonging, and sense of community among undergraduates. However, the literature illustrates barriers to inclusivity in campus housing. For example, traditional university housing systems function within the gender binary which often leaves students who do not identify within the binary having to apply for housing accommodations. In university settings, some students find that residential living opportunities designed to enhance well-being are inaccessible or inequitable to marginalized groups. For example, the Traditionally Hetero-Gendered Institution (THI) of residential living offices makes it so that queer students often are not considered in programming efforts (Preston & Hoffman, 2015). Because of THI within university housing, LGBTQ+ students have a disadvantaged opportunity to find community, feel supported, or have their needs met in a residential setting. This process particularly isolates non-binary students from their peers through housing procedures. Transgender students’ needs are often unmet, further emphasizing the importance of Gender-Inclusive Housing (GIH) (Anderson-Long & Jeffries, 2019; Pryor et al., 2016). Traditional methods of university housing often do not affirm gender as it is understood through a human-constructed framework, and transgender students often struggle to find community and feel ostracized in housing (Anderson-Long & Jeffries, 2019).

Students of color may also encounter significant struggles when seeking a sense of belonging within residential communities in college. These challenges can be rooted in systemic racism, cultural differences, and a lack of representation on campus (Boettcher et al., 2019). Microaggressions, racial stereotypes, and isolation can hurt students’ ability to form meaningful connections and feel included in their campus living spaces (Harwood et al., 2012). These students may also be faced with the feeling of being othered within Predominantly White Institutions and residential communities, which can have a detrimental impact on their overall well-being and academic success (Foste & Irwin, 2023). Addressing these struggles is essential for creating more inclusive and supportive residential communities that value diversity and prioritize the well-being of students of color (Boettcher et al., 2019).

Religious, secular, and spiritual identities (RSSIs) often receive insufficient attention in university housing (McClure et al., 2022). Given the prevalence of Christianity as the dominant religion associated with American universities, there is a pressing need for diversity, inclusion, and belonging initiatives within housing programs to incorporate individuals with marginalized RSSIs. By fostering a culture that celebrates and embraces student RSSIs, universities may not only enhance inclusivity but also potentially boost recruitment efforts, particularly among international students and those with underrepresented RSSIs (Gomes et al., 2014; McClure et al., 2022).

**Undergraduate Housing in the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic has forever altered the way universities and colleges respond to international emergencies. University housing therefore must be considered in the changes brought about by a global pandemic. College students faced unique challenges during the pandemic like depression brought on by disruption to important life transitions (Lederer et al., 2021). Post-pandemic studies show that students who experienced social isolation had increases in ambiguous loss, decreases in motivation, and lower sense of belonging. Similarly, students of color and first-generation college students experienced even higher levels of post-traumatic stress than their White peers (Governale, et al., 2024). College students’ mental health has plummeted compared to pre-pandemic levels, especially concerning anxiety and stress (Nails et al., 2023). Challenges related to social isolation, disruption to important life transitions, and adjustment to online learning have negatively impacted the undergraduate experience (Lederer et al., 2021). While the literature is limited on the effects of the pandemic on undergraduate housing, some studies have illuminated the harm caused by the pandemic related to housing insecurity among low-income undergraduate students (Glantsman et al., 2022). Students who came from historically underserved communities were more at risk for increased housing insecurity during and after the pandemic, especially marginalized students and first-generation students (Governale, et al., 2024: Glantsman et al., 2022). Fostering post-traumatic growth among college students after the pandemic should be a priority for undergraduate universities and colleges (Governale, et al., 2024), which leaves a unique opportunity for the potential of themed residential communities.

