

Living on Campus: Does it Still Make a Difference?

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Abstract

While the benefits of living on campus have been well documented, the changing landscape of living arrangements, programming efforts, and other factors underline the need to reexamine its impact. Using national survey data from first-year students, this study investigates the relationship of residential status with engagement and perceived gains in learning and development. Results indicate, after controlling for student and institution characteristics, that student residence has an inconsequential effect on the dependent variables. Implications for practice and additional research are discussed.

Living on Campus: Does it Still Make a Difference?

Introduction

On-campus living has been a part of higher education in the United States since its colonial beginnings (Thelin, 2011). As higher education historian Frederick Rudolph termed it, students and faculty lived and learned together in “the collegiate way” (Thelin, 2011, p.7), characterized by frequent contact and close community. Yet, there’s never a road without a turning, and by the start of the twentieth century the values in higher education had changed course, placing a new emphasis on knowledge specialization and research. The shift left faculty with less time for and less interest in students’ non-curricular endeavors. Student affairs workers filled the subsequent out-of-classroom gap (MacKinnon & Associates, 2004; ACPA, 1996), allowing students to continue to live on campus even as their professors increasingly did not. The on campus experience developed over the years, as did the evidence of its contribution to learning and student success. Living on a college campus has been associated with a host of positive outcomes, including persistence, openness to diversity, satisfaction, critical thinking, and personal development (Astin, 1977 & 1993; Pascarella, Bohr, Nora, Zusman, Inman, & Desler, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Pike, 2002).

Previous Literature

Contemporary student affairs theory and practice is rooted in the belief that out-of-classroom experiences are fertile ground for learning (American Council on Education, 1937). However, the articulation of the educational import of student affairs work is a postscript to its original functional role. In the first half of the twentieth century, student affairs personnel were operating *in loco parentis*, filling parental, managerial, and administrative roles rather than expressly educational (MacKinnon & Associates, 2004; Morrill, Hurst, & Oetting, 1980). Since

the 1960s, though, the field of student affairs has grown both in scope and in articulation of its rationale. Student development theorists—including Chickering, Kohlberg, Schlossberg, and many more—provided theoretical foundations for the educational significance of student affairs work (Blimling, Whitt, & Associates, 1999; Evans, Forney, Guido-DiBrito, 1998; Morrill, Hurst, & Oetting, 1980). The designation of “co-educator” added an increasingly necessary defense for the role of student affairs, as *in loco parentis* fell out of favor (Morrill, Hurst, & Oetting, 1980). Research from the 1980s and 90s buttressed arguments for the importance of student affairs to student learning (Astin, 1993; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). *The Student Learning Imperative* called for the redefinition of student affairs, claiming their role to “intentionally promote student and personal development” (ACPA, 1996, p. 5). By the turn of the 21st century, student affairs professionals felt reasonably confident asserting the part they played in educating students.

Blimling, Whitt, and Associates (1999) as vanguards boldly stated that “student affairs organizations are part of the educational mission of higher education, connected directly with the learning experiences of students. Out-of-class learning experiences are not ancillary to a liberal education but are central to it” (p. 15). Similarly, citing seminal student affairs documents such as *A Perspective on Student Affairs* (NASPA, 1987), *The Student Learning Imperative* (ACPA, 1996) and *Learning Reconsidered* (NASPA & ACPA, 2004), Schuh and Gansemer-Topf (2010) concluded that student affairs’ roles were no longer on the periphery but had moved to the center of collegiate education.

In the first volume of their compendium of research, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) confirmed the significance of student affairs, and in particular residence life, concluding living on campus was “the single most consistent within-college determinant of the impact of college” (p. 611). A few years later, Pascarella and Terenzini, along with Blimling (1994) offered an

explanation as to why this might be case, explaining that the social-psychological environment of residence halls is “qualitatively different” from off-campus living, with the hypothesis that “living on campus will maximize opportunities for social, cultural, and extracurricular involvement, and this increased involvement will account for residential living’s impact on various indices of student development” (p. 25). Astin (1985) also emphasized the importance of proximity and its accompanying benefits, stating that “simply by virtue of eating, sleeping, and spending their waking hours in the college campus” on-campus students are more likely to identify with college life (p. 145). These prominent researchers stated the commonsensical; namely, that living on campus afforded more opportunities to engage with the college life, and this was an asset to student learning.

