

## Residential Collegiate Housing:

### The Benefits and Drawbacks of Living and Working in the Same Environment.

**Abstract:** The idea of living and working in an environment that combines academic and social interaction plays a huge role in modern, higher education. It has been debated for some time whether this type of environment is beneficial or detrimental to the overall success of the student. It was found that living in college dormitories showed overwhelming evidence for increased academic and social integration. Living with roommates can have a positive or negative effect on GPA depending on the situation and gender of the students. It was also found that new social networking technology, such as Facebook, is playing an integral role in eliminating physical distance limitations historically experienced by off campus students. There has also been a rise in Residential Learning Communities which mimics many of the interactions that the Eckerd College community has been known for in the past. Overall, living on campus has been associated with a positive collegiate experience.

“You have four years to be irresponsible here. Relax. Work is for people with jobs. You'll never remember class time, but you'll remember time you wasted hanging out with your friends. So, stay out late. Go out on a Tuesday with your friends when you have a paper due Wednesday. Spend money you don't have. Drink 'til sunrise. The work never ends, but college does...” (Petty, 1982). While Tom Petty’s quote can be seen as devaluing the college academic experience, the conundrum of living and working in an environment that combines academic and social interaction plays a huge role in modern, higher education. It has been debated for some time whether on-campus collegiate housing is beneficial or detrimental to the overall success of the student. **Through examining the history of residence halls, impacts of living in collegiate housing and the emergence of new Residential Learning Communities, the overall positive living on campus experience can be explored.** These ideas will also be placed within the context of how new technology has altered these circumstances and how some of these issues can be applied to Eckerd College.

The history of residence halls can be traced back almost seven hundred years, although they performed a drastically different service than most do today (“You Were Asking,” 2009). Residence halls around colleges and universities originated because they provided a more economic way for students to live. Many students wanted cheaper housing than the local landlords could provide. However, their purpose stopped there- nothing beyond the actual quarters students lived in was provided. The university administration had no part in students’ daily lives; these dormitories were completely self-governed (“You Were Asking,” 2009). Over time many institutions discontinued use of residence halls; however, at England’s Oxford University and Cambridge University, the residence hall remained an important fundamental aspect of higher education. The collegiate housing systems in the United States are modeled heavily after universities in England due to their founders usually having graduated from one of the two previously mentioned institutions (“You Were Asking,” 2009).

When dormitories were first built they were centered around massive libraries to facilitate easy study. They were extremely Spartan, seeking to separate students from the outside population to foster more diligent studies and introspection. Take the dorms of the Harvard Yard at Harvard University for example; all the windows and doors are facing inward to the yard – from the outside all one sees is a wall (Stephey, 2011). During this time, students were mostly male, and were held to strict standards including dress codes, mandatory religious services, imposed curfews and even fitness workouts (Stephey, 2011). All of these restrictions were imposed by “dorm mothers” who lived within the dorms. In the 1940s more women began to appear in collegiate housing due to men’s absence in academia in World War II. Women were placed under even stricter supervision than men and were in many ways treated as children

(Stephey, 2011). During the 1950s and 1960s there was a huge collegiate housing boom which gradually led toward co-ed dormitories. Today, more and more amenities are being added to campus living to justify their rising cost. Across the country things such as tanning salons, restaurants, hot tubs and state-of-the-art fitness centers with climbing walls can be found on college campuses (Stephey, 2011).

With all these new amenities, which can be seen as distractions in college dorms, it makes one wonder if dorms are still beneficial to students' living-working environment. Many of the studies available cite three types of impacts that housing has on students: grade point average (GPA), academic integration, and social integration. Grades are the probably the most controversial of the impacts examined, but their emphasis is deserved since they play a large role in student class standing, enrollment and admissions. Pascarella and Terenzini as quoted by Yeung (2010) define integration as the "extent to which the individual shares the normative attitudes and values of peers and faculty in the institution and abides by the formal and informal structural requirements for membership in that community or subgroups of it." Academic and social integration have been extensively studied due to their association with withdrawal from higher education (Yeung, 2010).

The types of housing discussed by Yeung (2010) are living on campus, living off campus, and living off campus with parents. Yeung, like another famous study by Chickering (1974) found that there were major differences in "...parental background and finances, high school achievement and experiences, college plans and future aspirations, anticipated college experiences and activities, and attitudes and beliefs," between the three types of residence situations. Yeung (2010) attempts to use what he calls a "quasi-experimental" design approach to

replicate features of a randomized experiment. Such randomizations could not be achieved in his study because the administration cannot force random groups of students to live off campus or with their parents.