**Study Purpose and Research Questions**

Taken together, many studies emphasize residential learning communities that focus on academic success as an avenue for fostering a sense of belonging among students, especially students with marginalized identities. However, the literature on values-based university housing communities that emphasize shared interests, passions, and lived experiences is limited. Given this lack of research, we see an urgent need for research that explores the distinct significance of values-based university housing. Similarly, we believe that participatory action research approaches that directly involve students in the study of issues that impact them may illuminate the connection between values-based housing and student sense of belonging to strengthen the current literature on residential housing in general and values-based housing in particular. Our research questions are therefore action-oriented toward Sewanee’s unique values-based housing options and should be considered as a microcosm for campus communities beyond our own:

1. What do students perceive to be the role of Theme Housing in supporting student belonging on campus?
2. What reflections do students offer on the metrics used in the decision to remove theme housing?
3. What community-generated methods of allocating student-theme housing could increase equity in future campus housing decisions?

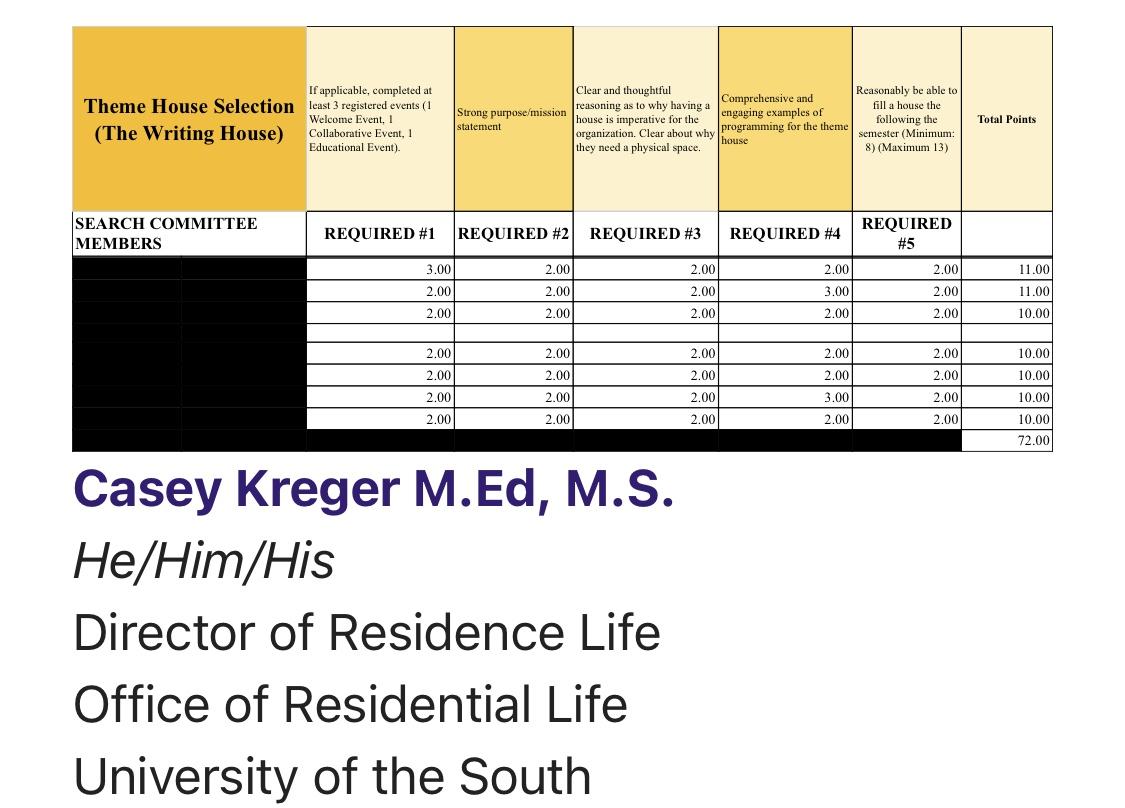
**Method**

Data from this study was collected through two semi-structured focus groups with 16 undergraduate students who were attending Sewanee: The University of the South. We chose to take a qualitative approach to better attend to personalized student thoughts and experiences of the removal of some theme housing on campus, and the potentiality of harm surrounding the decision. This approach allowed us to research, analyze, evaluate, and deliver the student voices directly to Sewanee’s administration. Participants were recruited via GroupMe invitations, interest flyers distributed around campus, email invitations directly to student co-directors of Theme Houses, and students needing research participation credit within the school’s psychology and neuroscience programs via convenience sampling. Participants were roughly distributed among those who were and were not involved in Theme Housing: 40% were involved in theme housing and 60% were not.