However, Pascarella and Terenzini shifted their assessment in the 2005 update of *How College Affects Students*, with a more chastened appraisal, noting that residential arrangement was less prominent in the post-1990 research and that its effects were likely indirect rather direct. While there is conceivably a host of reasons for the change in tenor regarding on-campus living, the authors clarify that much of the research utilized in the first printing was strongly biased toward White, full-time enrolled, traditional-aged undergraduates attending four-year institutions. Of course, this was problematic, as the authors noted, for different types of students will likely benefit to varying degrees or even not at all from aspects of the college experience (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Congruent with Pascarella and Terenzini’s updated judgement, recent discourse about living on campus is more subdued. Especially in the last decade, studies have found ambivalent effects of living on campus (Harwood, Huntt, Mendenhall, & Lewis, 2012; Strayhorn & Mullins, 2012; Turley & Wodtke, 2010). Complicating the narrative of positive effects of living on

campus was an acknowledgement of uneven benefits for students of differing identities. While residence halls have the potential to foster positive interactions with students from diverse backgrounds, they alternatively can encourage groupthink and provide a space for hostile discriminatory practices to persist (Blimling, 1993; Harper, et al., 2011; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Strayhorn & Mullins, 2012). For example, when examining the experiences of Black, gay, male undergraduate students, Strayhorn and Mullins (2012) found residence hall policies and programming perpetuated heterosexism, homophobia, and isolation. Similarly, Harwood, Hunt, Mendenhall and Lewis (2012) found that students identifying as African American, Asian American, Latino, and Native American experienced over 70 distinct racial microaggressions while living in residence halls. These studies highlight the varied benefits of living on campus by race.

The growth of enhanced residence hall spaces, amenities, and other features as well as changing styles of living spaces is another complicating factor. La Roche, Flanigan, and Copeland Jr. (2010) put it this way: “What were once considered to be luxuries in student housing—kitchens, private bedrooms, private bathrooms, social spaces and lounges—are now expected” (p. 46) Different types of residence halls, such as suite-style versus traditional dormitories, can have an impact on student interactions. When comparing students living in differing hall constructions, Brandon, Hirt, and Cameron (2008) found differing effects on frequency of peer interactions with those in traditional halls having more frequent interactions with other residents than their counterparts in suite-style halls. While Owens (2010) found no significant main effect of student housing type (adjoined suites, modified traditional, and super suites) on the psychosocial development of first-year students, he did find modified traditional

halls to have a greater positive relationship with the promotion of autonomy, purpose, and mature interpersonal relationships than the super-suite and adjoined suite halls.

The influence of environment on student development has been conceptualized through campus ecology theory (Banning, 1980), which maintains that behavior is a function of a person and her environment. The importance of environment to the development of students is relevant as universities seek to attract students with the quality of their housing options. Residence halls now include amenities such as workout facilities, full-service dining options, coffee shops, private bathrooms, walk-in closets (Kavehkar, 2013; Lederman, 2009) as well as technological updates to limit outsider access and increase safety (O'Neil, 2014). Many institutions have moved away from the traditional residence hall with long hallways and community bathrooms and replaced them with suite-style or apartments (Palmer, Broido, & Campbell, 2008). Since student development occurs within, and is influenced by, environmental factors, it is not surprising that changes to the physical layout of residence halls influences student outcomes (Banning, 1980; Brandon, Hirt, & Cameron, 2008; Owens, 2010).

Regardless of environmental influences, residence life professionals believe an important benefit to living on campus is the educational programming available within halls (Blimling, Whitt, & Associates, 1999). Pascarella and Terenzini (1984) state:

Residential units were presumed to be significant environments through both their sociological structures and the normative influences exerted by their occupants.

