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Predictors of Student Satisfaction in University Residence Halls

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a call in higher education for increased emphasis on the undergraduate experience. Public confidence in institutions of higher education has been eroding while demands for accountability have increased (American College Personnel Association, 1994; Schroeder & Mable, 1994). Hallenbeck (1978) stated, "Problems confronting higher education, such as . . . public skepticism, and slowness to innovate have fostered an era of consumerism which mandates attention" (p. 19). The increase in public attention given to institutional performance, student outcomes, and institutional accountability has heightened the focus on measurable outcomes in higher education (Astin, Korn, & Green, 1987). The Student Learning Imperative, published by the American College Personnel Association (1994), stresses the importance of systematically assessing the outcomes associated with college attendance as a way to improve institutional productivity. One area that has been given increasing attention is student satisfaction with various components of the college experience (Astin, 1993; Astin et al., 1987; Strange, 1991).

Students who persist to graduation report higher levels of satisfaction with their institution than students who are not retained (Astin, 1993; Nelson, Scott, & Bryan, 1984; Starr, Betz, & Menne, 1972). Both student satisfaction and persistence to graduation are more strongly influenced by characteristics of the institution than by students' precollege characteristics (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983). Early college experiences have been shown to more strongly predict at-risk status than precollege characteristics (Nelson, Scott, & Bryan, 1984). These early college experiences coincide with the time that students are most likely to be living in residence halls—at the beginning of their college career. Given the paramount influence of institutional factors on student satisfaction and persistence to graduation, and that many first-year students live in residence halls, it is imperative that housing professionals place considerable emphasis on attempting to influence aspects of their institutions that impact retention and satisfaction.

Several researchers have explored the relationship between residence hall living and satisfaction with the college experience. Astin (1984) found that when compared with commuter students, resident students were more likely to express overall satisfaction with their undergraduate experiences, and were particularly satisfied with student friendships, faculty-student relations, institutional reputation, and social life. Chickering (1975) also found resident students to be more satisfied with their college experiences than commuters.

Studies have found students to be moderately satisfied with their residence hall experiences. Null, Hull, and Menis (1982) found that students' perceptions of residence hall environments were more favorable when the organizational elements of the residence halls, the group-living situations, the social activities, and the academic environments of the group-living situations were highly rated. In addition, a multicampus study of approximately 8,000 students revealed that 61% of first-year students entering in 1983 were satisfied or very satisfied with their housing, up from 55% in 1981 (Astin et al., 1987).

Fay (1981) illuminated why it may be important to pay particular attention to residential satisfaction by noting that, ". . . physical settings have an impact on student development . . . (and) the lack of adequate facilities precludes the possibility of interpersonal growth taking place" (p. 47). The question therefore becomes, what are the different factors that contribute to student satisfaction with residence hall living and how can we increase satisfaction? Previous research has shown that there are a number of different factors that contribute to student satisfaction with the residence hall experience. These factors can be separated into two categories: physical environment and social factors.

Physical Environment

Physical features of a residence hall, such as

architectural design, space, amenities, and location on campus have been shown to impact students' satisfaction with their hall (Strange, 1991). Physical factors such as light, noise, temperature, and air quality also have powerfully influenced overall satisfaction with an environment (Strange, 1991). For example, excessive noise has been rated as a significant detractor from student satisfaction (Franken, Hovet, & Hartman, 1983; Null et al., 1982; Rogers, 1990), while students living in newly renovated rooms reported higher levels of academic achievement (Marshall, 1992). Density, defined as "the number of people per structure" (Spencer, 1979, p. 12), is another physical factor that has been shown to impact student satisfaction with the residence hall environment. Spencer (1979) found lower levels of satisfaction in larger residence halls. He suggested that residence hall staff should pay particular attention to this when building or renovating residence halls, and encouraged creative attempts to structure small communities within larger halls so that students will have a group with which they easily can identify.

Social Factors

Students who live in residence halls that are perceived to be socially and emotionally supportive, or in halls with a strong sense of community, tend to be more satisfied with their residence hall experiences than students who do not view their halls in these ways (Ullom & Hallenbeck, 1981). For example, students who remain on campus perceive their residence hall environments to be more emotionally supportive than students who decide to move off campus. In fact, a sense of emotional support and expression has been found to be the most significant contributing factor in students' decisions to remain on campus (Ullom & Hallenbeck, 1981). Furthermore, student persistence toward graduation is positively correlated with the quality of roommate relationships, the residence hall social environment, social involvement and emotional support (Waldo, 1986). Satisfaction with social life and other social factors also have been shown to contribute to overall persistence (Nelson et al., 1984).