We held two semi-structured focus groups designed to gain insight into participants’ thoughts regarding the impact of Theme Housing on sense of belonging with an emphasis on analyzing the metrics that were used in the decision to remove certain Theme Housing. Focus groups also included questions for participants regarding what community-generated methods of restructuring student Theme Housing applications could increase equity in the section process in the future (e.g., *How could we come together as a community of students, administrators, and faculty to address housing inequalities for faculty?*) Below, Figure 1 shows an example of the Theme Housing selection rubric.

**Figure 1**

*Theme housing selection rubric*



In-person focus groups were conducted during the spring of 2023 at The University of the South and ranged in length from 30 minutes to 50 minutes, depending on participant elaboration in their responses. Before the start of the focus group, participants were informed that the research team would work to ensure that what they shared would remain confidential. We did not collect demographic details besides class year due to the small sample size at a predominately White institution. When justifying the study to the IRB, it was determined that the study involved no potential risks due to the non-sensitive content of the discussion. Therefore, we did not require participants to sign a written consent form. Instead, we explained the intent of the focus groups detailing their participation in the study acted as their consent to be recorded. We allowed participants a moment before the recording began to leave if they chose not to consent. All participants remained in the focus group, thereby indicating their consent. Participants were encouraged not to discuss what others shared in the focus group outside of the space. Focus groups were audio recorded and recordings were uploaded to a secured drive until transcripts were made. Subsequently, all recordings were deleted. All focus groups were first transcribed using Otter.AI software and then edited as needed for accuracy. Transcripts and audio were deleted from Otter.AI immediately upon completion of the transcription. Participant names were never recorded as part of the focus group, and students were encouraged not to say one another’s names during the recording. For compensation, each participant received either a research participation credit or was entered into a lottery for a $20 Amazon gift card.

**Qualitative Data and Analysis**

Qualitative descriptive data were collected through semi-structured focus groups. Data collection occurred from March 24th, 2023 to April 7, 2023, with the study as a whole occurring from February 8th, 2023 to May 3, 2023. Data was coded from the Otter.AI generated edited transcripts via Dedoose qualitative software by the first second authors separately. A flexible coding approach was used to analyze our data (Detering & Waters, 2021). We first utilized structural coding, gathering general quotes that were answered by each question asked then each performed a round of open coding. We then performed axial coding by analyzing each other’s codes, resulting in selective coding by choosing overarching themes of the transcript with cascading sub-themes. Our major themes were student voice, lack of transparency, accessibility to safe spaces, community flourishing, safe space, and why physical spaces are needed. Member checking with co-researchers was utilized after coding was thought to be complete to retain the project’s values of constructivist theory. The method ensures that research is driven by the participants as stakeholders and aims to discover the participants' subjective truth or perceptions through returning themes and representative quotes to co-researchers to reflect upon and offer feedback (Flick, 2022).

**Study Context**

This action research project was based at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee. Sewanee is located in Franklin County, Tennessee on the Cumberland Plateau, a predominantly rural county in the southern part of the state. Franklin County has a population of approximately 43,936 residents, and the county's demographic makeup is primarily White, with 92.5% of the population identifying as White alone, and the remaining 7.5% being from various racial and ethnic backgrounds, including African American, Hispanic, or Latino, Asian, and others (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). The University of the South, commonly known as Sewanee, is situated within Franklin County and is slightly more diverse than the surrounding county, with 18% of the student population identifying as students of color. Sewanee is a private liberal arts university known for its picturesque mountain campus situated on 13,000 acres of land. The University is home to 1,793 undergraduate students, 98% of whom live on campus in residential dorms, sorority, and fraternity houses, and, crucial to this study, Theme Houses.

