



HONORS COLLEGE LIVING/LEARNING COMMUNITIES

The Developmental Differences of
On-campus and Off-campus
Honors College First Year Students

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Past research has demonstrated differences between resident and commuter university first year students in their cognitive development and personality. Twenty-nine Honors College commuter and resident first year students at Oakland University were assessed in a pre-test, post-test design, once at the beginning and at the end of the academic year. The researcher examined cognitive development and personality differences among participants. Residents were less shy and also more extroverted than commuters. Neuroticism showed a significant difference between the groups at time 2, with the commuters being lower than residents. Openness increased for the whole sample at time 2. Surprisingly, critical thinking scores significantly decreased for both groups of students.

Numerous studies have been conducted to investigate differences between commuters and on-campus residents at universities. Many studies looked at academic achievements, cognitive impacts, personality differences, and growth (including autonomy, independence, and self-esteem) of the student

within the first year of college; most of the studies were conducted decades ago (George, 1971; Chickering, 1974; Pascarella, Bohr, & Zusman et al., 1993; Inman & Pascarella, 1998; Welty, 1976; Zheng, Saunders, Shelley, & Walen, 2002). Also, some recent studies have focused on the benefits gained in learning communities when compared with regular residence halls (Knight, 2002; Freyman, 1998; Zheng, Saunders, Shelley, & Whalen). However, these studies do not compare honors residents in learning communities with honors commuters. Therefore, the following article describes a research study of the differences between Oakland University Honors College commuter and resident first year students. Because the sample was small, I have used it not as an actual statement of any existing reality but as a means to provide merely a sense of that reality.

Advantages to Living On-Campus

Many studies have demonstrated advantages to living on-campus. Such advantages include gaining independence, autonomy, self-esteem, cognitive growth, enjoying meaningful interaction with faculty and peers, and having fun with friends (Bukowski, 1975; Chickering, 1974; George, 1970; Hays & Oxley, 1986; Pascarella, Bohr, & Zusman et al., 1993; Welty, 1976). Pascarella et al. found that important interactions that foster growth (such as intellectual and social encounters with students and faculty) are “more likely to occur in residential settings than when the student . . . commutes to college” (p. 16). Significant growth in intelligence and differences in thinking introversion (reflective thought and range of ideas), estheticism (artistic interests and activities), and altruism (concern for others and ethics in relationships) between residents and commuters may be attributed to the on-campus living situation and the interactions it brings (Welty). Ultimately, resident first year students show greater personal and intellectual growth than do first year commuter

students because they are most likely to experience situations that enhance their growth, such as more meaningful friendships, interactions with faculty and staff, and involvement in campus activities (Chickering; Inmann & Pascarella, 1998; Pascarella et al.; Welty).

Residence halls foster environments that build new friendships and encourage involvement in extracurricular activities (Chickering, 1974; Hays & Oxley, 1986). These experiences can influence the cognitive growth of the student (Chickering; Inmann & Pascarella, 1998). Therefore, residency can indirectly impact cognitive growth and directly impact social growth (Chickering; Hays & Oxley; Inmann & Pascarella). In addition, residents tend to develop traits of responsibility, socialization, achievement via independence, and self-control more rapidly than commuters (Petteway, 1968).

Learning Communities

In addition to the previously mentioned advantages of living in the residence halls, living in a learning community adds to academic success as well. Although gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity can play a role in academic success, membership in a learning community further impacts academic performance (Zheng, Saunders, Shelley, & Whalen, 2002). Learning communities typically bring curious students together in order to increase learning by bringing in faculty for meaningful discussions, offering academic support programs, and making “connections between curricular offerings” (Knight, 2002, p. 3; Zhen et al.). They also “foster a spirit of distinctiveness and . . . intellectual community” (Freyman, 1998, p. 22).

Honors Students

Past research suggests that successful honors students tend to be more curious, motivated, self-confident, open-minded, and

mature than average students (Freyman, 1998; Guerrero & Riggs, 1996). They also tend to have higher retention rates and grade point averages, and are more likely than non-honors students to enjoy participation in deep discussions with faculty and peers regarding abstract ideas (Freyman; Knight, 2002). The small class size environment that honor programs offer allows students to interact more often with their professors and peers, which can augment their cognitive growth (Fischer, 1996; Tsui, 1999). Honors students, therefore, appear to be at an academic advantage—experiencing greater intellectual stimulation than non-honors students. Honors students also tend to have more interests than non-honors students, and are therefore more likely to get involved with co-curricular activities (German, 1995). These interests include academic and departmental groups, honors student associations, and other student organizations, such as religious or Greek organizations (German). Residency, then, may further impact honors students' academic success, growth, and involvement throughout their first year.

Background Characteristics of Commuters

Although there are a number of advantages to living on-campus, many students still choose to commute. Some reasons for this could be socioeconomic status, parent occupation, desire to continue dependence on family, and geographic proximity (George, 1970; Reichard & McArver, 1976; Welty, 1976). In a study by Reichard & McArver, most parents of resident students worked in a white-collar occupation, with 62% of fathers and 69% of mothers working in office jobs. Welty found that many of the fathers worked in a professional occupation. Some have argued that resident students are at an advantage because they can afford to live on-campus and therefore gain the additional benefits that are offered (George; Peterson, 1975).