Yeung, along with many other studies, has found overwhelming evidence for dormitories being beneficial for students. His analysis showed that residential students performed slightly better academically than their off campus, or even fraternity or sorority, counterparts (Blimling, 1989). This data however does not control for past academic performance; when these controls are included the differences are negligible. However, with these controls the study still found that students living in residence halls had significant gains in critical thinking (based on test scores). Overall, previous studies showed that there is no apparent benefit to academic performance or cognitive development due to living on campus.

It has been thought for some time that one of the major reasons students do better with social integration in residence halls is because of their proximity to available social opportunities and information. There is more information for this type of impact rather than GPA or academic integration. Pascarella and Terenzini as quoted by Yeung (2010) found that, "living on campus... was the single most consistent within-college determinant of the impact of college," by bringing about change indirectly through social, cultural, and extracurricular activities. Commuters tend to participate less in extracurricular activities, know a smaller base of students, and therefore hold fewer leadership positions (Yeung, 2010). Men were found to be more socially integrated than women, and it was found that time spent on campus was the key factor in determining social integration.

For some of the same proximity reasons, greater academic integration is found in students who live on campus. They tend to spend more time around staff and educators of the institution. It was found that students living on campus interact more frequently with faculty than do commuter students who live at home and were found to be least academically integrated (Yeung, 2010). Off-campus students presented themselves somewhere in the middle of the two. Women were found to be more academically integrated than men possibly due to their willingness to ask for help. In addition, commuter students living at home were less likely to study with or help other students probably due to their increased non-academic work load and familial responsibilities. The only group benefited by living with parents was found to be students of Hispanic descent (Yeung, 2010).

Interestingly, Yeung (2010) found that when moving from on-campus housing to living at home with parents, students' GPAs rose by a third of a standard deviation. However, this gain is offset by decreases in both academic and social integration within the college. So while living at home may seem more cost effective and beneficial in the immediate future, living on campus was found to be more beneficial to the overall university experience in the long run.

Living on campus has clearly been shown to have a positive influence in students' lives. The academic and social integration they are afforded have been shown to provide "more opportunities to influence student growth and development in the first year or two of college than almost any other program in student affairs" (Blimling, 1993). Rinn (2004) of the University of Kentucky says this growth is influenced by aiding student development along seven vectors: "achieving competence, managing emotions, becoming autonomous, establishing identity, forming interpersonal relationships, clarifying purposes and developing integrity." The social

identification a student feels within their dorm, especially during their freshman year can greatly contribute to their transition into college (Rinn, 2004). A student will associate their dorm as a substitute for home, a place where they feel safe and welcome, and begin to form relationships around and within its walls.

Nowadays on campus housing comes in a variety of different choices. Students have the opportunity to live in suite-style dorms, theme dorms, or traditional dorms. Suite style dorms have become more in demand recently because students are expecting to continue living at the same standard they were at home (Stephey, 2011). Many times this includes having a kitchen and a living room separate from your bedroom. There is a big debate about whether these added amenities could be seen as distractions from studies or just as enhancing the learning environment. Theme housing has also recently become popular. Themed housing is purposely placing or allowing students of the same academic standing, interest, or ethnicity to all live together in one specialized dorm. While this dorm allows students to build group solidarity, it also promotes self segregation and forms highly distinct groups without much diversity (Rinn, 2004). It has also been found to encourage stereotypes and prevent students from broadening their horizons by meeting people outside of their groups.

Another important impact of collegiate housing investigated by Pascarella, E.T., Edison, M., Hagedorn, L.S., Nora, A. & Terenzini, P.T. (1996) is the idea of locus of control. This describes the extent to which people are self directed or believe they control their own fate rather than its being luck. They found that students living on campus experienced greater increases in internality than students who either live off campus or with family. This is important because students who believe they control their own fate consistently do better academically and

motivationally than those leaving it up to something else. Kuh, Gonyea & Palmer (2001) claim three gains associated with the same three types of collegiate housing: gains in personal and social competence, gains in practical competence, and gains in general education. They found that on all accounts residential students reported higher gains than either type of student living off campus.

For all the benefits of living on campus, however, there will always be drawbacks. One of the largest problems on college campuses today is substance abuse, specifically binge drinking (Kremer & Levy, 2008). Kremer & Levy found that male students who drank in high school negatively affected the GPA of a randomly assigned roommate who did not drink in high school. This influence even increases over time as it was shown that second year male students' GPAs were affected even more by roommates who routinely drank in high school (Kremer & Levy, 2008). Much of this is caused by peer pressure and the need to fit in. Much in the same way that a dorm can make you feel like you have a place in the community, having a roommate who drinks can make a student feel pressured to do so as well in order to fit in. Strikingly, a roommate's past academic performance or socioeconomic background did not influence a roommate's GPA as much as the tendency to consume alcohol frequently. On the other hand, female students were not affected in any way by their roommates past drinking history. This is most likely because college-age males are more susceptible to peer influences than college-age females (Kremer & Levy, 2008).

