

Highlights

Residential life & Roommate Study

Peer Relations Study Group
University of Wisconsin-Madison

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In this issue:

- *Satisfaction & struggles with residence hall life*
- *What makes a good house fellow?*
- *Roommate relationships: Okay but not close*
- *About our study*

Students “Pretty Satisfied” in Residence Halls, But Some Struggle to Adjust

U.W.-Madison students, on average, claimed that they were “pretty satisfied” with residence hall life, but some found their living situation was a poor fit for their lifestyle, and diversity issues were a major concern for many students.

On average, students rated their residence hall experience at 3.9 on a 5-point scale. There were modest differences among halls, with Chadbourne and Barnard receiving the highest satisfaction ratings (4.3) and Kronshage the lowest (3.5). What contributed most to satisfaction?: opportunities to make friends and engage in social activities with hallmates.

Friends and activities matter. Students emphasized the ability to meet new people and develop a sense of community as key factors in their satisfaction with residence hall life. Other important factors were living close to friends, having a variety of activities and social events, and the support of house fellows.

Sometimes a poor fit . Of course, the residence halls did not work perfectly for everyone. Some felt “out of sync” with the predominant ambiance in their hall. “My learning community doesn’t consist of the most social people and it has been hard meeting new people,” one student lamented. “The extrovert in me has been going nuts with the lack of socializing.” Another student complained, “The people are always saying to me that I don’t know how to have fun because I don’t like to drink or party. It is also annoying when these same students hide my textbooks and notes when I am trying to study.”

Life in the Residence Halls

<https://education.wisc.edu/prsg>



Traits of a good house fellow

Students identified a number of qualities that they expected or admired in house fellows. Here are some of the traits mentioned most often:

- Be sincere
- Be friendly, outgoing, able to relate to all students
- Get to know students on a personal level
- Respect the students
- Be fair and reasonable when enforcing rules
- Be careful not to be too invasive
- Participate in activities and social events together with residents
- Be more available
- Give advice about adjusting to college life

Dealing with diversity. Several participants encountered isolation, loneliness, discrimination, or stereotyping related to their minority status. Some suggested that the University use residence halls as a base to promote cultural openness and inclusion. “Create activities and workshops that deal with diversity and acceptance of others,” one student suggested, “because a lot of students here have never been exposed to people of diverse backgrounds. Sometimes they act intolerable towards them.”

continued on p. 2

Residence Hall Satisfaction (from p. 1)

Housing staff members are expected to pay more attention to racism, hateful reaction, and micro-aggression in the halls. Students also requested that house fellows introduce more workshops or talks to help students embrace the diversity.

“The best thing about living in my residence hall is the social aspect. I love the closeness of my floor and the opportunity it provided me to meet many new friends.”

“What’s been most challenging? Discrimination, defeating stereotypes, living with those with limited cultural experience.”

An ongoing challenge. A major challenge for the University is creating a variety of social environments across residence halls to meet the different social interests of students. A recurring question is whether to expand efforts to match students with social environments in which they feel comfortable or to encourage students to stretch their boundaries a bit—to embrace the diversity of people and lifestyles that they encounter among housemates and venture into new activities.

About our study . . .

In the Spring of 2016 we invited students in 7 U.W.-Madison residence halls to fill out a confidential online survey. Specific halls were selected to represent the diversity of living environments and student populations living on campus. A total of 503 students successfully completed the survey; response rates varied between 15% and 20% in the selected residence halls.

Females (65%) outnumbered males (34%) or other-gender individuals in our sample. About one-eighth (13% of participants were from outside the U.S., representing 14 nations. Among the domestic students, approximately 80% identified as European American, 3% as African American, 4% as Hispanic, and 11% as Asian American. Close to one-fourth of the sample was comprised of roommate pairs. They are the subject of a separate report.

We are very grateful for the invaluable assistance provided by the U.W. housing staff, especially Scott, Seyforth, Fred Fotis, and house fellows in participating residence halls.

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Roommate Relationships: Okay but Not Close

On average, U.W.-Madison students were more satisfied with their residence hall experience than their roommate relationships. Despite being “pretty satisfied” with residence hall life, they were only “somewhat satisfied, on

average, with their roommate relationship. Most said they did not have a very close relationship with their roommate (2.4 on a scale from 1 to 5).

What affected satisfaction the most? Living with someone they knew before college (friend or acquaintance) and someone of their same ethnic/racial background. Other factors that were im-

portant included having similar living habits and sharing the same attitudes toward academics and partying.

Students who used Roommate Sync to locate a roommate were more satisfied with their relationship than those who were matched to someone at random. Neither group was as satisfied as those with roommates whom they knew before college. Some students suggested that the Housing Office extend the practice of matching roommates through a survey that all students fill out before being assigned housing. Others encouraged more information about potential roommate swaps so that adjustments could be made mid-semester or mid-year when the relationship is really fractured.

The Roommate Agreement was regarded as very helpful in fostering healthy roommate relationships. Students had several suggestions for improving its effectiveness:

- ✓ Offer guidelines about the things most important to agree on.
- ✓ Be more active in helping roommates reach agreement on key issues.
- ✓ Offer opportunities for roommate conferences throughout the year to revisit and rework the Roommate Agreement
- ✓ Extend the practice to sophomores and older groups.