Structurally, residence units might be expected to influence the nature of students' collegiate experiences both through their physical configurations and consequent influence on the nature and extent of students' interactions with one another, and through the sorts of rules that govern student behaviors, as well as the academic social

experiences afforded students through the nature of the social and academic programming conducted within the residence unit. (p. 114)

In *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions that Matter*, Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (2005) described residence hall conditions that contribute to the educational experience of students living on campus. These conditions included fostering interactions with faculty and themed living communities that include academic components (Kuh et al., 2005). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) articulate similar sentiments with relation to student-faculty interaction, positing that out-of-class interactions with faculty help to connect in- and out-of-classroom experiences, and the positive effects of living on campus “are typically the result of *purposeful, programmatic* efforts to integrate students’ intellectual and social lives during college” (Terenzini and Pascarella, 1997, p. 178). Along with intentional programming, the spontaneous conversations and emotional support available to residential students through access to professional staff are understood as immeasurable but significant contributions to their learning and development (MacKinnon & Associates, 2004).

As higher education should inspire interrogation and intentional reflection both in and outside of the classroom, residence halls have the potential of being indispensable as purposeful spaces in which student affairs professionals have both formal and informal opportunities to educate residents (Davidson, Henderson, Knotts, & Swain, 2011; Moran, 2001). However, assessing discrete benefits can be difficult as direct comparisons of students living on campus to their off-campus peers are complex. There is an abundance of variation among types of types of residence halls (e.g., suite-style apartments vs. traditional halls), programming (e.g., living learning communities vs. traditional hall programs), staffing (e.g., professional vs. student staff) not to mention varying levels of participation among the residents with offered programming and

interactions with professional staff. Thus, while there is much anecdotal evidence to support the benefits of living on campus, trustworthy measurements are difficult to achieve.

Important to understanding the extant research on the effects of living on campus is clarifying the comparison groups used in studies. While the terminology often used (on-campus students vs. off-campus students) suggests discrete categories, the living arrangements of students are more complex. For example, Astin's (1993) study *What Matters in College: Four Critical Years Revisited* included four different categories of living arrangements (i.e., at home, in a college residence hall, in a private room or apartment, and distance of home from college). Astin (1993) found that effects had more to do with leaving "home" than with other distinctions: "In short, these results imply that the principal impact of the student's freshman place of residence occurs because the student is going away from home to attend college" (p. 366). In other words, it was leaving one's home rather than the specifics of the housing type one moved into (e.g., on-campus residence hall) that was important. Another oft referenced work in the field is Chickering and Reisser's *Education and Identity*. Citing Pace's (1984) research, Chickering and Reisser (1993) concluded, "Developmental benefits appear to be greater for students living on campus, in residence halls or Greek societies, than for students living off campus" (p. 400). Pace relied on data from the College Student Experience Questionnaire (CSEQ) for his research. The living arrangement options on the CSEQ included, (1) dormitory or other campus housing; (2) residence (house, apartment, etc.) within walking distance of the institution; (3) residence (house, apartment, etc.) within driving distance of the institution; and (4) fraternity or sorority house (College Student Experience Questionnaire Assessment Program, 2007). If unaware of the four distinct living arrangements used, readers might misunderstand Chickering and Reisser's (1993) assertion that "those who live off campus and commute to college have a disadvantage—

they miss the social-psychological context created by on-campus living” (p. 402). By not clarifying how students who identified as within walking distance or in a fraternity or sorority fit into the picture, it is easy to assume that residence hall living is the sole source of these benefits. The tacit understanding becomes, then, that there is something important about living in campus housing rather than just living close to campus. Is it proximity that matters or, rather, engagement with programming, staff, and access to diverse peers, etc., that make a difference? The implications are clear, especially with increasingly available and quite accommodating housing options near campus. If it is just, as Astin (1993) suggests, leaving home and moving away to college that matters, then the extra expense by students and institutions for on-campus options needs to be reconsidered.

Conceptual Framework

The concept of student engagement is relatively new, introduced in the 1990s in connection with the development of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Student engagement “refers to college students’ exposure to and participation in a constellation of effective educational practices at colleges and universities” (McCormick, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2013, p. 47). The concept is indebted to Pace’s (1980) research on the quality of student effort, Tinto’s (1975, 1993) work on social and academic integration, Astin’s (1984) theory of student involvement, and Chickering and Gamson’s (1987) seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. The notion of student engagement takes into account both students’ time spent and their quality of effort as well as institutional factors (Kuh, 2001). In other words, student engagement theory claims that student success is connected to students’ participation in effective educational practices as well as institutional promotion and support of these practices (Kuh, 2005). As Pascarella, Terenzini, and Blimling (1994) proposed, living on campus should

increase engagement as there is both increased access to educational opportunities (hall programming) and educators (residence hall professionals and student staff).