Beyond alcohol abuse, Kremer & Levy (2008) also found that while the GPAs of first year roommates are correlated, by senior year they are most often not. It is thought that the initial correlation can be explained by common shocks throughout the first year. Shocks can be

classified as adjusting to a vastly different routine, eating new food, experiencing a bad professor, or encountering new sicknesses. Each of these obstacles will be experienced together for the first time and both students will rely on each other to adapt and overcome. By the time senior year is reached however, roommates have had three full years to learn how to adjust and each has developed their own strategy leading to different GPAs.

There have also been positive influences associated with the peer pressure of living on campus. Yeung (2010) found a small, but statistically significant effect on GPA when living with a roommate with a higher SAT score. Similarly, Kremer & Levy (2008) found that a female student from a low income background will improve her GPA if placed with a roommate from a high income background (Kremer & Levy, 2008). In addition, if a student is paired with a roommate who is very active on campus, they would be more likely to be convinced to tag along to academic and social events.

While so far most of the positive points have been for living on campus, there are a few undisputable gains for living off campus as well. Living off campus has been shown to help students become much more independent, allowing them to experience for the first time coping with money, business details, and meals. In addition to these life experiences, living off campus is thought to reduce distractions, including overcrowding, insufficient privacy, roommate issues and noise commonly encountered on campus (Yeung, 2010).

As for students living at home, they were found to work more than their peers who also lived in off-campus housing. In addition to this increased work ethic which could be seen as a positive aspect of living at home, students living off campus with family were found to have the lowest alcohol use scores, probably due to the different social standards found there compared to

on campus. Ultimately male students and Hispanic students were found to benefit most from living with their parents (Yeung, 2010).

Much of the advantage of living on campus versus off campus dealt with the availability of social information and opportunity. Increases in technology and the prevalence of social networking have recently been found to increase the sense of belonging among commuter students. As mentioned earlier, social integration plays a large role in retaining students at an institution and making them feel a part of the campus community. There five factors associated with a sense of belonging: “empathetic faculty understanding, perceived peer support, perceived isolation, perceived faculty support and comfort, and perceived classroom comfort” (Dorum, Bartle & Pennington 2010).

Dorum et al. (2010) discussed social networking mainly in term of the world-wide phenomenon of Facebook. They found that more than half (55%) of students joined Facebook to meet people from their university before actually attending, while 43% joined immediately after. Three quarters of the students sampled said that Facebook played a major role in helping them become settled at the university. In addition to meeting new friends, it allowed students to remain in contacts with friends from home while they were adjusting to a new environment. Facebook is most commonly used for social, rather than academic reasons and is helpful in aiding in the communication that off campus students traditionally lack. Previous off-campus students were seen to be at a social disadvantage, but now Facebook, acting as “social glue,” can afford greater social integration and information sharing between students with traditionally less time spent on campus (Dorum et al., 2010). Positive attitude in students is associated with their greater sense of belonging on campus so any increase in belonging is welcome. While Facebook

is by no means a replacement for face-to-face interaction, it helps alleviate the informational disadvantage off-campus students have by not physically being present.

One of the most interesting new ideas to arise in higher education takes on campus living to a new level with the creation of Residential Learning Communities (RLC). Their interest was developed after some administrators realized that many large schools continue to fall short of serving their undergraduate community (Golde & Pribbenow 2000). The goal was to create a truly integrated environment for living and learning. RLCs have students living, eating and working immediately beside faculty and staff. This additional interaction between students and faculty outside of the classroom has been shown to positively affect student learning and personal development (Golde & Pribbenow 2000). At this time, RLCs positive success has translated to their use in almost five hundred colleges and universities, and that number continues to grow (Smith, 2001).

While Eckerd College is not exactly a RLC, there are many similarities that can be drawn. Since Eckerd is such a small college almost every students gets personal attention from the faculty if they seek it. This high degree of interaction with the faculty in a professional setting promotes the academic integration which is so important to having a beneficial college experience. Other programs and events such as Pitchers with Professors and Kappa Karnival which are hosted monthly and yearly, respectively, by Eckerd help promote student faculty interactions in more casual settings. This informal setting mimics the facilities of the RLCs in their ability to increase interaction. Even off campus students at Eckerd have been positively affected by the high use of Facebook by students, and even faculty, as a social networking tool.

No matter which way you look at it, the college years are some of the most influential in a person's life. There are advantages and disadvantages to living both on and off campus ranging from manipulations of GPA by previous drinking habits, to increased or decreased academic and social integration. It is also evident that the changing face of technology in both social networking and types of learning communities will certainly continue to play a role in the effect of collegiate housing including that at Eckerd College. One thing is certain, while academic achievement is important, a student misses out on a large part of college life without the added benefits of increased academic and social integration that comes with living on campus.

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