**Researcher Reflexivity**

The first author, A.B.C. is a white, upper-middle class, cisgender, non-disabled female with both parents having received a bachelor's degree, one of which received a doctoral degree. Both of her parents work as mental health professionals and influenced her to become a peer health educator. A.B.C. was personally impacted when peer health lost their house as a result of the reallocation of student housing. A.B.C. is informed by her mental-health-forward background to understand the value of a campus-wide sense of belonging and the threats posed to student well-being on campus.

The second author, M.K. is an international student from Japan, who is currently a junior in Sewanee. She has spent most of her life in Tokyo, Japan, and has decided to study abroad in a rural region of the States for four years to pursue psychology. She is also the first person in her family to get a college education and a degree. Growing up learning a foreign language has granted her the ability to communicate with people who live in a different country. This allowed her to understand facets of cultural values, ideas, and the sense of community both in Japan and the U.S. One of the things that stuck out to her about Sewanee is that the sense of belonging and community is extremely high in demand, and housing an important factor in both.

**Findings**

Findings from focus groups with student co-researchers are concentrated within the following key themes: student voice and trust, accessibility and safe spaces, community flourishing, and the importance of physical space.

**Student Voice and Trust**

After students were presented with the rubric documentation of how Theme Houses were scored and selected for the next academic year, many felt the process itself significantly lacked student voices. A suggestion given multiple times in both groups was to include in-person testimonials from representatives of the Theme Houses, such as the co-directors and residents, to account for qualitative factors contributing to a Theme House’s success. While findings in this area mostly relate to campus-specific issues, students shared the importance of strengthening trust relationships between students and the administration for community well-being. For instance, one student compared the lack of qualitative interviews in the selection process to the workforce:

When you're going to like get a job, people will get your [resume], but then invite you back to an interview for a reason…it's really not fair that they're able to put a score on a house without having any personal experience. It's only looking at half of what they're providing.

Another student shared frustrations about the lack of student voices as a whole on campus when asked about what needs to be done to the Theme Housing selection process saying, “I guess, give students more of a voice,” indicating that trust has been broken between students and administrators. Students continued to voice concerns about the weight (or lack thereof) their voices had with the administration, stating that, “In classrooms [we] are taught to like, think for ourselves and like, speak up. But then within our very own community, I feel like we're being silenced.” Another student echoed the assumed defeat against the administration voicing that “If they care that much, they will put in the effort to show up.” The student continued to indicate that no matter how much the administration claimed to care for students, students felt as if they were being ignored.

Some students felt as if the issue of the lack of student voice had more to do with the lack of communication and trust between students and the administration than the lack of individual care. One student reflected, “I do think it is a symptom of there not being very much communication between student bodies, individual students, and the organizations that are there to support students.” Another student shared how opportunities for student voice have decreased since before the pandemic, their experience at Sewanee was drastically different in regards to having their voice heard:

But we were here pre-COVID. And I was only here for two months before we got sent home. But then student voices were so valuable. They made such a huge difference in the community. And it was kind of heartbreaking to see that disappear when COVID happened, and that beautiful aspect of Sewanee and a part of Sewanee that really attracts people to come here.

When student leaders approached administrators after Theme Housing selections were made, many of them felt infantilized.For instance, one Theme House Co-Director participated in a meeting with administrators to discuss the future of Theme Housing, and shared these reflections:

But when I did meet with them, they talked, and they would say, “Yes, I see your point. But this is why it's so hard for us. And this is why we can't do anything that you're asking for." Or they would say, "This isn't my job. This is someone who works beneath me. And that's their responsibility." But the only reason we were talking to [administrator] was because that person that we had initially reached out to said, "I don't have the authority to deal with this. You need to talk to someone above me." And so they were constantly deflecting and redirecting us.