Interestingly, Minkevich, George, and Marshall (1972)

found no significant differences in socioeconomic status between commuters at two-year and four-year colleges. Thus, Minkevich et al. concluded that variables in past studies that were found to contribute to college choice (i.e. socioeconomic status, sex, and personality) might be related to the differences between commuter and resident students rather than the differences between two- and four-year colleges. This study suggests that personality traits may account for some of the differences between residents and commuters. One such individual difference appears to be extroversion, where residents tend to be more outgoing and more involved with social activities than commuters are (Chickering, 1974).¹

Because Oakland University is primarily a commuter school, and the majority of Honors College students fall within the general commuter population, it is possible to conduct a comparison study of Honors College commuter and first year resident students. The purpose of the current study is to investigate whether Honors College students at Oakland University (OU) show patterns consistent with past research on commuters and residents within the general university student population. The current study examines the growth and development of OU Honors College first year students to see whether living on-campus or off-campus makes a difference in their transition, as it does with the more typical university populations already studied. It was hypothesized that Honors College first year students living on-campus would achieve greater cognitive and personal development than their commuter counterparts. The study also investigates personality differences in commuters and residents and looked at changes from the beginning to the end of the study.

¹ The research literature lacks more specific details about the direction of personality differences between residents and commuters. Very little information could be found about which groups exhibit more or less of certain personality traits, especially traits commonly measured on the Big Five Inventory scale.

Method

This study was conducted in a two-part, pretest-posttest design; first assessing first year students in the beginning of the academic year (time 1) and again in the middle of their second semester (time 2). Participants were given the first survey during the Honors College orientation and were asked to fill it out and return it promptly. In March of 2007, the middle of the winter semester, participants were contacted via email and phone and asked to meet with the researcher to complete the second survey.

Twenty-nine Honors College first year students completed the first survey, and twenty-three completed the second. Unfortunately, this is a small sample size and therefore, did not give the study much power. Thus, the results of the study might have been different had the sample been larger.

Demographic information was taken during both surveys. At time 1, there were 9 males and 20 females. At time 2, there were 6 males and 17 females. There were 16 commuters and 13 residents at time 1, and 12 commuters and 11 residents at time 2. There were three commuters who moved on-campus during the study. The average high school GPA was 3.83 and the average ACT score was 27.3. The average first college semester GPA was 3.55. At time 1, many students worked 0–5 hours or 11–15 hours. At time 2, most students worked 0–5 hours. Neither group worked significantly more than the other group. The average age of the participant in the first survey was 18, and the average age in the second survey was 18.5.

The instruments used were scaled surveys that examined personality, cognitive growth, and demographics (including age, gender, residency, ACT score, high school GPA, fall semester GPA and amount of hours worked per week). Personality was measured on a standardized scale of personality, the Big Five Inventory (BFI; John & Srivastava, 1999), based on the 5-factor model of personality (extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness). Extroversion measures a person's tendency to be outgoing and sociable.

Agreeableness measures how well a person gets along with others (in terms of trust, helping, unselfishness, kindness, etc.). Conscientiousness measures how consistent and accurate a person is with tasks. Neuroticism, or emotional stability, measures how well a person handles stress and tense situations. Finally, openness measures the creativity of a person and their willingness to try new experiences.

Rosenberg's Self-esteem Scale (1965) and Cheek & Buss's Shyness Scale (1981) were also used to assess participants' personality. Rosenberg's Self-esteem Scale measures the level of self-esteem in an individual and is used often by other researchers. Cheek & Buss's Shyness Scale measures an individual's anxiety toward social interactions and is also used frequently by researchers.

The Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal (Watson & Glaser, 1980), an instrument that assesses critical thinking skills in inference, recognition of assumptions, deduction, interpretation, and evaluation of arguments, and used to measure cognitive growth, was also given twice. Thus, this measure examined the cognitive growth of the participants in their first year of college.

Results and Discussion

Again, it must be noted that the small sample size in this study could have biased the results. In other words, these results may not be applicable to other honors students at different universities or for a different time (i.e. next year's incoming class or the previous year's class). Due to this small sample, some significant differences may not have been found or some findings may not hold true for other cohorts.

It was predicted that residents would have a greater increase in the Watson-Glaser critical thinking scores than commuters would. As it turned out, the critical thinking scores of both groups significantly decreased over the year (time 1 average score = 60.91; time 2 average score = 56.05), indicating that

the whole group did not develop cognitively. These results contradict past research, in that residents experienced greater cognitive development than did commuters (Welty, 1976).

