



The Case for Campus Housing: Results from a National Study

**A Brief for Campus Executives
and C-Level Officers**



Kevin Fosnacht, Robert M. Gonyea, Polly A. Graham, & Kyle T. Fassett

Graduating more students and promoting student learning are national imperatives. Residential institutions must provide safe and welcoming housing facilities for effective transitions, academic and social integration, and learning.

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The Case for Campus Housing

Dear Campus Executives and C-Level Officers,

The year 2020 has been trying for higher education, and certainly so for those who serve in campus housing and residence life departments. However, there has possibly never been a time when the value of campus housing and residence life has been more evident. In a matter of weeks, housing and residence life departments mobilized to de-densify or close campus residence in the name of student and staff safety. Campus housing and residence life professionals are the highest touch-points for students. More and more, we are seeing the overwhelming impact these professionals have on student success.

The Association of College and University Housing Officers - International (ACUHO-I) recently finished a multi-year research engagement with the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University Bloomington. In total, more than 75,000 students from 76 residential campuses, including roughly 33,000 first-year and sophomore students, participated in this study.

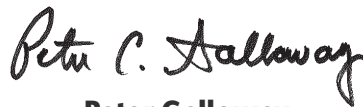
The results are undeniable. **Living on campus has a clear and profound impact on student persistence and engagement.** Regardless of important factors like race, parental education, and finances, students that live on campus are more likely to engage in academic activities relative to their off-campus peers, and these activities in turn, affect retention rates, academic engagement, and feelings of belonging to the university community.

Included in these reports are not only the findings from this study, but also ways that you can take these findings and apply them to your campus. For example—what policies might you consider implementing to increase the number of residential students on your campus? What programs might encourage and improve the academic engagement and retention of residents?

We are excited to share this report with you. These findings send a clear message—despite the challenges surrounding campuses today, the campus housing experience is a critical component to a bright future for campuses and students alike.



Mary DeNiro
ACUHO-I CEO



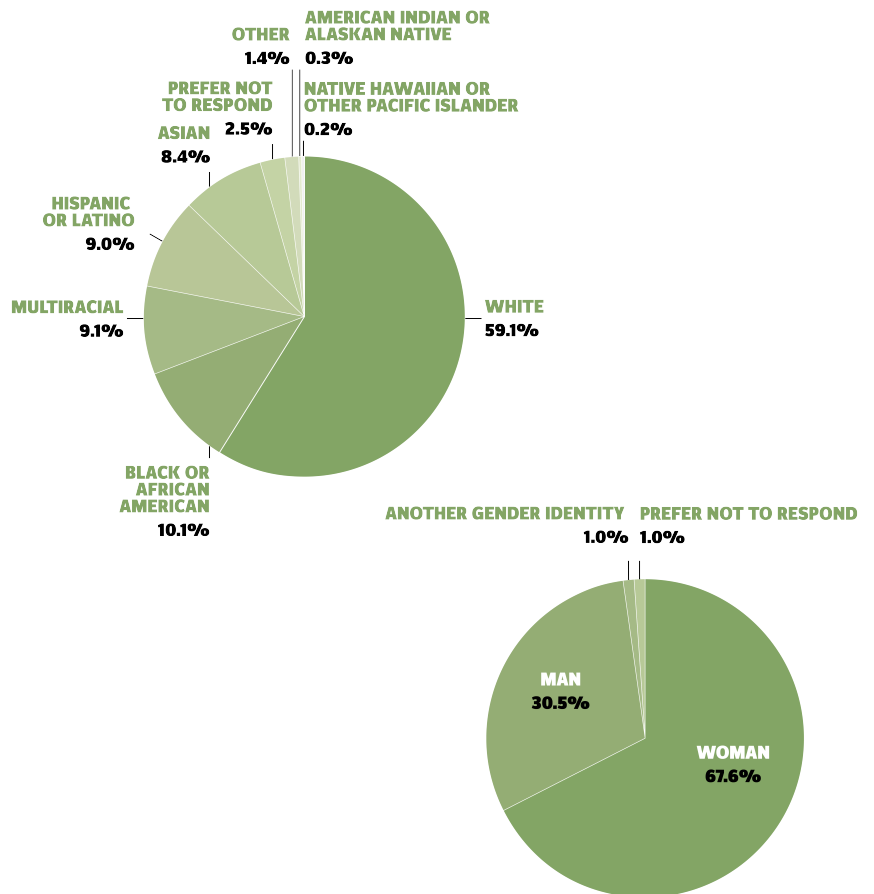
Peter Galloway
ACUHO-I President

Overview of the Study



In this brief, we share research findings on the impact of student living arrangements on engagement and persistence. In 2018, ACUHO-I launched the Sponsored Research Program, with support from the ACUHO-I Foundation. This program represents the Association’s largest single financial investment in research on behalf of the profession. The inaugural grant was awarded to the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University Bloomington to collect student housing data through the [National Survey of Student Engagement](#) (NSSE, pronounced “Nessie”). The data are from a representative sample of 33,000 first-year and sophomore students enrolled at 76 diverse residential institutions who completed the NSSE in 2018.