Research has demonstrated that physical environments and social factors can have a substantial impact on students' satisfaction with their residence hall experiences. Residence hall experiences, in turn, have been shown to have positive impacts on student perceptions of their undergraduate experiences, friendships and faculty-student relations (Astin, 1984). However, the relative influence of various physical environment and social factors in residence halls has been given little attention in the literature. What makes the most difference in predicting resident satisfaction and how can housing professionals use this information to maximize their use of human and financial resources? The authors sought to answer this question in a study using a multiple regression approach.

METHOD

Participants

A random sample of 1,000 residential students stratified for race, sex, and area of campus was drawn at the beginning of the spring 1995 semester. These 1,000 undergraduate residents represented 14% of the residential population at a large, public, mid-Atlantic University. The respondents were 47% female, 53% male, 71% Caucasian, 14% African American, 10% Asian, 3% Hispanic, and 2% Native American or Alaskan Natives. They primarily were first-year students (39%) and sophomores (26%), with the overwhelming majority being traditional college students aged 17-21 (90%). Respondents closely mirrored the residence hall population. All participants were treated in accordance with the "Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct" (American Psychological Association, 1992).

Instrumentation

For over 10 years, our Department of Resident Life has used an annual survey to measure student characteristics and residence hall satisfaction titled the Residence Hall Evaluation Project (RHEP). The RHEP asks residents to indicate their satisfaction with several areas including the nature of their residence hall community, their physical environment and facilities, safety and security, dining services, resident life staff and services, and basic demographic characteristics. Students respond to items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree or very satisfied to very dissatisfied. The internal consistency of the RHEP as measured by Cronbach's alpha is .89, with alphas of the various sections ranging from .57 to .86. When

the survey was created, several professionals with a Ph.D. in College Student Personnel Administration and at least 10 years of residence life experience chose questions for the instrument that would enhance face validity.

Procedure

Resident Assistants hand-delivered the RHEP survey to each identified respondent. Residents anonymously returned their surveys to their resident assistant in sealed envelopes. Each respondent received two movie passes for an on-campus theater once they turned in a survey envelope. A total of 885 usable responses were returned, yielding 89% of the original sample.

RESULTS

A stepwise multiple regression was computed to determine the items on the questionnaire that most strongly predicted students' satisfaction with their residence hall. A multiple regression of all 101 questions on the survey demonstrated that 46% of the variability in residents' satisfaction could be explained by 11 questions ($p < .001$). As shown in Table 1, residents' satisfaction with the physical facilities of their hall predicts 30% of the variance in their overall satisfaction with their hall.

The second strongest predictor, satisfaction with the quality of relationship with residents' roommates, adds 5% predictability to the regression equation. Whether the residents believe fellow unit members care about them and whether their hall is a place where quiet study is possible, each contribute an additional 2% of predictability to prediction of satisfaction. Variables adding at least 1% predictability of satisfaction each include: whether the residents plan to return to the hall for another year; if the residents live in a coeducational building; satisfaction with the safety and security of the hall; the opinion that one benefits from living with people with backgrounds, interests, and lifestyles different from the individual respondent; and fair and consistent enforcement of policy by staff. Finally, less than 1% predictability is added by each of two final significant predictors: being female and believing that when damage occurs on the unit that the respondent usually knows what happened and who caused the damage.

DISCUSSION

This study explores what factors influence residents to be satisfied with their residence halls. Out of 101 variables, 11 variables predicted 46% of residents' satisfaction. The most important factor for residents' satisfaction was the quality of the physical facilities of their hall. Residents reporting high satisfaction with their halls' physical facilities tend to report higher levels of general satisfaction with their hall when compared to residents who were not satisfied with their physical facilities. This supports the findings of Strange (1991) concerning the importance of the physical factors of a residence hall. The second most important variable predicting residents' satisfaction was the relationship with