Methods

Our study investigated the association between college students' living arrangements and various measures of student engagement. We acknowledge that certain measures of engagement are less connected to a student's living situation (e.g., classroom learning). Therefore, this study examines the impact of living on campus on measures of engagement and perceived gains items that, based on previous literature, should be more proximal to residential status. Further, while this study compares students who live on campus to those who live off, it also differentiates between two off-campus categories: (1) students who live within walking distance to campus, and (2) students who live farther than walking distance to campus. To that end, the research question guiding this study is: What is the relationship between residential status and student engagement particularly comparing students who live on campus with students who live within walking distance and with students who live farther than walking distance?

Data

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) provided the data for this study. NSSE is a large-scale, multi institutional survey administered annually to first-year and senior baccalaureate seeking students. NSSE asks students questions about their engagement in educationally purposeful in-class and out-of-class activities. Using theory and empirical analysis, NSSE items have been categorized into ten engagement indicators (EIs), which reflect distinct aspects of engagement: (a) Higher-Order Learning, (b) Reflective & Integrative Learning, (c) Learning Strategies, (d) Quantitative Reasoning, (e) Collaborative Learning, (f) Discussions with Diverse Others, (g) Student-Faculty Interaction, (h) Effective Teaching Practices, (i) Quality of

Interactions, and (j) Supportive Environment. Of interest to this study are Collaborative Learning (CL), Discussions with Diverse others (DD), Student-Faculty Interaction (SF), Quality of Interactions (QI), and Supportive Environment (SE). NSSE also asks about time spent on selected activities including preparing for class, participating in co-curricular activities, and doing community service. Finally, NSSE asks students to report the amount they believed they have gained in areas including working effectively with others, developing or clarifying a personal code of values and ethics, and understanding people of other backgrounds.

Sample

For our study, data were used from the 2014 and 2015 NSSE administrations to U.S institutions. We chose to examine first-year, full-time students in order to avoid the added complexity of senior students' housing norms, i.e. that seniors who decide to live on campus are different from their peers living elsewhere in important ways, with similar considerations for part-time students. Since there were virtually no part-time students living on campus, we removed them from the models, thus removing any effects of part-time status had on off-campus students (e.g., they work more hours, have fewer classes and faculty with which to engage, are on campus less time in total, etc.). Since our research question seeks to better understand differences among students in three living situations (on-campus, within walking distance of campus, and farther than walking distance) we removed 936 first-year students who were living in a fraternity or sorority house and 4,286 students who selected "none of the above" to the living question (distance education students).

Resulting data contained 163,000 first-year students with 72.0% living on campus in a dormitory or other campus housing, 7.3% living in a residence within walking distance, and 20.7% living in a residence farther than walking distance. These students represented 957

bachelor's degree-granting institutions from varied Carnegie types (according to the 2010 Basic Classification), with the largest concentration (28%) in the Master's Colleges and Universities - Larger Programs group. 4% were at Doctoral Universities - Highest Research Activity, 7% attended Doctoral Universities - Higher Research Activity, 5% at Doctoral Universities - Moderate Research, 11% at Master's Colleges and Universities - Medium, 6% Master's Colleges and Universities - Small, another 6% attended Baccalaureate Colleges – Arts & Sciences, 17% were at Baccalaureate Colleges – Diverse Fields, and the remaining 6% were at other institution types.

A few differences among student characteristics are notable (Table 1). With regard to race, a higher proportion of White students lived on campus whereas Latino students had more representation off campus, particularly in residences farther than walking distance from the campus. Similarly, first-generation students were more likely to live off campus, especially farther than walking distance. Additional demographic information by sex, reported grades, major, age, and transfer status can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographics of study participants

