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Academic and Social Effects of Living in Honors Residence Halls

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ABSTRACT

The impact of the residential environment in theories of college student development is often emphasized. Many researchers have studied the effects of on-campus living versus off-campus living, generally finding that living in residence halls is positively associated with both academic and social development. However, the study of gifted college students living in an honors residence hall is rarely addressed. This article examines the possible academic and social effects of living in an honors residence hall. Implications are discussed.

ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL EFFECTS OF LIVING IN HONORS RESIDENCE HALLS

The study of college student development often includes students' residences (i.e., residence halls, off-campus apartments, parents' homes, etc.) because of the realization that there are other influences on college student development apart from classroom or classroom-related activities. Attending college does not just mean attending classes. Researchers often emphasize the role of residence halls in college student development because residence halls 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, p. 1), likely because a student spends more time in his or her living environment than anywhere else.

The importance of a student's residential environment has been supported by many researchers (e.g., Astin, 1977; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). To illustrate, Chickering (1969), in his psychosocial theory of college student development, argues development can be influenced by six major institutional factors of a college or university, including residence hall arrangements (others include clarity and consistency of institutional objectives; institutional size; curriculum, teaching, and evaluation; faculty and administration; and student culture). Through these institutional factors, students are aided in their development along seven vectors, namely achieving competence, managing emotions, becoming

autonomous, establishing identity, freeing interpersonal relationships, clarifying purposes, and developing integrity. Residential environments are typically studied in relation to students' academic development and social development.

RESIDENCE HALLS AND ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT

Although an abundance of literature exists regarding the social climate of residence halls, the academic climate of residence halls is examined far less frequently (Denzine, 1998). Living in residence halls is often anecdotally associated with gains in students' academic development, although the research in this area is less certain. In his meta-analysis of 21 studies that compared residence hall students with those living at home, Blimling (1989) found students living in residence halls seem to perform better academically than students who live at home. However, when prior academic achievement was controlled, research did not generally support the notion that students living in residence halls would perform better academically than students living at home. High-achieving students still performed well regardless of their living arrangements. In his meta-analysis of nine studies that compared residence hall students with students living in fraternity or sorority houses, those students living in residence halls were likely to perform better academically than students living in fraternity or sorority houses. Other researchers have found a clear correlation between living in residence halls and academic achievement in the form of grade point average (Astin, 1973; Rinn, 2003).

Although the evidence is uncertain regarding the relationship between residence hall living and academic achievement, research has supported the belief that living on-campus is associated with persistence and graduation from college. Chickering (1974) found on-campus living had a significant positive effect on completion of the bachelor's degree, even when controlling for individual differences such as academic ability. In addition, living on campus increases students' chances for aspiring to attain a graduate or professional degree (Astin, 1977). Several pre-college traits may be accountable for persistence and the attainment of a degree, such as academic aptitude, family socioeconomic status, and educational aspirations, although Astin provides an estimate that living in a residence hall contributes to about 12% of the variance involved in attaining a bachelor's degree.

RESIDENCE HALLS AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Research generally supports the notion that students living in campus-organized housing tend to be more socially adjusted and tend to participate more often in extracurricular and campus activities than students living off campus (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Lundgren & Schwab, 1979). Living in dormitories maximizes opportunities for students to become involved in social and extracurricular activities because they are placed in the center of activity (i.e., on campus), are literally surrounded by their peers, and have easier access to faculty and staff. This involvement largely accounts for student growth and development, including a general increase in self-concept (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), simply by exposure to other students and

opportunities. In fact, students often cite social opportunities and the opportunity to meet other students as reasons for re-applying to live in residence halls (Cleave, 1996). Of course, living in a residence hall is not guaranteed to provide a community-like atmosphere for college students. Clark and Hirt (1998) show that living in a small residence hall does not provide a better community atmosphere than living in a large residence hall.

Students who live in a residence hall may be inclined to identify with other students in their residence hall, thus viewing themselves as part of a group. In a study of 142 students living in residence halls, Bettencourt, Charlton, Eubanks, Kernahan, and Fuller (1999) found that social identification within a residence hall group increased adjustment to college, including both academic and social adjustment. Residence halls promote a sense of community that is both inclusive and exclusive. Residential communities are inclusive because they impart a sense of belonging among group members and exclusive because only certain group members can belong to the community, those who live in the residence hall. The safety a student feels within a residence hall community can thus serve as a starting point for student exploration. Students have the freedom to explore the campus but also the safety net of their residence hall. The residence hall then becomes the "psychological home and the locus of identity development during the most concentrated and intense learning period in the lives of students" (Hughes, 1994, p. 191).