Students indicated that mutual distrust between students and administrators directly resulted in weakened organizational programming and group morale. One student shared feelings of frustration regarding the Theme Housing crisis, explaining that it is a “very hard thing for everyone to deal with on this campus.” This student indicated that the loss of trust between students and administrators also led to actionable change in the form of this action research project. They suggested, “if we never try you’ll never know,” recommending action research as a desirable option to make changes in positions of less power.

**Accessibility to Safe Spaces**

In the greater context of Sewanee’s small campus, many students stressed the importance of Theme House programming and accessibility. One focus group participant highlighted the key role Theme Houses play in accessibility and inclusivity concerns for student life, stating, “We're on a college campus, very isolated in the middle of nowhere, you got to drive long ways to get anywhere.” Participants agreed that resources provided by Theme Houses were crucial elements in connecting students to the community. Another student added that “tangible space also makes a lot of these events more accessible to people.” Taking away some of the Theme Houses “would be just devastating in the sense of it's not going to be a guarantee to whether the events can happen or not.”

Similarly, students noted that the removal of several Theme Houses has centralized the remaining Theme Houses into one row. In that process, ResLife also relocated many sorority houses in place of former Theme Houses to centralize Greek Housing:

I understand the perceived benefit of centralizing where the houses are, but by doing that, you also create very distinct parts of the campus where Theme Houses aren't. And so there are big sections that are like now, only Greek life. And then there are big sections that are just Theme Houses. And Theme Housing is meant to bridge gaps, and then also provide opportunities that exist outside of Greek life, and outside of dorm life. And by sectioning it off, it sends a message like it's one or the other or creates hostility or animosity between the two.

Collectively, students agreed that accessibility to Theme Houses around campus was particularly important in maintaining student well-being. For example, one of the respondents who used to be a tour guide on campus shared her thoughts on how Theme Houses can be an encouragement to students to become future leaders:

And when I was briefly a tour guide, I gave a tour to you know, some prospective students. And I was talking about theme houses and they're like, oh my God is there like theater theme house and I was like, not to my knowledge but you can make one like you can request one, and like I don't even know if that person ended up going here or not. But the fact that like, that inspires it like creates a space for like creativity and like encourages students to be a leader if they want to change make one and I think that is so unique to our school that it just really sad when we hear about like, the students have to like, like have theme houses, I don't know. I think it's just a beautiful part of Sewanee. I don't know why you would want to get rid of it.

Based on her interactions with the prospective students who seemed excited about Theme Houses as an accessible site for belonging and community. Respondents also stated that Theme Houses are “a beautiful part of Sewanee” and that it is “so unique to our school.” Many shared that themed residential communities like Sewanee’s Theme Houses would be a selling point if they were to start college applications over again.

Many of the respondents showed concern that the removal of Theme Houses may also result in the loss of some safe spaces on campus. Because the students who live in Theme Houses have many opportunities to share ideas and get to know each other better by living in a shared space with a small number of students, they serve as a safe space for many students on this campus. With the reduction in Theme Houses, there is concern about the safety of belonging:

I wonder how many safe places are going to be left on campus without theme houses because they serve as safe places for so many people that like if that was if we never had it, then maybe that could be a different story. But because it has served as a safe place for so many people. I think a lot of a huge portion of our Sewanee campus would really, really feel that absence. And we'll probably do anything they can to bring it back just because like, you don't know how much that changed their lives. We don't know that from the outside. Only personal experience can explain that. Yeah.

This respondent shared her concern that the Sewanee campus and community may deeply mourn the absence of Theme Houses. She also claimed that the effects of Theme Houses are unforeseen from the outside, and that “only personal experience can explain” the wider-reaching impacts. The close-knit community and strong interpersonal connections fostered there “has served as a safe place for so many people.”

Another respondent commented on how it is easier to speak to someone closer to one's age rather than an adult about emotional well-being. Although there are Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) on campus, talking to a peer can be more comforting:

Well, I mean, it's like CAPS is good and all, but sometimes it's easier to just speak to someone closer to your own age. They provide so many resources for other students. It's just comforting to like, know that you have that option. You don't even like you might not even need it. But you have that as an option.

