

Anonymous

Fez Fessenden

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Make Yourself at Home: How Student Housing Impacts the College Experience

Introduction

As a current college freshman who has just navigated making housing plans for the first time, I found the process quite confusing and slightly stressful. Virginia Tech and the surrounding Blacksburg area have a variety of housing options, with varying amenities, price ranges, and distances from campus. I wondered how much of an impact housing had on college students' experiences at school. How does living on campus versus living off campus impact students' academic performance, sense of community, and social life? I am also a member of a living-learning community (LLC) here on campus, where we participate in activities designed to help us grow socially, academically, and professionally. This caused me to wonder what impact, if any, LLCs have on students' academic performance, sense of community, and social life. I conducted an anonymous online survey of 20 Virginia Tech students to gain some more insight into how they feel their housing choices impact their college experience (Richard). I also reviewed several articles and studies that explored how various aspects of housing impacted college students socially and academically. This paper explores how on-campus versus off-campus housing impacts college students' academic performance, sense of community, and social lives at Virginia Tech.

Findings

Academic Performance

Living on campus is especially beneficial for the academic performance of freshmen students. Adjusting to college is often difficult, and students' first-semester grades can suffer as students struggle to transition to a new and more independent living environment. Students can feel more comfortable by becoming ingrained in the campus community. One way that students can become more involved with their school is by living in dorms on campus. According to a 2015 study of student housing published in the *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, "freshmen students who reside in the residence halls not only achieved significantly higher GPAs than their non-residence hall counterparts, but they experienced significantly less academic difficulty as well" (Nowack and Hanson 25). For reference, researchers defined academic difficulty using the number of students placed on academic probation during their freshman year. Residence halls provide a safe place for students to experience college for the first time and often provide more support and a less distracting environment compared to off-campus housing. These aspects positively impact students' initial academic performance. Often, when students live in residence halls, they also do not have to worry about a variety of daily time-consuming tasks (such as transportation to campus, parking, grocery shopping, and cooking) that can be stressful and distract from academics. Gender further extrapolates the effect of residence halls positively impacting academic performance. The same 2015 study found that "male freshmen living outside the residence halls experience more academic difficulty and achieve lower GPAs than females" (Nowack and Hanson 26). Even though males and females had similar academic performances when living on campus, the male students who lived off campus during their freshman year performed significantly worse compared to the females who lived off campus. The male off-campus group noted an 8.77% increase in academic struggles compared to the male on-campus group (Nowack and Hanson 26). According to another study referenced in this article, students

who were randomly assigned to on-campus housing still performed better than those who were randomly assigned to off-campus housing in their freshman year, which refutes the claim that students who choose to live on campus were predisposed to perform better due to personal choices (Nowack and Hanson 26). These studies argue that students living on campus are more likely to perform better academically because the residence hall environment is beneficial to the transition to college.

Although students tend to perform better academically when they live in dorms, they are not completely distraction-free. One common complaint that participants in my survey had was the excessive noise in dorms (Richard). A study published in *Noise & Health*, sought to explore how noise levels at on-campus versus off-campus residences impacted academic performance. Researchers conducted the study in two parts; by first measuring sound levels at on-campus and off-campus student housing, and by having students who lived on-campus and off-campus respond to questionnaires about their perceptions of the noise levels at their residence and how it distracts them. One probable reason that the study of student housing published in the *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice* found that students living off campus experienced more academic difficulty is that more distractions are present in off-campus housing, with a major issue being noise levels. In typical on-campus housing environments, there are rules surrounding quiet hours, and resident hall advisors to enforce noise expectations. These standards are not as present or enforced in off-campus housing communities. Off-campus housing is also often located in more populated areas surrounding college campuses. According to the study published in *Noise & Health*, “various contemporary community noise sources affect university students’ activities and possibly influence their educational achievement as well” (Onchang and Hawker 69). These contemporary noise sources included: traffic, construction sites, shops, restaurants,