Students involved in social organizations, including Greek organizations, report fewer feelings of loneliness and isolation than students not involved in social organizations (Lane & Daugherty, 1999). Moran, Yengo, and Algier found students involved in campus student organizations are also less likely to feel isolated than non-involved students (as cited in Lane & Daugherty). Commuter students, who are generally less likely to be involved in campus activities, report feeling more isolated from peers and less socially active than those students living on campus (Lundgren & Schwab, 1979). These research findings offer further support for the importance of residence hall living in the social development of college students.

HONORS RESIDENCE HALLS

The study of living in residence halls, fraternity and sorority houses, off-campus apartments, and parents' homes is well covered in the research literature. However, consistent with the lack of research on gifted college students (Rinn & Plucker, 2004), there is also a lack of research on housing for gifted college students, typically known as honors residence halls. This paucity of research remains even though a recent study shows honors students are more likely to live on campus than non-honors students (Gerrity, Lawrence, & Sedlacek, 1993)

Honors residence halls are characteristic of honors colleges within public universities, allowing gifted college students to participate in a challenging academic program while also fulfilling the general university requirements for an undergraduate degree. Students are usually accepted to an honors college on the basis of prior academic achievement. Honors colleges, largely modeled from the elitist image of British higher education, were first started in the United States in the early twentieth

century (Aydelotte, 1944). Residence halls in the United States are also a result of the British collegiate model, whereby students and faculty both lived and worked together (Blimling, 1993; Zeller, 1998).

In 1973, Halverson reported the educational and institutional objectives of honors colleges, which included provisions of both academic opportunities and "an environment that will encourage the aspirations of and the achievements by these students [honors students] and that will foster in them dignity, self-esteem, and a sense of their potential" (as cited in Austin, 1991, p. 11). The importance of the environment in collegiate honors education is reason for the implementation of both honors centers, which usually house a lounge, study areas, computers, honors residence halls, and so on (Austin). Although effects of living in honors residence halls are scarcely studied in the literature, a related residence has been studied, namely living-learning centers.

Living-learning centers, like honors residence halls, seek to integrate students' academic and residential lives through courses offered for credit and non-credit activities within the residence hall itself. Classrooms, living quarters, faculty offices, lounges, and so on are generally located in the same facility or cluster of facilities. Most research tends to support the notion that living-learning centers have a positive influence on a student's academic and social development. Students residing in living-learning centers have been shown to achieve higher grade point averages than students living in other housing arrangements (Kanoy & Bruhn, 1996) and report greater satisfaction with their environment (Clarke, 1988).

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) found that students living in living-learning centers, as compared to conventional residence halls, "rated the institutional environment significantly stronger in intellectual press and sense of community and also reported significantly greater freshman year gains on the measure of cognitive development" (p.151). Pemberton (1969) found similar results and also noted that the transition from high school to college appeared easier for students in a living-learning center because of the supportive atmosphere. In fact, one of the most often cited important features of a living-learning center is a student's self-reported feeling of connectedness to his or her living environment (Schein & Bowers, 1992). These findings offer a base from which to reflect on the effects of living in honors residence halls.

SPECULATION ON THE EFFECTS OF HONORS RESIDENCE HALLS

Just as living in a residence hall increases a student's odds of persistence in college and eventual graduation, participation in an honors program increases persistence in college and also aspirations for graduate or professional degrees (Astin, 1977). Therefore, the combined effects of participating in an honors program and living in an honors residence hall would appear to result in large positive gains for the academic achievement and aspirations of gifted college students. This increase in academic achievement and aspirations could occur for several reasons.

