



The Case for Campus Housing: Results from a National Study

**A Brief for Housing and
Residence Life Professionals**

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For the three million college students who live in campus housing, colleges and universities are working to ensure their facilities are safe and welcoming places of learning and success. Housing and residence life professionals are the frontline staff that promote meaningful curricular and co-curricular student experiences. Their work ensures students successfully navigate living away from their permanent homes.

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The Case for Campus Housing

Dear Housing and Residence Life Professionals,

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.

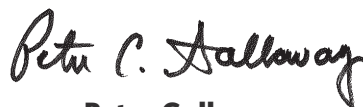
The results are undeniable. **Living on campus has a clear and profound impact on student persistence and engagement.** Regardless of important factors like race, parental education, and finances, students that live on campus are more likely to engage in academic activities relative to their off-campus 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



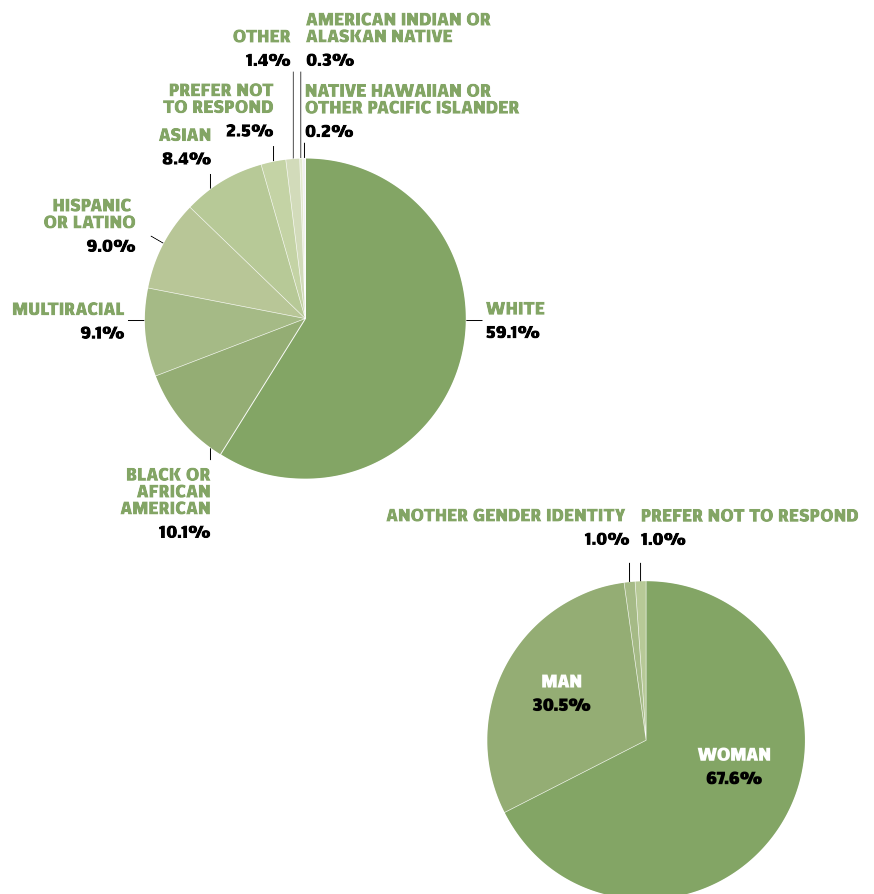
Peter Galloway
ACUHO-I President

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.



A purple-tinted photograph of a dorm room. In the foreground, a wooden bed frame is visible with a white sheet and two pillows. To the left, a window with a radiator below it looks out onto a building. A wall-mounted lamp is on the right wall. The text "Living On Campus Benefits Persistence" is overlaid in the center in a white, bold, italicized font, with a white horizontal line underneath it.

***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 reenrolled at equivalent rates to students who lived with their families. In other words, first-year students planning to live away from their families were better served by living in a campus residence hall than in accommodations off campus.

Our models show these differences are largely attributable to engagement in learning activities that took place in the residence. Some of these activities include the ability to attend classes, interact with faculty, meet with advisors, study and do projects with other students, use academic support services, and attend social, diversity-related, and wellness activities where they live.

Residence life professionals should redouble efforts to create engaging and supportive environments for first-year student success, such as social and community programs and activities involving faculty, advising, academic support services, diversity programs, class meetings, collaborative study, and health and wellness programs.