		Residence status ^a		
		On campus	Within walking distance	Farther than walking distance
Sex	Female	67%	61%	67%
	Male	34%	39%	33%
Race or ethnicity	American Indian or Alaska Native	1%	1%	1%
	Asian	4%	7%	8%
	Black or African American	8%	9%	7%
	Hispanic or Latino	9%	13%	20%
	Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0%	0%	1%
	White	67%	52%	52%
	Other	0%	0%	0%
	Foreign or Nonresident alien	3%	13%	3%
	Two or more races/ethnicities	4%	4%	4%
	Unknown	4%	4%	5%
Grades	Mostly A grades	48%	44%	47%
	Mostly B grades	44%	46%	44%
	Mostly C grades or lower	8%	9%	9%
Major	Arts & Humanities	11%	10%	8%
	Biological Sciences, Agric., & Nat. Res.	12%	11%	11%
	Physical Sci., Math., & Computer Sci.	6%	6%	6%
	Social Sciences	12%	10%	10%
	Business	14%	16%	15%
	Communications, Media, & Public Rel.	5%	4%	3%
	Education	8%	6%	8%
	Engineering	8%	9%	7%
	Health Professions	14%	15%	19%
	Social Service Professions	4%	4%	6%
	All Other	4%	5%	4%
	Undecided, undeclared	4%	3%	3%
First-Generation ^d	No	66%	57%	43%
	Yes	34%	43%	57%
Age	Not traditional age	1%	11%	15%
	Traditional age (20 or younger)	99%	89%	85%
Transfer	Started here	95%	88%	87%
	Started elsewhere (transfer)	5%	12%	13%

a. Dormitory or other campus housing (not fraternity or sorority house); Residence (house, apartment, etc.) WITHIN walking distance to the institution; Residence (house, apartment, etc.) FARTHER THAN walking distance to the institution

b. Neither parent/guardian holds a bachelor's degree

Variables

The primary independent variable of interest for our study was living arrangement, derived from the NSSE question:

Which of the following best describes where you are living while attending college?

- (a) Dormitory or other campus housing (not fraternity or sorority house);*
- (b) Fraternity or sorority house*
- (c) Residence (house, apartment, etc.) within walking distance to the institution;*
- (d) Residence (house, apartment, etc.) farther than walking distance to the institution*
- (e) None of the above*

We excluded from our analysis students living in fraternity or sorority houses and those reporting “None of the above.”

The dependent variables were selected based on literature that connects living on campus to positive interactions with others, personal development, and a supportive environment (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Dependent variables included five Engagement Indicators: (a) Collaborative Learning (CL), (b) Discussions with Diverse Others (DD), (c) Student-Faculty Interaction (SF), (d) Quality of Interactions (QI), and (e) Supportive Environment (SE). Scale reliabilities (Cronbach’s alpha) on these ranged from .80 to .88. We also analyzed the number of hours students spent studying and on academic work using the item:

About how many hours do you spend in a typical 7-day week doing the following?

Preparing for class (studying, reading, writing, doing homework or lab work, analyzing data, rehearsing, and other academic activities).

Finally, we created a “perceived co-curricular gains” scale by combining results from five items, and (as with the Engagement Indicators) computing it on a scale with a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 60:

How much has your experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the following areas?

- *Working effectively with others;*
- *Developing or clarifying a personal code of values and ethics;*
- *Understanding people of other backgrounds (economic, racial/ethnic, political, religious, nationality, etc.);*
- *Solving complex real-world problems;*
- *Being an informed and active citizen*

The scale reliability coefficient (Cronbach’s alpha) was .88. All dependent variables were standardized before entering into the models so that unstandardized beta coefficients can be interpreted as effect sizes. See Table 2 for means, counts, and standard deviations of the dependent variables.

Table 2. Dependent variables, means and standard deviations

<i>Dependent Variables</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
Collaborative Learning*	158,689	33.6	13.7
Discussions with Diverse Others*	160,473	41.6	15.5
Student-Faculty Interaction*	159,557	21.3	14.5
Quality of Interactions*	156,511	42.0	12.0
Supportive Environment*	160,635	38.4	13.4
Time spent preparing for class (in hours)	161,500	14.7	8.4
Perceived co-curricular gains*	161,437	34.7	15.5

* Variables were computed on a scale of 0 to 60.

Analysis

In order to control for salient institutional and student characteristics, data were analyzed using block hierarchical regression on each of the seven dependent variables. The first block entered for each model included all the student background characteristics: sex, race (dummy coded with White as the reference group), major categories (dummy coded with business as the reference group), first-generation, transfer status, traditional age status (20 years and under), and grades (dummy coded with “mostly A’s” as the reference group). The second block of variables entered included the institutions, with each institution dummy coded, and one institution left out of the model. This method controls for all types of variation and nuance between institutions (size, control, mission, selectivity, etc.) because each institution’s effects are included as a separate dummy variable. Additionally, the “living” variable was dummy coded for those living on, within walking, and farther than walking distance.