When honors students live together in the same dormitories, they are likely to facilitate and reinforce the academic achievement of one another. Several research

studies have supported the idea that residence halls homogeneously assigned by academic ability results in higher academic achievement and greater satisfaction with living quarters than randomly assigned residence halls (Blimling, 1989; DeCoster, 1964). Gifted students who are assigned to a high-ability residence hall or an honors residence hall would then be more satisfied with their living arrangements and achieve at higher levels than those gifted students living in other residence halls or off-campus. While the academic achievement in homogeneous residence halls is higher, the perceived intellectual environment is also greater (Golden & Smith, 1983). Students may be performing better, and they are also aware that their environment is supporting their achievement. As previously mentioned, though, some researchers have shown that high ability students will perform well in college regardless of their living environment (Stewart, 1980; Taylor & Hanson, 1971).

A similar debate exists regarding whether or not matching roommates by academic major will influence academic achievement. Taylor and Hanson (1971) argue that homogeneously grouping students by their major results in higher achievement than randomly placed students. Schroeder and Belmonte (1979) found that students assigned to residence halls by their academic major performed better academically than students in the same major who were assigned randomly to a residence hall. On the other hand, Elton and Bate (1966) argue the housing of students by academic major does not affect their academic achievement at the end of their first semester in college.

Another possible reason for an increase in achievement among students living in an honors residence hall is the environmental press theory. Using 1,722 students enrolled at 140 different colleges and universities, Thistlethwaite and Wheeler (1966) studied the effects of the college environment, especially teacher and peer subcultures, on students' aspirations to seek graduate level degrees. In controlling for sex, degree aspirations at the beginning of college, National Merit Qualifying Test score, father's educational level, mother's educational level, number of freshman scholarship applications in 1959, family financial resources in 1959, and probable major field of study, the authors examined students' intentions to pursue graduate training, as measured through college press scales. They concluded that the selectivity of an institution, or the average grade point average of an entering freshman class, has a direct positive effect on aspirations "since an undergraduate will perform best and aim highest at a school where most of his fellow students have high aspirations and are superior academically" (Drew & Astin, 1972, p. 1152). Thus, if students with high achievement and high aspirations surround a gifted college student, the student is likely to raise his aspirations to meet those of students around him.

The influence of the environmental press appears to be self-perpetuating, or to reinforce itself over time. Environments that are highly differentiated, such as an honors residence hall, tend to attract people who already share similar characteristics with the dominant group, thus reinforcing and strengthening the characteristics of the dominant group, creating a cyclical pattern (Strange, 1993). In an honors residence hall, students, by definition, have historically performed well in high school and value their academic performance in college. Because honors residence halls are usually open only to honors students, an honors residence hall will likely remain

academically oriented and the students will likely continue to reinforce the academic achievement of one another. Therefore, it might be "incorrect to attribute behavioral variation among student groups to differential group influence, since it represents mainly the effects of differential selection and anticipatory socialization" (LeVine, 1966, p. 108). In other words, an honors residence hall might not lead to a particular behavior: Students may have joined the honors residence hall *already* displaying that behavior.

Many researchers, including Pascarella (1980) and Rossi (1966), agree that students tend to change in the direction of the environmental press, thereby reducing the differences between themselves and others. While the academic effects of the environmental press are well noted and tend to be positive, the social effects are typically less evaluated. In other words, the literature is unclear as to whether or not intellectual environmental presses can positively or negatively influence the social development of gifted college students.

Upon initial arrival at college, students involved in an honors college may experience an easier social adjustment to university life through interaction with other honors students and the formation of a community (Rutland Gillison, 2000). In the initial stages of transition to university life, especially if a student does not know any other students, the transition can be eased by the formation of structured peer groups, especially through residence hall arrangements. Instead of leaving students to develop their own friendships and social groups in a new environment, students might benefit from being automatically placed in a group. After students have time to settle in their new environment, they can then begin forming their own peer groups and friendships.

In a study of the development of peer networks, such as those just described, university freshmen that participated in the structured networks reported making a more successful transition to university life, both academically and socially, than students who did not participate (Peat, Dalziel, & Grant, 2001). Students who fail to develop successful peer relationships, particularly with their residence hall roommates, may receive lower grade point averages and have lower retention rates than students with successful peer relationships (Pace, 1970; Waldo, 1986). Participation in an honors college and living in an honors residence hall can provide a structured peer group for honors students. Some research has provided evidence for the importance of peer groups in honors programs. Honors college students representing 28 universities ranked peer support and interaction as the third most fulfilling experience of an honors college, following honors classes and outside academic activities. In addition, the advantages of participation in an honors college included intellectual commonality and cohesiveness among the honors college students (McClung & Stevenson, 1988). These ratings speak to the importance of being near like-minded peers upon entrance to college.