and other entertainment venues. Measured noise levels were significantly louder at off-campus residences compared to those on campus, and off-campus students reported being most disturbed by the noise when reading or doing other “mental tasks” (Onchang and Hawker 69). Despite this, the questionnaire found that on-campus students tended to have a higher perception of noise in their living environments than off-campus students did. My survey of Virginia Tech students agreed with this notion. However, this result could be due to the higher level of privacy and comfort that students often report feeling in off-campus housing accommodations (Richard). The study concluded that “preventive measures are necessary to reduce community noise in the accommodation of university students both within and external to university precincts” (Onchang and Hawker 75). Noise distractions are a prominent issue in Blacksburg as well. According to one study, which examined student complaints about off-campus housing at Virginia Tech, “noise and inadequate parking were the main dissatisfactions with off campus rental housing by the students” (Sites 75). Students perform the best academically when they are in an environment that they feel safe and comfortable in, and reducing distractions such as unreasonable noise levels is one key step in helping students perform better. This could be done by having smaller groupings of students living together, enforcing quiet hours, and providing more spaces away from housing where students can relax together.

Sense of Community/Social Life

Housing accommodations significantly impact college students’ sense of community and social life. According to a study published in *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, which explored student satisfaction with on-campus versus off-campus housing, there are “three conditions that help make a student’s living environment productive, namely: a sense of security and attachment; processes for involvement; and an experience of neighborhood” (Muslim et al.

602). Often, on-campus residences provide more ways for students to be involved with their schools and experience community within their living environments. This conclusion was further supported by the same study, which noted that “research on the impact of on-campus living satisfaction on student development has consistently shown that students’ chances of persisting to graduation are greatly improved by living on campus and having a positive living and learning experience” (Muslim et al. 603). Not only are students more academically successful when they reside on campus, especially in their earlier years of college, but they also have more opportunities to engrain themselves in the campus community, which increases the retention and graduation rates of these students. However, this same study also found that students were not as satisfied with their on-campus housing as they were with their academic or social lives (Muslim et al. 603). Although on-campus housing has a positive impact on students’ academic performance and social lives, they often do not prefer it (Muslim et al. 603). Researchers found that students commonly disliked the “space limitations, lack of privacy, lack of freedom, and poor maintenance that is commonly found in on-campus housing” (Muslim et al. 603). These factors often persuade students to move off campus, where housing features are more variable and many students can find residences that they are more satisfied with, however, this move can also have negative effects.

Often, student satisfaction with housing accommodations is personal and depends on a variety of factors. One factor that has a strong impact on housing satisfaction is nationality and upbringing. Students will often feel most comfortable living in familiar conditions. According to a study published in *Housing and Society*, which analyzed how students from the United States, South Korea, India, China, and Europe considered different housing features, student preference with specific housing features was strongly correlated with their cultural background.

Satisfaction with specific features such as the “size of the kitchen, location of bedrooms, and overall housing satisfaction were significantly correlated with respondents’ national origin” (Lee and Parrott 151). This shows that satisfaction with student housing accommodations is highly personal and depends on a variety of factors. Housing that might be favorable for one person could be unfavorable for another. The study also concluded that “apartment community, length of residency in the U.S., and length of residency in present housing were correlated with ... overall housing satisfaction” (Lee and Parrott 151). This study supports the notion that housing satisfaction is highly dependent on the type of off campus housing that a student resides in because housing preference is a personal decision. Another factor that impacts student satisfaction with housing is the type of housing itself. In a study of off campus rental housing conducted through Virginia Tech, researchers found that “the factors having the greatest influence on the students' off-campus rental housing choice were cost, amount of space available within the dwelling, and reputation of the property's management” (Sites 72). Many colleges have a variety of different options when it comes to types of off-campus housing. This study analyzed differences in preferences for amenities, leasing options, and maintenance between students who rented apartments versus houses. The study concluded that students who rented houses had more complaints than those who rented apartments (Sites 73). This supports the conclusion that off-campus housing preference is highly dependent on many factors and is not always a positive experience for students. Moving off campus is often not the fix-all solution that many students believe it is.

If you will still be attending Virginia Tech in the fall, where will you be living?