TABLE 1
PREDICTORS OF RESIDENCE HALL SATISFACTION AMONG RESIDENTS

Variable	*R*	*r2*	*r2* Change	*p*
Satisfied with facilities	.55	.30		.001
Satisfied with roommate	.59	.35	.05	.001
Fellow residents "care about me"	.61	.37	.02	.01
I can study in quiet in the hall	.62	.39	.02	.05
I plan to live in a hall next year	.63	.40	.01	.01
I live in a coed building	.64	.41	.01	.01
Satisfied with safety and security	.65	.42	.01	.01
Believe in benefitting from diverse others	.66	.43	.01	.05
Fair and consistent policy enforcement	.66	.44	.01	.05
Being female	.66	.44	.004	.05
Know who damages hall when occurs	.66	.45	.004	.05

their roommate. This supports research by Waldo (1986). The quality of the floor community, as reflected in students' responses to "residents on my unit care about me" was the third strongest predictor of hall satisfaction. This supports the value of focusing residence hall staff efforts toward building cohesive communities and confirms prior research (Ullom & Hallenbeck, 1981). Being able to study in quiet was the fourth strongest predictor of being satisfied with the hall, supporting substantial research that excessive noise in a residence hall detracts from hall satisfaction (Franken et al., 1983; Null et al., 1982; Rogers, 1990).

In addition, residents who had made plans to return to the residence halls for another year tended to be more satisfied with their hall. Residents of coeducational buildings were significantly more satisfied than those in single-sex buildings. An examination of the means showed that all-male buildings were rated equally well. This supports the contention that men living in coeducational housing are significantly more satisfied with their residence hall than men living in single sex housing. This particular finding suggests the importance of tailoring single-sex vs. coeducational housing options to the requests of students wherever possible. Although women who choose coeducational housing report equal satisfaction levels to women who choose a single-sex environment, such is not the case with men. Given significantly higher satisfaction levels for men in coeducational housing, such housing spaces should be offered in sufficient numbers to help maintain high levels of satisfaction among men.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

As the calls for raising the level of accountability in higher education continue, it can be useful for housing professionals to know which characteristics and features of their residence halls most strongly predict resident satisfaction. Policy makers can use this information to direct financial resources and staff efforts toward areas that make the most difference to students. Given the substantial importance in the quality of physical facilities to student satisfaction, allocating funds to renovate older buildings is of paramount importance. Furthermore, student input should be included in what features might be most attractive (data jacks, cable television, study facilities, social lounge space, etc.).

The finding that roommate relationships are second in importance stresses the need for residence life departments to carefully train staff in how to facilitate healthy roommate relationships, and how to resolve conflicts as they arise. This study confirmed that roommate relationships can have a powerful influence on students' experiences.

The fact that residents' perceptions that others on the floor "care about me" emerged as a predictor of satisfaction with the hall affirms the community building efforts that residence life systems have concentrated on for some time. Efforts to build floor communities founded on the principles of mutual respect and caring for others are critical components of residence life programs seeking to foster resident satisfaction. This particular finding has implications for staff training. Housing staff should diligently work to build cohesive floor communities not only because of the value of community itself, but also because the quality of the floor community influences residents' satisfaction with their hall.

It was intriguing that the fourth predictor of residents' satisfaction was whether residents believed they could study in quiet in their halls. Students who believed they could quietly study in their hall also were more satisfied with their hall. This offers support for enhancing efforts to build stronger academic environments in residence halls, an idea growing in momentum. Given the emphasis students place on being able to study in their halls, the present research indicates that housing staff should work diligently to build stronger academic environments in residence halls. This same finding highlights the importance of setting quiet hours that residents abide by, perhaps through the process of developing floor agreements to build consensus on this issue. This finding also supports Schroeder's (1995) contention that residence halls need to become "locales for student learning" (p. 1) and urged the blurring of boundaries between classroom and out of classroom experiences.

Finally, the increased level of satisfaction among men in coeducational housing relative to men in single-sex housing points to the need to offer coeducational housing to men whenever possible.

LIMITATIONS

Although there is strong internal consistency of the measure used in the present study, a limitation

exists in that little is known about the measure's validity. This should be taken into consideration when applying the findings. In addition, the regression analysis used in the present study treated each question in the survey as a predictor. Thus, we know that satisfaction with facilities was the strongest predictor of resident satisfaction, but we do not know which aspects of facilities might be most influential. Further research would be useful to clarify what physical aspects and features of facilities are most influential to residents' satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

While several studies have shown how various initiatives contribute to student satisfaction in residence halls, the present study clarifies the relative influence that various characteristics of residence halls and efforts of staff have on residence hall satisfaction. In particular, it was shown that high quality facilities, positive roommate relationships, strong floor communities, and quiet study environments are the most important predictors of residents' satisfaction with their halls. Knowing this enables housing professionals to focus efforts on variables that have the most influence on students' satisfaction as they work to advance the goals of their institutions.

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