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

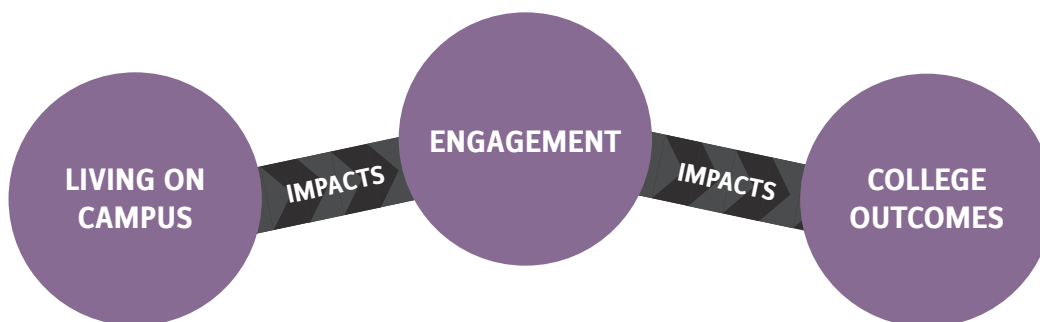
92% LIVING ON CAMPUS

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)

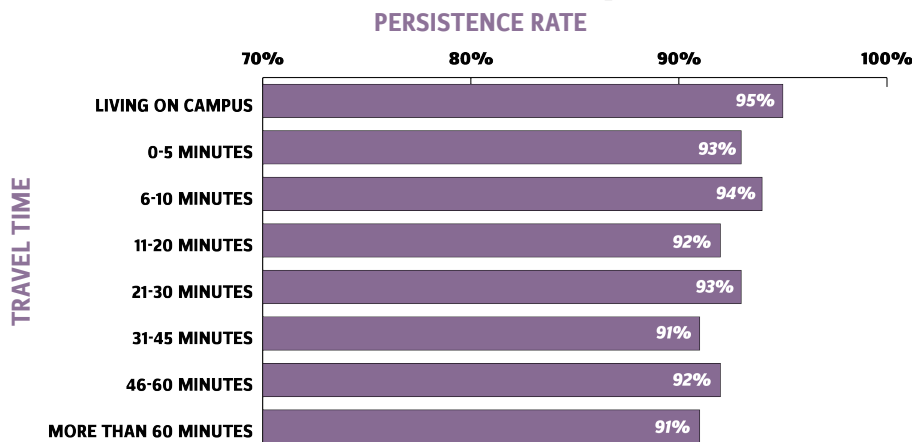
95% LIVING ON CAMPUS

92% LIVING OFF CAMPUS WITH FAMILY

93% LIVING OFF CAMPUS WITHOUT FAMILY

Resource allocation for staff and programs need not be as intensive for sophomore residents, but may focus more on their concerns such as gaining further independence, exploring majors and careers, or wider activities and leadership experiences on campus.

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





***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. In fact, LLC participation positively influences multiple types of engagement, including student-faculty interaction, collaborative learning, reflective and integrative learning, and a supportive environment.

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.

+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 male students (+4.7 percentage points) and that participation was somewhat less impactful for female students (+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.

🔗 Institutions should prioritize making LLCs available to as many students as possible, especially during the first year. We also strongly recommend that more communities be designed to encourage male participation.



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

Students of Color Benefit from Selecting Their Roommates

Housing professionals work to create supportive communities for their residents. That starts with helping new roommates learn how to communicate, share living space, find common interests, and respect differences. In the residence hall, many first-year students from majority groups experience diverse interactions for the first time, gaining cross-cultural awareness and learning. Simultaneously, microaggressions are common in social spaces like residence halls, creating difficulties for racial and ethnic minority students and a need for safe counterspaces that embrace cultural norms.


Asian, Black, and multiracial students who chose their roommates perceived a significantly and substantially more welcoming campus environment than their same-race peers for whom the institution assigned a roommate.

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 cross-cultural interactions among their student body. Our study suggests that institutions should [rethink](#) this emerging practice (Fosnacht et al., 2020). Students assigned roommates by the institution did not interact more often with diverse peers, indicating that such policies may be ineffective.

In fact, the policy may adversely influence outcomes for some students of color. Asian, Black, and multiracial students that selected their roommates [perceived higher-quality interactions and more supportive environments in general](#). 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. Students who choose their roommates, particularly who share their culture, may contribute to a greater sense of belonging.

However, our results point to another concern. Students of color chose their roommates much less often than White students, meaning they were less likely to realize the benefits noted above. 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.

Allowing students to choose their roommates may help ease some of the concerns faced when transitioning to college. Improving roommate matches could positively affect live-in staff who help manage these issues and relieve some students of having to move mid-semester.