17 responses

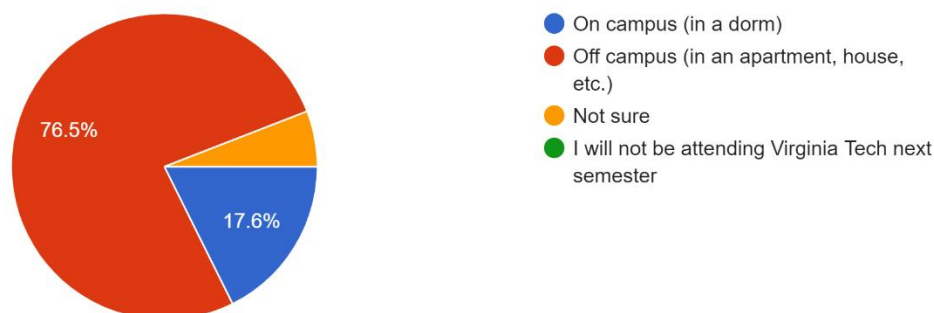


Figure 1. Graph of responses to my survey question regarding future housing plans (Richard).

Many students choose to move off campus to improve their housing satisfaction, especially in their later years of college. As shown in figure 1 above, 76.5% of the 20 Virginia Tech students that I surveyed reported that they would be living off-campus in their next year of school (Richard). According to one study published in the *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences*, the main factors that push students to move off campus are inferior quality of campus food/wanting to cook their food, high noise levels, small rooms, and parking (Delgadillo and Erickson 5). The most common complaints of the Virginia Tech students that I surveyed were lack of AC, lack of upgraded amenities, communal bathrooms/messy shared spaces, and maintenance issues (Richard). Students who live on campus often experience a greater sense of community and are more involved with campus life, however, living on campus only has a positive impact when students feel comfortable in their residence halls. Another study conducted through Virginia Tech examined how dorm size, type, and gender impact students' level of satisfaction with their housing. The study concluded that males and females felt more comfortable in single-sex halls, but females felt more comfortable in larger buildings while

males preferred smaller buildings (Clark 50). These conclusions support the notion that housing preference is highly dependent on several factors, including gender. The same study found that at Virginia Tech, “the residential experience offers students higher levels of interaction and involvement with as well as socialization with their peers. Students who reside on campus have more opportunities to become involved in campus life, participate in leadership opportunities, participate in recreational sports, and become involved in cultural activities” (Clark 14). Students who lived on campus were also more likely to graduate and aspire to attend graduate or professional school compared to students who lived off campus (Clark 14). Based on these studies, students who remain living on campus are more socially and academically successful. The transition to living off campus can also be difficult and stressful for students, which can be detrimental to these factors. One student that I surveyed reported that they knew, “many people that lived off campus right after freshman year and it was often isolating for them as they found it difficult to meet new people” (Richard). According to the study published in the *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences*, “students often neglect the issue of housing until it can no longer be avoided because of unhealthy or unsafe conditions” (Delgadillo and Erickson 5). As a student who just went through the process of finding off-campus housing for the first time, I found the experience stressful. Comparing rent prices, touring apartments, and finding roommates within a brief time all while trying to keep up with my first semester of college was overwhelming, and I have a renewed understanding of why students typically put off figuring out their housing arrangements. Moving off campus is stressful, but many students still feel driven to do so because of the housing conditions that they experience on campus. Student satisfaction with on-campus housing can be improved through the provision of more community amenities. According to a study conducted through Virginia Tech that examined the criteria for the design of

improved student housing, students preferred dorms where “workrooms, study lounges, and other amenities are provided in greater numbers” (Dagwell 47). Providing more spaces for students to relax and socialize with one another made the living environment better for them. Underclassmen and upperclassmen differed in that they preferred larger and smaller social groupings, respectively. The study also found that as students get older, they become less satisfied with on-campus housing. This is likely because Virginia Tech primarily has dorms where students live in large groups, and do not have as much personal space. The study recommended that more students would stay on campus and take advantage of the benefits of living on campus if on-campus housing was more appealing to them (Dagwell 53). Adding more amenities such as study rooms, having less centralized shared bathrooms, and giving students a variety of types of on-campus housing to choose from would make on-campus housing more appealing to all groups of students (Dagwell 77). Students who live on campus tend to be more involved with campus life and more academically successful, so making on-campus housing as appealing as possible to students would be to their advantage.