CAPS is a critical resource for students, but participants identified a feeling of intimidation that is normally not there when conversing with a peer. Theme Houses provide a safe place for students, and when students are looking for help, they can rely on those residents. Because “[t]hey provide so many resources for other students,” the existence of Theme Houses provides comfort, even if students “might not even need” the specific resources provided by the residents at all times.

**Community Flourishing**

The removal of several Theme Houses has also led students to address the rift created between students and the administration concerning greater community-wide flourishing in Sewanee. One student shared the impact Theme Housing has on student well-being: “I think what we have now is really good.” They went on to say that the future of Sewanee Theme Housing is “hard to think about'' because “we're struggling to hold on to what we have.” They indicated that Theme Housing is a crucial part of student flourishing at Sewanee, and felt discouraged about the removal of several Theme Houses. Another student shared that the decision to remove Theme Houses has exposed greater underlying issues:

I feel like trust is always the glue between brokenness, broken community, and broken relationships. And I feel like we're having these issues because there is some brokenness in this community.

She shared that the distrust of the administration by students and the students by the administration is leading this campus into fragmented sectors.

Theme Housing plays an important role within the community since it allows students to pursue their interests, have structural support, and connect with one another in a close-knit environment. Theme Houses are meant to align with students’ interests and create a platform to promote those interests to the broader community, which fosters a passion within the students:

Theme Houses do not just create connections with individual students, but also foster deep connections among fellow Houses across campus. It is common for students to collaborate with other Theme Houses to explore and broaden the prospects of their interests and passions. The intersections create space for events that may not have been possible or likely to occur without the collaborative efforts of Theme Houses:

They act as nodes for connection and intersectionality. The interfaith house has had two events, partnering with the Q&A house talking about sacred queerness, which is obviously talking about spirituality and queerness, gender identity, and sexuality. And that goes beyond just those two houses. And it identifies and creates a space that wasn't in existence before. And that's helped by the fact that it's made by organizations that do exist and have the capital to like, do events that haven't happened before.

The existence of Theme Houses allows the students to have a space where they can collaborate and share their mutual interests and passions, which is an important part of student flourishing on campus. These spaces, according to the participant, are not just for Theme Houses themselves, but go “beyond those two houses” and reach the broader community.

**Holding Space for Creativity and Community**

Since many of the student-led events run through Theme Housing, students must have a physical place to brainstorm and execute their plans. Theme Houses provide a casual space for the residents, which allows them to bounce ideas off each other:

Well, going off of my experience from having a crafting guild organization without a space, to having a crafting organization with a house, just numbers-wise, we were able to triple, or maybe even quadruple the number of events we've been able to do. And I think that is just a reflection of us being able to pass by each other, live with each other, and interact in different ways to where we're bouncing off each other in session settings that are not just in a business-style meeting. Because that's not where ideas happen. So many ideas have been created when we're talking and ideas have been playing in our subject which is crafting for us happens when we're playing together. Outside of the House working on something and saying like, Man, I really wish we had one of these. Let's do an event.

This respondent has experienced a situation where his organization did have a house and did not have a house. He reflected that the number of events within his organization increased when having a Theme House. He also noted that the daily interaction with other residents of the Theme House led to new event ideas when “not just in a business style meeting,” but in a shared residence. Another individual shared a similar sentiment:

I feel like a lot of the best ideas and most creative ideas come naturally rather than like in a seated meeting time. And I feel like if you're living with people with common purpose, and like common goals and common interests, it's almost inevitable, that those conversations are going to, just come out, whatever. And it's really nice that you're living with people with common interests that they can like, take that idea and do something with it. Rather than someone listening to that idea and be like, Oh, that's a cool idea. And like, that'd be the end of that idea. But because like they're all just living together. I feel like the conversation of new ideas is always more continuous. And like more fluid.

Here, the respondent emphasized how ideas come out more fluidly than in seated conversations. Living in a Theme House with people who share similar interests and values allows the ideas and conversations to flow and it is “almost inevitable”. The respondent also added that residents of Theme Houses can also make those ideas that came up in conversations happen.