Following the core NSSE questionnaire, respondents completed an [additional set of items](#) related to their on- or off-campus living arrangements, including residential activities, experiences with roommates, living-learning communities, financial stress, sense of belonging, and the perceived benefits of housing.





***Living On Campus
Benefits Persistence***

Living On Campus Benefits Persistence

Returning to college for a second year is a critical marker of student success. For decades, living on campus was thought to be the most important predictor of persistence. However, in recent years this belief has been challenged, and many now understand persistence to be conditional upon engagement. Engagement is defined in two parts. It is both the time and effort students devote to studies and other learning activities that generate positive outcomes, and it is how institutions create environments for students to participate in these activities. Due to the timing of the NSSE survey, for this study persistence was limited to spring term students returning in the fall.

First-year and sophomore on-campus residents persisted at a rate 2.0 and 2.2 percentage points higher than their off-campus peers (living independently of their families), respectively.

STUDENT TIME & EFFORT

SAFE & SUPPORTIVE CAMPUS ENVIRONMENTS



Residential Learning Activities

Which have you done in your place of residence?

- Attended a class
- Met with a faculty member or an advisor
- Used academic support services
- Studied or worked on a project with other students
- Attended social, co-curricular, diversity-related, or health/wellness activities



Belongingness & Safety

In the place where you live, to what extent do you feel...?

- Physically safe
- Free from harassment and discrimination
- Valued
- Sense of community
- Can resolve conflicts



Supportive Environment

How much does your institution emphasize...?

- Academic support
- Using learning support services
- Encouraging diverse contacts
- Social opportunities
- Support for your well-being
- Helping with non-academic responsibilities
- Campus activities/ events and events that address important issues



Financial Well-Being

This year, how often have you...?

- Worried about having enough money for regular expenses
- Worried about paying for college
- Chosen not to participate in an activity due to lack of money
- Chosen not to purchase required academic materials due to cost
- Skipped meals

Living On Campus Benefits Persistence

First-year Students

We found that first-year on-campus residents persisted at higher rates than off-campus students who lived independently of their families. They also returned at equivalent rates to students who lived with their families. In other words, first-year students who lived away from their families were better served by living in a campus residence hall than in accommodations off campus.

However, the persistence benefits were conditional upon increased engagement in learning activities in the residence. These activities included the ability to attend classes, interact with faculty, meet with advisors, study and do projects with other students, use academic support services, and participate in social, diversity-related, and wellness activities where they live.

For **first-year students**, we recommend creating holistic, integrated environments for students within the residence halls. Such environments require collaboration between students and academic affairs units. Provide essential services in or very near campus residences such as advising and academic support, spaces that support collaborative learning activities, and classrooms and offices where students can have quality interactions with faculty.

First-year Student Persistence Rate (Spring-to-Fall)

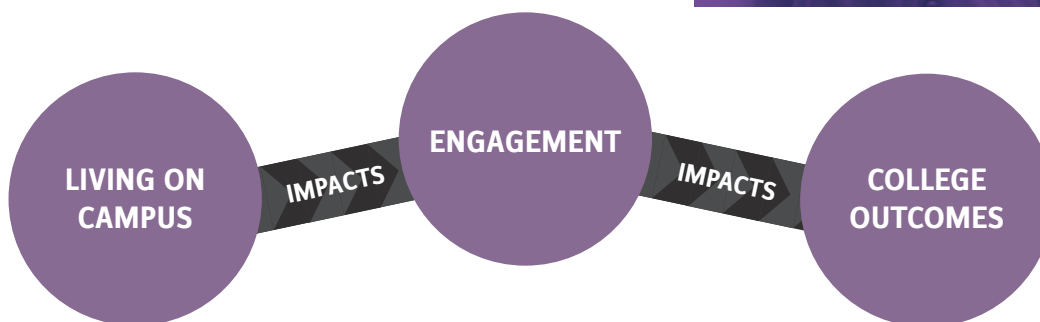
92% LIVING ON CAMPUS

91% LIVING OFF CAMPUS WITH FAMILY

90% LIVING OFF CAMPUS WITHOUT FAMILY

PICTURE IT

What would a two percentage point increase in retention look like for your campus?