Conversely, honors college students cited a major disadvantage to participation in an honors college as isolation from the mainstream student body (McClung & Stevenson, 1988). Like living-learning centers, honors residence halls only attract a certain group of students. Although students report positive experiences in living-learning centers, an often-cited complaint is the seclusion from the rest of

the campus (Leean & Miller, 1981). Likewise, students appreciate the community experience of an honors college and the proximity of other honors students, but they may also experience seclusion and isolation from the rest of campus. Even though students list seclusion as a disadvantage, is it possible that the honors students themselves form the seclusion? If so, is this seclusion and isolation helpful or harmful?

Some argue that theme dorms, or dorms that expand an area of interest beyond the classroom, can promote self-segregation (Hill, 1996). These theme dorms, like honors residence halls, attract highly distinct groups and do not offer much diversity. For example, some theme dorms are academically oriented, and many theme dorms are ethnically based. While this may allow students to build group solidarity and ease the pressures of being a minority, theme dorms also can encourage stereotypes and lessen the opportunities for students to broaden their horizons and develop friendships with other groups.

For example, the University of Massachusetts Amherst and the University of Maine have residence halls for those students who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (Herbst & Malaney, 1999; Ocamb, 1996), and Rutgers University offers a residence hall for women majoring in science, engineering, or mathematics (Stinson, 1990). Many other universities offer theme dorms based on ethnic interests, substance-free commitments, and various artistic and music interests, among others. In comparing the effects of various residence hall arrangements on the academic and social experiences of college students, Clarke (1988) found that those students living in theme dorms reported less satisfaction with their peer relationships than students living in other residence hall arrangements. It is important to keep in mind that students who live in theme dorms choose to live in those dorms and perhaps may be creating self-segregation for themselves.

Students living in theme dorms may perceive themselves to be somewhat isolated from other students living in conventional residence halls. Likewise, if honors students all live in the same dormitories, they might be deprived of contact with students of other ability levels (DeCoster, 1964) and perceive the same feelings of isolation. This segregation, whether self-imposed or not, can play a large role in the development of friendships, peer groups, and reference groups.

The development of friendship usually occurs when people who have common interests are brought together in an environment. "Frequency of contact…depends on proximity, so friendship develops more easily if people live near each other, work in the same office, or meet at the same church or club" (Argyle, 1992, p. 50). Similarly, students living in the same residence hall are likely to become friends. In a study of 325 college males, Brown (1972) found the nature of a group living in a residence hall played a large role in the development of friendships. By placing students on a dormitory floor by their major, Brown was able to determine that the similarity of interests among the residents, as well as the close proximity, led to friendships among those students living on the same floor.

In a hypothetical situation, although not far from reality, suppose a gifted student is accepted to an honors college at a large, public university. Although the student does not know anyone else attending this university, or enrolled in the honors college,

he decides to attend because of the excellent reputation of the honors college. He is assigned to an honors residence hall and is pleased to discover that he is meeting other honors students and developing friendships much more quickly than he imagined upon arrival on campus. Why is he meeting people and developing friendships? Perhaps the student finds it easier to socialize because he has been placed in a residence hall full of people like himself. Because of the proximity of the other honors students and the similarity of interests among the honors students, this hypothetical student should not have much difficulty developing relationships with other honors students.

However, suppose this hypothetical honors student finds himself satisfied with his newfound friendships in the honors residence hall and finds himself with little desire to try to interact with non-honors students. Can this self-segregation be harmful, either academically or socially? What are the consequences or benefits of not interacting with non-honors students?

Probably, this hypothetical student is having the experience of belonging to an in-group, and he is viewing non-honors students as an out-group. "We tend to see members of out-groups as more similar to each other than members of our own group—the in-group. In-group favoritism refers to the tendency to see one's own group as better on any number of dimensions and to allocate rewards to one's own group…[T]hese tendencies can form the basis of racial and ethnic prejudice" (Aronson, 1999, p.145). Honors students may begin to view non-honors students as "out-group" members. Similarly, non-honors students may view honors students as "out-group" members. In addition, Gudykunst notes that out-group members may be perceived as too different from in-group members, thereby lessening the motivation to communicate with the out-group members (as cited in Buttny, 1999). Honors students and non-honors students may eventually come to the conclusion that the other group is too different from themselves and not attempt to initiate contact with them.