Having Theme Houses can also be beneficial when students are trying to create events based on student innovation and peer empowerment. The purpose of student events may vary, though it will be meaningless if it is not accessible to other people on campus, as one student shared when they noted “I feel like having a tangible space also makes a lot of these events more accessible to people.” Many of the Theme House events take place in their own spaces, which are located near the central campus. It is welcoming and accessible to many people, which is crucial to having a successful event. Other respondents noted that having a Theme House to work on such events is a lot easier than not having a designated space.

**Discussion**

Qualitative insights reveal that students care a great deal about Theme Housing and the future of housing on the mountain. These insights are more broadly applicable for fostering student-administrator trust, implications of space, community building, and nurturing creativity in other colleges.

**Fostering Student-Administrator Trust**

Students expressed over twenty times in the two focus groups that the relationship between students and administrators felt strained. While these findings are subjectively based on the specific environment of a small liberal arts university in the South, they have real implications for the importance of fostering strong student-administrator relationships in undergraduate universities. Because students felt as if their voices didn’t matter when in communication with the administration, serious communication changes needed to be made for the two bodies to successfully work together in community matters. Focus groups revealed that if students were given ample opportunity to have their voices heard in administrative decisions, transparency in communication would be improved. This research project directly impacted the 2024-2025 Theme Housing selection process in a positive, actionable way. A year after these focus groups were held, the administration made changes to their staff, involved students in the selection process, offered qualitative opportunities (i.e. a video essay) for Theme House applications, and offered houses back to organizations that lost their houses the previous year without an opportunity to demonstrate their non-quantifiable impact. These results demonstrate the potential of action research as a solution for change-making among groups that hold significantly less power than others, like between students and administrators. Similarly, these findings suggest trust between students and administrators can be a mediating factor in decision-making on university campuses. If trust between students and administrators at Sewanee had been established prior to the action research project, it is likely that community well-being around disruptions to residential living would have been mitigated. This holds implications for other universities despite Sewanee’s specific context given the necessity of trust between students and administrators when implementing values-based residential communities on other campuses.

**Implications of Space**

Throughout the focus groups, students shared how important it is for safe spaces to exist on campus. They also shared that the majority of these safe spaces are centered in Theme Houses. Students therefore indicated that the spaces Theme Houses are given should be made to feel safe (i.e. a Theme House should take up its space in a physical home). Many Theme Houses, as a result of the selection process, negotiated for their organizations to be housed in dorms—a consequence of occupying a hall in a dorm was dramatically limited programming for their organizations. Many also expressed that Theme Housing placed in anything besides a home sends the message that Theme Housing is like any other student organization: able to function without its residents. While some Theme Houses may be able to maintain programming from a dorm or even an office space, the heart of Theme Housing is its close relationship with safe and accessible spaces where students can feel vulnerable and at home. Theme Housing’s role in fostering a sense of belonging is limited when Theme Housing does not feel like a home.

Outside of Sewanee’s unique context, these findings provide implications for the importance of safe, accessible spaces for undergraduate students across the United States. Students’ sense of belonging was increased when they felt supported by residential communities. Having dedicated safe spaces for marginalized and non-marginalized students alike creates a community in which students have multiple opportunities to be seen and recognized. Finding a home or a chosen family in an open, accessible environment is crucial for undergraduate well-being.

**Community-Building**

After the COVID-19 Pandemic, building community among undergraduates became a greater necessity for universities and colleges than ever before. Community belonging can act as a buffer against many negative emotions such as depression and anxiety while simultaneously building resilience against internal and external stressors. Sewanee students expressed great appreciation for Theme Housing due to its unique position to better the university community as a whole. Students mentioned the collaborative efforts of Theme Houses to bridge different houses, student organizations, and larger community organizations together as an asset of the university. Similarly, Theme Houses that center around faith groups, LGBTQIA+ belonging, feminist ideals, and cultural understanding form the potential for community building within and across the houses and intersectional groups. When diverse groups work together and build a community based on the appreciation of diversity, it sends a message to the greater community that they are stronger and better together. Universities that enable collaborative, values-based housing have great potential to strengthen student communities and beyond.