Living On Campus Benefits Persistence

Sophomores

The effects on persistence were somewhat [different for sophomores](#). Sophomores living off campus were less likely than those living on campus to return to the institution the following year, and those who lived more than 10 minutes away from campus were the least likely to persist. However, unlike first-year students, this benefit applies to on-campus sophomores in general and is not conditional to their levels of engagement. Consequently, sophomores may not require as much attention from live-in staff or access to developmental programs to persist (although such interventions may have positive benefits for other outcomes not addressed in this study).

Sophomore Student Persistence Rate (Spring-to-Fall)

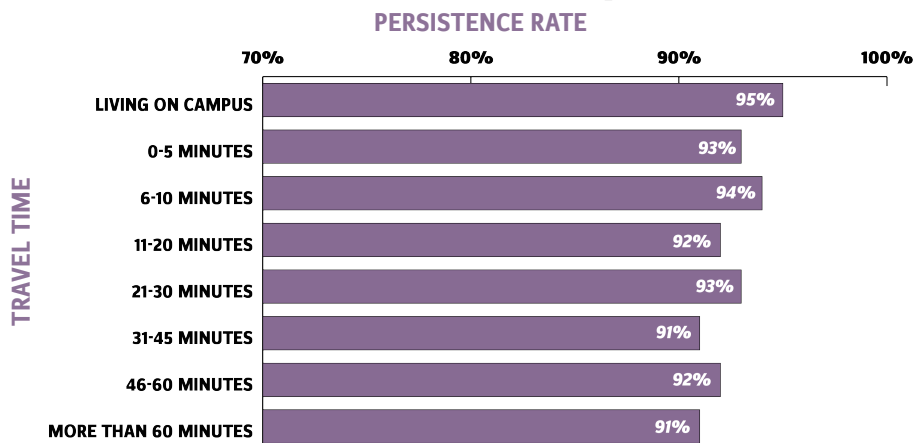
95% LIVING ON CAMPUS

92% LIVING OFF CAMPUS WITH FAMILY

93% LIVING OFF CAMPUS WITHOUT FAMILY

We recommend that **sophomores** live on campus, where feasible. However, sophomores may not require the same types of support as first-year students. Apartment-style living areas and models like public-private-partnerships (P3s) may be ideally suited for the sophomore population due to their lower needs for staffing and intensive programming resources.

Sophomore Spring-to-Fall Persistence Rate by Travel-time to Campus



A smiling man in a plaid shirt is holding a large, light-colored recycling bin. The bin is filled with various items, including a stack of papers and a white coffee cup with a lid. The background shows a brick wall and a window with a diamond-patterned screen. The entire image has a blue tint.

***Living-Learning Communities
Have Wide Benefits***

Living-Learning Communities Have Wide Benefits

Living-learning communities (LLCs) are a staple of residence life, helping students to learn together within a central theme or shared educational purpose. One of the most apparent findings in our study is the comprehensive benefits of these programs.

Campus residents who participated in LLCs were [more engaged in effective educational practices](#). For example, LLC participants were up to three times more likely to attend a class, meet with faculty, see an advisor, or use academic support services within the living area. They were also more likely to study with other students, attend social and co-curricular activities, participate in diversity-related activities, and do health and wellness activities. Indeed, these are the distinctive ways living-learning communities shape the college experience.

After adjusting for a broad array of student and institution characteristics, LLCs had a positive association with engagement, such as student-faculty interaction, collaborative learning, reflective and integrative learning, and supportive environment.


+2.2%

Living-learning communities were associated with a 2.2 percentage point increase in persistence.

Additionally, first-year students in living-learning communities were more likely than their on-campus peers to persist in college. Specifically, LLC participants returned at a rate 2.2 percentage points higher than non-LLC residents, net other factors. Interestingly, additional analysis revealed that the effectiveness of these programs is concentrated among males (+4.7 percentage points) and that participation was somewhat less impactful for females (+1.3 percentage points). Of concern, however, is that male students were less likely to participate in LLCs.¹

+4.7%

Yet, male participants persisted at a rate 4.7 percentage points higher than male nonparticipants.

 We recommend expanding or creating living-learning communities, with an emphasis on programs for first-year male students. Given the numerous advantages of LLCs and their relatively low marginal costs for students, the benefits of LLCs outweigh the additional costs. For institutions, the reduction in attrition has substantial financial benefits through lower demands to recruit new students. Public institutions in states with performance-based funding formulas may use strategies like LLCs to improve degree completion rates.



***Students of Color Benefit from
Selecting Their Roommates***

Students of Color Benefit from Selecting Their Roommates

In the past decade, the rise of social media and online roommate-matching sites has changed how students find roommates. The proportion of incoming students choosing their roommates has increased. Lately, however, good intentions to promote diversity have led some institutions to require incoming students to have institutionally assigned roommates in the hope of increasing crosscultural interactions among their student body.

40%

40% of White first-year students chose their roommates.

30%

30% of multiracial students chose their roommates.