At the same time though, the development of a common group identity, such as that which defines honors students, can "diffuse the effects of stigmatization, improve intergroup attitudes, and enhance institutional satisfaction and commitment among college students" (Dovidio, Gaertner, Niemann, & Snider, 2001, p. 167). Membership in an honors college might provide a social identity for gifted college students. Upon entrance to college, a gifted college student will likely seek out relationships and activities that affirm the social identity he or she believes is important. The development of a social identity within a common group identity can thus be very beneficial.

As a result, the "stigma of giftedness" (Coleman & Cross, 1988) may not be as prevalent among the gifted college student population as it is among gifted elementary and secondary school students. The stigma of giftedness is the perception by gifted students that others see them as different. If being surrounded by like-minded peers in an honors residence hall can lessen the effects of stigmatization due to less interaction with non-honors students who might perceive the honors students to be different, then the seemingly negative effects of living in an honors residence hall might not be so negative. If, due in part to living in an honors residence hall, honors

students perform better academically and feel that they belong to a group free of stigmas, perhaps the benefits outweigh the costs.

A student's reference group is also an important component of the social effects of living in an honors residence hall and a factor to consider when evaluating the effects of self-segregation. The concept of reference groups stems from Festinger's (1954) theory of social comparison, which assumes that people have a drive to obtain an accurate appraisal of their own abilities, and, in the absence of objective means for doing so, people evaluate their abilities by comparison with the abilities of others. In addition, people are likely to compare themselves to others of like abilities in order to gain a more accurate appraisal of themselves. In the case of honors students, external comparison can depend on residence hall arrangement.

Honors students living in an honors residence hall may view their reference group only in terms of other honors students living in their honors residence hall, especially if self-segregation is occurring. Honors students not living in an honors residence hall may be able to obtain a more accurate portrayal of their abilities because they are able to view their reference group in terms of both other honors students and non-honors students.

To evaluate one's abilities accurately, it is helpful to know where one stands relative to all ability levels rather than just the level of similar ability. Several researchers (e.g., Festinger, 1954) argue that, in comparing ability levels, one compares his or her ability only with others of similar ability. Davis (1966) argues that gifted students probably do not compare themselves across institutional settings or from one residence hall to another. However, Bassis (1977) argues that students at any particular institution are likely to realize where that institution falls on the selectivity continuum, at least in a broad sense. In his empirical study, Bassis found that college students, in forming their reference groups, are likely to incorporate across-institution comparisons when evaluating themselves. Thus, honors students may recognize the selectivity of their honors residence hall as compared to other residence halls on campus.

If gifted students who are involved in an honors college and live in an honors residence hall have engaged in self-segregation from the rest of the campus, researchers and educators are left to wonder how likely it is that these gifted students will develop reference groups beyond the walls of their own residence hall, thus affecting their self-evaluation.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Although the research literature generally provides support for the positive academic and social effects of living in college or university residence halls (e.g., Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), evidence concerning honors residence halls is far less clear. Living in conventional residence halls likely contributes to persistence and eventual graduation from college, leads to increases in social adjustment, provides a sense of community, decreases feelings of isolation, and generally results in a greater satisfaction with the university experience (Astin, 1977; Lundgren & Schwab, 1979). Participation in an honors college seems to lead

to the same experiences. Thus, the combination of participation in an honors college and living in an honors residence hall appears positive.

While living in an honors residence hall can influence the academic achievement of gifted college students, the social effects are arguably controversial. Honors students living in honors residence halls are able to form a common group identity, but they may also engage in self-segregation, the formation of narrow peer groups and reference groups, and they may experience isolation from the rest of the campus. It is uncertain whether the potential benefits of living in an honors residence hall outweigh the potential costs.

Empirical research needs to be conducted in this elusive area of higher education. The study of gifted college students and their living environments is largely understudied as compared to other minority groups on campus, yet these students may experience the same feelings of seclusion as other minority groups. Empirical findings could provide more solid evidence regarding the academic and social effects of living in an honors residence hall and could assist researchers, honors college administrators, and others in the improvement of collegiate honors education.

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