**Nurturing Creativity**

Students continuously emphasized the creative potential honed by Theme Houses. When student organizations plan and implement programming, idea generation is typically limited to weekly (bi-weekly, etc.) meetings. When the members of a student organization live together in a dedicated space, ideas for programming can be generated spontaneously, allowing for more creative and integrated events and implementation. Likewise, organization members who live with other members may feel more connected to their peers and the organization as a whole. This connectedness has great potential to lead to more considerate programming and outreach. Where many students on university campuses may feel like they join as many clubs as possible, only to be left with too busy a schedule to care about the work they do, values-based residential communities make it so that students can feel they live out the true values of the organization they are a part of.

**Limitations**

Findings from this study should be interpreted considering the limitations caused by the small participant size of focus groups and the limited time to conduct the study.

**Focus Groups and Participants**

The data was collected from two focus groups, which consisted of 5-10 people in each group. The sample size was small, and many of the participants had some connections with Theme Houses (have lived in or were currently living in Theme Houses, etc.), which contributed to some amount of bias in the discussion. The majority of student participants were also either psychology majors or students seeking psychology research participation credit. Future research should broaden the sample so that we can access more opinions, suggestions, and potential solutions for community matters.

Similarly, with such a small sample size, the diversity of participants was fairly limited. While we had participants who were not affiliated with Theme Housing, Greek Housing, or Language Housing, we did not hear from many international students, LGBTQ+ students, or students of color. A more diverse sample might provide this research with more nuanced ideas of community living.

**Limited Time**

Since this project started at the end of January 2023, there was limited time to complete thorough data collection due to semester restraints. Future research should consider student opinions of the benefits of values-based housing both on their campus and on other campuses. Because values-based housing is a relatively new idea in university housing programming, research should be dedicated to its unique importance in longer studies.

**Future Implications**

We see this project as having implications for our campus rooted in an action research paradigm, and implications for university housing in general. This study did not ask specific research questions about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on themed residential communities. Theme Housing at Sewanee likely improved community-building efforts in the wake of the pandemic. It is also likely that implementing values-based residential communities on university campuses post-pandemic can improve collective well-being damaged by pandemic-induced isolation. Future research should study the specific effects of values-based residential housing as mitigation for pandemic community losses.

This project led us to write an opinion article for Sewanee’s student newspaper, *The Sewanee Purple*. Subsequently, we met with an administrator in the Residential Life office to relay this research to the administration in hopes of actionable change to the selection process. Unfortunately, the head of Residential Life refused commentary on the issue. Secondly, the administrator we met with in charge of the Theme House selection process left the university and could not oversee the changes made for the following selection process. Excitingly, the changes that were made integrated many of the concerns raised by students in focus groups leading to a new selection process for the 2024-2025 academic year. Theme Houses had the opportunity to create a video essay in addition to the written application, allowing for unique testimonies not understood through the initial rubric. Similarly, at least one student was confirmed to sit on the selection committee to provide insight into the selection processes.

While we understand that Sewanee Theme Housing is a rather unique university housing opportunity, we believe this research recognizes the wide-reaching importance of values-based university housing. Any housing programming that provides a university with opportunities for fostering a sense of belonging is programming worth creating, promoting, and working toward. Inclusion and belonging in higher education should be a top priority when considering the well-being of students. Larger universities especially could benefit from smaller-scale values-based housing, as it provides a sense of community to students in an otherwise overwhelming environment. Many university housing plans of this scale only include academic learning-based housing communities, which only promote one avenue for belonging. More students might thrive with personalized values-based housing set-up to serve a wide array of student groups and interests. We believe future research should consider the benefits of values-based university housing among more university campuses and communities.

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