25%

Only about a quarter of Asian, Black, and Latinx students chose their roommates.



Students with roommates assigned by their institution did not interact with diverse others more often than those who chose their roommates.

Simultaneously, many students of color (Asian, Black, and multiracial) who picked their roommates [perceived a significantly and substantially more welcoming campus environment](#). A possible reason for these findings is that rooms occupied by students of the same race act as counterspaces that embrace the norms of their cultural communities.

However, our results point to another concern. Students of color chose their roommates much less often than White students. On average, 66% of students received their roommates through institution-led matching processes, but this was much higher for Asian (76%), Black (76%), and Latinx (74%) students (Fosnacht et al., 2020).

- 🌀 Allow students to choose their roommates and make this process more accessible for students of color.
- 🌀 Cultivate and enhance programs for students of color to help them make social connections early, particularly before enrollment.
- 🌀 Help students of color discover and create safe spaces within the residence halls and on campus in general.
- 🌀 When considering policy changes, be aware of and take precautions against unintended consequences for students of color.

Continuing the Conversation

While our findings and recommendations may not apply to all institutions, higher education executives may wish to consider the following when applying the findings to their institutions:

1

Why do first-year students leave your institution?

What can be done within your residential communities to reduce that number?

2

What opportunities do your sophomores have to live on campus?

How can your housing programs better market the benefits of the experience to them? What are the possibilities to create housing tailored for sophomores?

3

How can you strengthen academic and student-affairs collaborations to recruit students, promote core activities, and bolster the effects of your living-learning communities?

4

When implementing new policies, what steps do you take to ensure the policies do not have adverse impacts on historically marginalized students?

References

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Notes

1. We acknowledge the absence of findings for non-binary or gender-variant students. The persistence data for these populations were insufficient for reliable analysis. We are hopeful that future studies will address this deficit.



Presentations and scholarly papers supporting this report can be found at the Indiana University ScholarWorks Database collection: Campus Housing, Student Engagement, and Persistence: A Multi-Institutional Study

About NSSE



The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, pronounced “Nessie”) is a trusted and widely used instrument for assessing the quality of undergraduate education—providing institutions diagnostic, actionable information that fosters and catalyzes evidence-based improvement efforts. NSSE annually collects information at hundreds of four-year colleges and universities about first-year and senior students’ participation in programs and activities that institutions provide for their learning and personal development. The results provide an estimate of how undergraduates spend their time and what they gain from attending college.

Authors

Researchers at Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research:



Robert M. Gonyea, Ed.D.
Associate Director,
Research & Data

Robert M. Gonyea, Ed.D., is associate director of the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research where he coordinates research and reporting for the National Survey of Student Engagement and associated projects. Bob spent the early part of his career working in residence life, student activities, and leadership programs where he gained insights about positive student development and effective campus environments. His work has appeared in the *Higher Education Handbook for Theory and Research*, *Research in Higher Education*, *Journal of Higher Education*, *Journal of College Student Development*, and other higher education publications.



Kevin Fosnacht, Ph.D.
Associate Research Scientist

Kevin Fosnacht, Ph.D., is associate research scientist at the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research. At the center, Kevin primarily works on the National Survey of Student Engagement one of the largest surveys of undergraduates in North America. Dr. Foscnacht’s research focuses on identifying programs and practices that foster student success. His research has appeared in many journals including *The Journal of Higher Education*, *The Review of Higher Education*, and *Research in Higher Education*.



Kyle T. Fassett, Ph.D.
Project Associate

Kyle T. Fassett received a Ph.D. in Higher Education with a minor in Educational Psychology, Measurement, and Evaluation at Indiana University Bloomington in 2021. He is currently a postdoc with the Center for Innovative Pharmacy Education & Research and also serves on the editorial board for ACUHO-I’s *Journal of College and University Student Housing*. He previously worked in residence life and academic advising. Kyle’s research focuses on teaching and learning as well as queer collegians.



Polly A. Graham, Ph.D.
Project Associate

Polly A. Graham completed her Ph.D. in Higher Education and Student Affairs with a minor in Educational Philosophy in 2020. She is a lecturer at Indiana University’s Kelley School of Business, teaching an undergraduate intensive writing course.

Polly has experience as a Resident Director, Living-Learning Center Director, and Project Associate at the Center for Postsecondary Research. Her research interests include the on-campus experience and relational pedagogy.



This research and report was made possible by the ACUHO-I Education and Research Foundation, and all those who generously support it. The ACUHO-I Education and Research Foundation supports resources and programs that further the development of individuals involved in campus housing around the globe. Our primary goal is to be a good steward of financial resources to support the profession and its future, and to provide opportunities and access to resources for all people involved in college and university housing operations. Our vision is to ensure that every person has access to resources of the housing profession and is inspired to invest in its future.

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Thank You

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