Results

In general, results show that student residence, after the control variables were entered, explained only a very small fraction of the additional variance in each of the dependent variables. For example, when the residence variable was entered into the collaborative learning model the R^2 change was .005, only one-half of one percent of additional variance beyond the variance already accounted for by the student characteristics and the institutions (see Table 3). In fact, that was the largest R^2 change of all the models. The fact that most of the R^2 change statistics were significant at $p < .001$ is due to the extremely large size of the sample.

The inconsequential effects of residence status are also apparent in the trivial sizes of the regression coefficients for the two dummy variables – walking distance and farther than walking distance. Values are interpreted in relation to living on campus, and because the dependent variables were standardized before analysis, the coefficients represent the amount of a standard deviation change in the DV with one unit change in the IV. A small difference is evident between walking and farther than walking in the amount of engagement in CL. Relative to those living on campus, those within walking distance engaged in collaborative learning about as much, but those who were farther than walking distance engaged were somewhat less in their collaborative learning activities ($ES = -.22$). Keeping in mind the negligible amount of variance explained, this was the largest of any effect in the models.

Table 3. R-square, R-squared change, and regression coefficients for residence status for all models.

<i>DV</i>	<i>ADJ R SQ</i>	<i>R SQ CHANGE^a</i>		Regression coefficients			
				<i>Walking distance</i>		<i>Farther than walking distance</i>	
CL	.07	.005	***	-.05	***	-.22	***
DD	.05	.003	***	-.12	***	-.14	***
SF	.05	.003	***	.09	***	-.11	***
QI	.05	.000	***	-.05	***	-.05	***
SE	.05	.001	***	-.05	***	-.06	***
PG	.04	.000	***	.04	***	-.01	
Tmprep	.11	.000	***	-.04	***	-.06	***
Tmread	.10	.000	*	.02	*	.02	*
Writpgs	.05	.000	***	.07	***	-.03	***

a. Change in R^2 (amount of variance explained in the dependent variable) after the residence variable (dummy coded) was added. Living on campus is the reference group.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Limitations

Given the importance of the first year to college success (Greenfield, Keup, & Gardner, 2013) first-year students are an important population to study. However, given typical housing patterns and policies, examining sophomore and junior data may have helped to further explain how students' housing situations influence their engagement. Many residential policies require first-year students to live on campus, which results in not as many first-year students living off campus by comparison. The impact of policies such as these means that a majority of the off-campus students in our study were from particular types of institutions that do not have a

residential requirement for first-year students. However, we did control for institutional level differences. Additionally, the on-campus experience can vary greatly between campuses and even within the same campus. Thus, living “on campus” is a blunt measure in many respects. More granular information, such as residence style (e.g., suites vs. rooms off of a shared hallway), number of roommates, programming, etc., could explain with needed nuance particular residence hall set-ups or programming that foster engagement.

Discussion

With a few exceptions, our findings disconfirm research that contends students living on campus have an advantage over their peers in other living situations. In contrast to Pascarella and Terenzini’s (1991) assertion that living on campus was “the single most consistent within-college determinate of the impact of college” (p. 611), location of residence explained very little about students’ engagement and perceived gains. It is important to note that our study did not investigate persistence, academic gains, satisfaction, or other important outcomes that have been found to have a positive relationship with living on campus. We offer five possible explanations for the lack of meaningful difference in engagement and perceived gains among living arrangements, namely, changes in residence hall construction and peer influence, increased attention on commuter student success, first year experience programming, the changing nature of off-campus housing options, and increased usage of social media.