 Housing and residence life professionals should develop pre-college initiatives to help students meet one another and aid in the roommate-matching process. Residence life should make it possible and more accessible for all students, and students of color in particular, to select their roommates. Leveraging social platforms may help, yet keep in mind that not all students have equal access to these resources.

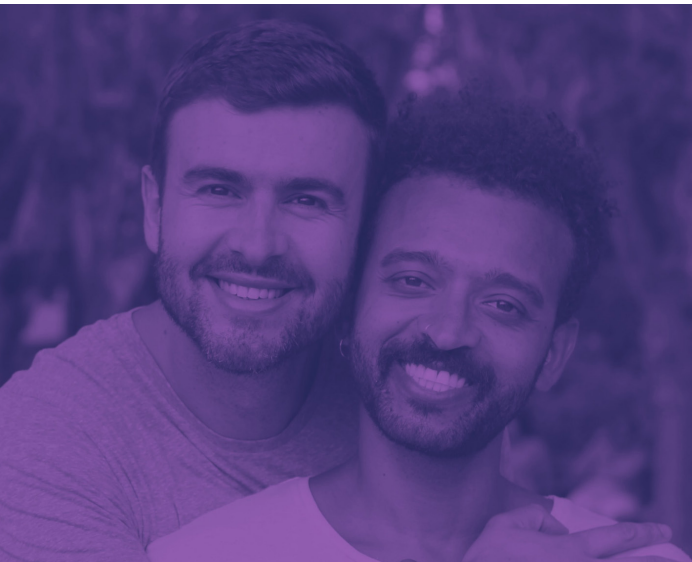
A photograph of two students sitting on a couch in a library or study area. They are both wearing face masks. The student on the left is a Black woman with her arms crossed, wearing a dark sweater over a white collared shirt and jeans. The student on the right is a white man wearing a white zip-up hoodie over a striped t-shirt and jeans. Between them is a small table with several books on it. The background shows a bookshelf and a whiteboard. The entire image has a purple color overlay.

***The Choice to Live On Campus
Differs by Background***

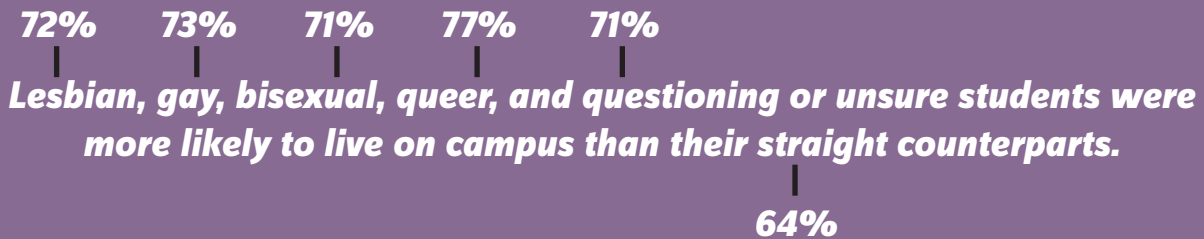
The Choice to Live On Campus Differs by Background

Students' [backgrounds influence their collegiate residential choices](#). For example, White and Black students choose to live on campus more often than their Asian or Latinx peers (Fassett et al., 2020). Women reside on campus more often than men and gender-variant students. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and questioning or unsure students (LGBTQ+) are more likely to live on campus than their straight counterparts. Students reporting mental health disorders were also more likely to live on campus.

These differences may be due to varying preferences, financial circumstances, and cultural norms. Factors may also include long-standing initiatives in residence halls to create a welcoming environment for students from minoritized and targeted groups. Still, it is worth asking why students from some groups are more likely to live off campus. What are the missed opportunities, their perceived risks and benefits, and the implications for both students and residential programs?



Understanding why students choose to live on or off campus may contribute to assessments to improve residence life programming and staff training. For example, do we need to better train resident assistants with referral and communication skills to help students with mental health concerns? Alternatively, residential units may wish to develop additional resources or adopt policies to improve the experiences of underserved groups.



Continuing the Conversation

While our findings and recommendations may not apply to all institutions, housing and residence life professionals may wish to consider the following questions when using these results in their work:

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 sophomores have to live on campus?

How can your housing programs better market the benefits of the experience to them?

3

How can your housing programs develop and strengthen living-learning communities to serve more students, to recruit males in particular, and to bolster their positive effects?

4

How do incoming students, and students of color in particular, find roommates at your institution?

What could be done to jump-start the process for students who commit to your institution early?

References

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Notes

1. We acknowledge the absence of findings related to 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.

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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.



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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*.



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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.
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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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