Past research also suggests that exposure to meaningful interactions with faculty and peers (as Honors College students often experience) should increase students' cognitive development (Welty, 1976; Pascarella, Bohr, & Zusman et al., 1993; Fischer, 1996; Tsui, 1999). Therefore, it is surprising that the critical thinking scores decreased, and thus, the researcher suspects that this drop may not be reliable. Perhaps the participants answered the questions less carefully than they should have. There was an interesting (but not significant) trend among the scores, however, indicating that commuters decreased somewhat more than the residents did (average difference from time 1 to time 2 was -6.73 for commuters and -3.00 for residents), suggesting that even though critical thinking scores of both groups decreased, the residents decreased somewhat less.

Significant results were found for shyness and extroversion. Past research indicates that some personality differences between residents and commuters can account for differences in choosing to commute or not (George, 1970). In the current study, commuters were more shy than residents (at time 2, commuter shyness score = 2.91, resident shyness score = 2.15). Also, commuters were less extroverted than residents (at time 2, commuter extroversion score = 2.86, resident extroversion = 3.64). More simply, residents were more outgoing than commuters. These personality differences may have contributed to students' decisions for living at home or on-campus. If so, then these personality traits certainly contribute to a resident's experience of meeting new friends, getting involved, and interacting with faculty, and therefore, fostering a greater amount of cognitive growth (Chickering, 1974; Inmann & Pascarella, 1998; Welty, 1976; Pascarella et al., 1993).

Another interesting finding was an increase in openness for the whole group (time 1 openness score = 3.89, and time 2 = 4.09). This indicates that honors students increase their cre-

ativity skills and become more willing to try new experiences as they progress in their first year of college. This finding is supported by past research, where honors students are more curious and open-minded than non-honors students (Freyman, 1998; Guerrero & Riggs, 1996).

Neuroticism also yielded interesting and significant results. Neuroticism showed that both commuters and residents started the same but ended differently. The commuters actually decreased in neuroticism, whereas the residents increased (time 1, residents = 3.45 and commuters = 2.96; time 2, residents = 3.53 and commuters = 2.85). This indicates that commuters became better able to handle stress and more emotionally stable during their first year of college. Whereas, the residents became less able to handle stress and less emotionally stable in that first year. These findings are somewhat unexpected and inconsistent with past research showing that GPA and ACT scores were correlated with neuroticism scores (Rogers, 2006; Karnes, Chauvin, & Trant, 1984). Because commuters and residents had equally high ACT scores and GPAs, the neuroticism score should have been approximately equal for both groups. However, this was not the case in the current study, which could have been due to random error from the small sample size.

Self-esteem, agreeableness, and conscientiousness did not yield significant differences between residents and commuters. This means that both residents and commuters in the study scored the same on self-esteem, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. This finding is supported by past research, where honors students generally have greater motivation, self-confidence, and higher grade point averages than non-honors students (Freyman, 1998; Knight, 2002; Guerrero & Riggs, 1996). In addition, GPA is related to both agreeableness and conscientiousness (Rogers, 2006); therefore, it is not surprising that both honors residents and commuters (whose GPAs did not differ) were equal in these areas. In other words, since they had equal GPAs, past research supports the finding that

both residents and commuters were equal in agreeableness and conscientiousness.

The sample was equivalent in academic measures and in the amount of hours they worked. Although a trend indicated a tendency for commuters to work somewhat more than residents, the groups were statistically equivalent (meaning that there was no real difference between the groups in the amount of hours worked). The groups were not equal, however, on gender disbursement. There were more females than males, and more male commuters than male residents. Therefore, it is possible that gender differences may have contributed to the results of the study.

As mentioned earlier, the major limitation of this study was its small sample. Because of this, it is quite possible that the failure to find many significant trends was due to the low power of the study. In other words, a small amount of participants indicated a higher risk for random errors and a smaller chance that the results can be generalized to the general population. Some factors that may have played a role in the small sample size might have included the length of the survey and the method of recruitment. The first survey took over an hour for many participants to complete. Also, the method for recruiting participants was not very strong. The researcher handed surveys to the first year students, but asked them to fill it out on their own time and return it to the Honors College as soon as possible. This method of recruitment brought in very few participants (29 out of 130 registered first year students in the Honors College). A luncheon was also held for participants to motivate them to fill out their surveys, but again, not many students came. Finally, the incentive for students to participate was small (one \$25 gift card raffle at the end of the study). A greater incentive (perhaps small gifts for all who participated), a shorter survey, and having participants fill out the survey “on the spot” doubtless would have increased the number of participants in the study.

Conclusions

Despite the small sample size, some significant differences were obtained. These include personality differences between residents and commuters, as well as increased openness and decreased critical thinking scores for the whole group. While the sample was consistent with past research on personality differences between residents and commuters (e.g. extroversion and shyness), it still did not follow the expected trend of cognitive growth. And again, some caution should be taken when examining the results due to the small sample.

In general, these results may encourage future research. For example, more research could be conducted investigating the difference in openness between honors students and non-honors students in the first year of college. Other investigations could include further study of differences in neuroticism between honors and non-honors residents and commuters, as well as changes in extroversion and shyness for honors and non-honors students. In addition, replications are needed to investigate the unexpected decrease in critical thinking scores. Further research in the area of commuter and resident differences is particularly important, for much of the literature available on student characteristics is from the 1970s and is in need of updating.

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