As previous literature suggested, residence hall construction influences the frequency of interactions among residents (Palmer, Broido, & Campbell, 2008). Therefore, we need to better understand how differing residence hall designs influence student outcomes. In short, the educational impact of hall design must be considered along with its marketable features in residence hall construction decisions. Another consideration is whether or not students live alone

or in “singles” within a residence hall. Dumford, Ribera, and Miller (2015) found that students living alone reported lower levels of peer belonging than their counterparts living with roommates. As Astin (1993) asserted, peer influence is paramount, “Finally, the single most important environmental influence on student development is the peer group. By judicious and imaginative use of peers groups, any college or university can substantially strengthen its impact on student learning and personal development” (p. xxii). Along similar lines, Pascarella and Terenzini (1984) found that male students’ attrition was influenced by the level of institutional and goal commitment of the students’ with whom they lived. Furthermore, de Araujo and Murray (2010) attributed the academic benefits of living on campus to positive peer-effects. Thus, to understand the living situation of students, we should heed not only the design of the residence arrangement and programming, but the peer element as well.

The lack of significant engagement differences among living arrangements could be understood positively as institutions exerting effort into engaging off-campus students. Jacoby (2000) charged institutions to “deepen commuter students’ involvement in learning,” and maybe institutions have answered the call (p. 81). If institutions have made headway in integrating off campus students into the academic and social community, than the benefits of living on campus have not declined, rather the ill-effects of living off campus have been attenuated. In 2014, for example, Gianoutsos and Rosser found that while there were differences in demographic trends between residential students and their off campus peers, residential students did not have an advantage over commuter students in terms of academic success. Also, it is important to consider that some of the previous literature on commuter students’ engagement did not control for student or institutional characteristics, which may have led to exaggerated engagement differences (Kuh, Gonyea, & Palmer, 2001).

Additionally, institutions have been putting more resources and effort into the first-year experiences of students (Barefoot, 2000). A focus on first-year success is relatively new, with the inaugural convening of higher education professionals to discuss first-year programs in 1981 (Greenfield, Keup, & Gardner, 2013). Since that time, there has been an explosion in scholarship, programs, policies, and positions to support students in transition (Keup & Barefoot, 2005; Tinto & Goodsell, 1994; Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2004). Arguably, the engagement of off-campus students is inflated for first-year students because of the substantial attention and resources committed to ensuring first-year success. Again, this is a positive understanding of the landscape, as initiatives are benefitting all first-year students and not only those living on campus.

Another consideration is off-campus housing options, which often cater amenities and conveniences to students. Apartment complexes and townhomes built close to campus can provide many of the same benefits of on-campus housing without the supervision of official college personnel, increasing desirable privacy for students (Kolstad, 2015). Realizing the market potential, private investors are taking a more professional interest in meeting students' needs such as providing reliable and high-speed internet connections (Arbury, 2015). Additionally, off campus options can be more affordable than paying room and board and thus attractive to students who are trying to save money (Gordon, 2015). Thus, sans the student affairs professionals and hall-specific programming, off-campus housing options may be meeting the needs of student as well as or better than on-campus housing options (Kolstad, 2015).

An increase in social involvement is one of the assumed advantages to living on campus (Pascarella, Terenzini, & Blimling, 1994). However, the nature of relationships between students is changing with the mass use of social media and technology (e.g., access to academic

resources, file sharing with peers) (Jones, 2002). Wang, Tchernev, and Solloway (2012) summarize the research on social media (SM), claiming that SM offers “unprecedented convenience and efficiency for creating, maintaining, and strengthening social relationships. Many features of SM facilitate self-disclosure and social interactions, such as the removal of geographic boundaries and the rich interaction opportunities afforded by networks of ‘friends’ and information” (p. 1829). Thus, the advantage of on-campus living due to its proximity to peers may be mitigated through SM connections. Research has shown that SM such as Facebook can increase college student involvement (Heiberger & Harper, 2008) as well as increase social integration to campus and persistence (Gray, Vitak, Easton, & Ellison, 2013). Therefore, changing technology usage may also mediate benefits to living on campus.

While we found that living on campus had only a negligible effect on students’ engagement and perceived gains, as many practitioners and research have presumed before us, we believe that residence halls have the potential to positively impact the student experience. However, we should not rely on aging assertions that living on campus is a good in and of itself. We need to parse out the sources of positive impact, further investigating the environment, the programming, and the peer interactions so as to improve practice. Additionally, research should seek to better understand how differing populations experience on campus living differently, with the intention to address less positive experiences. As the housing options for students continue to grow and change, it is incumbent upon residence life to live up to their calling as educators and stewards of those in their care, taking into account the changing landscape and responding accordingly.

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