Impact of Living-Learning Communities

Virginia Tech offers another alternative form of on-campus housing, called living-learning communities (also known as LLCs). These communities are places where students with a common interest can live together in the dorms. Students typically live in LLCs during their freshman year, but there are leadership opportunities open to students within the LLC in their later years of college as well. At Virginia Tech, there are academically-focused LLCs (such as Hypatia and Galileo for engineering students), and LLCs that are socially-focused (such as Ujima and Studio72 for Africana studies and the arts, respectively). It is crucial to consider the impact of LLCs on students’ academic performance, sense of community, and social life because

they are structured differently than a typical dorm in these aspects. Based on my research, LLCs at Virginia Tech positively contribute to students' professional development and academic success but have a less significant impact on social life compared to typical dorms. According to a doctoral dissertation that studied LLCs at Virginia Tech, students in LLCs had opportunities to participate in experiences that helped with professional development, job acquisition, and job performance (Nave 60). Underrepresented students in their respective job fields observed the positive effects of these experiences more drastically (Nave 1). This same dissertation also found that "participants in engineering LLCs were more engaged with faculty and peers than those who did not participate" (Nave 29). One of the major draws of LLCs for many students is that they are surrounded by peers who are taking the same classes they are and are interested in the same topics (Kampe et al. 8). These increased interactions with faculty and peers were academically beneficial for students. LLCs at Virginia Tech also positively impact students' GPA and in-major retention rates. A study published in *ASEE Peer* (the American Society for Engineering Education's peer-reviewed journal), which examined the impacts of engineering LLCs at Virginia Tech, supported this claim. The study found that females living in the LLC had an average GPA that was 0.29 points higher than their peers living in typical dorms (Kampe et al. 6). GPA is especially important for freshmen in engineering at Virginia Tech because, with a 3.0 GPA, they are guaranteed admission into their first choice major at the end of their first year. The study also found that freshmen who lived in the engineering LLC during their first year had slightly higher retention rates both within their chosen majors and at the school (Kampe et al. 6). Students enjoyed the professional development, academic help from peers, common classes, and community that the LLC offered (Kampe et al. 9). However, based on survey data from this study and my survey data, students who choose to live in LLCs tend to be more driven and

academically concerned, on average, than students living in typical dorms, which could cause us to wrongly attribute their academic success to the LLC (Richard). The Virginia Tech LLC study found that students commonly listed “desire to succeed in engineering” and “desire to have help with academics” when asked why they wanted to participate in the LLC (Kampe et al. 8). This shows that academically focused LLCs tend to attract students who are driven to succeed in that area.

Conclusions

To conclude, living on campus, especially during the earlier years of college, is extremely beneficial for students both academically and socially. These effects are shown through higher GPAs of on-campus students, and more involvement with on-campus social activities. However, these effects are only observed when students feel comfortable and supported in their living environment. Often a lack of space, amenities, and the struggles of communal living push students to move off campus, especially in their later years of college. More students could continue to experience the benefits of on-campus living at Virginia Tech if dorms were made more appealing to them. Features such as upgraded amenities and community spaces, more privacy, and a variety of styles of housing would make on-campus housing more appealing to a wider group of students. Living-learning communities (also known as LLCs) offer students at Virginia Tech an opportunity to live on campus with peers who share similar interests. LLCs are beneficial for students academically but have less of an impact socially compared to standard dorms. This is shown through higher GPAs and retention rates of students who lived in LLCs compared to those who did not. The issue of student housing is a complex personal choice, with many factors that impact students’ experiences. Knowing that living on campus is beneficial to

college students, more research is needed to understand how students can experience the benefits of on-campus housing at Virginia Tech.

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