

Impact of Off-Campus Housing on Student Academic Performance and School Loyalty

A Custom Report Prepared for

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Part I: Executive Summary

The conclusion from this research project is that living off campus in purpose-built student housing appears to have little to no negative impact on students' academic engagement and performance (including grades), intent to graduate, level of participation in university clubs and activities, school loyalty or personal growth. What does affect these factors is a student's year in school, that is, the progression from being a freshman to being a senior. What small effect living off campus has on students relates to issues with shuttle bus travel to and from campus which, if inefficient, can increase the likelihood that students will skip class and can reduce their participation in on-campus activities, but not their overall engagement with university life.

Part II: Background

There is a belief among university housing officers¹ (and others) that research supports the notion that living on campus in university-provided and university-managed housing (resident halls or, in the student vernacular, "dorms") is more beneficial to students than living off campus.

Researchers attempting to understand the effect place-of-residence has on students have focused on four key measures of how place-of-residency affects:

- Academic engagement (class attendance, class preparation work, etc.) and academic performance as measured by Grade Point Average (GPA)
- Persistence (likelihood of graduating)
- Involvement (social engagement) with and positive feelings about their university
- Maturation (personal/social development including quality of interactions with fellow students, especially those from different backgrounds)

However, in a review of the relevant literature, it is striking that *no research actually supports the conclusion that living off campus in purpose-built student housing is detrimental to student performance* on any of the key measures listed above, that is, academic engagement, persistence, involvement, or maturation. Typically the specific studies cited as proving the superior outcomes from living on campus are studies that compare freshmen students living on campus with students who live at home and

¹ Real-life confirmation of this was received through a chance conversation (totally unrelated to this research project) with a couple whose daughter recently applied to the University of Michigan. The parents told this researcher that the admission counselor at Michigan told them that their daughter should plan on living on campus all four years because "students do do better if they live on campus."

commute to school. There is no mention in the literature of any studies involving students living in off-campus, purpose-built student housing.

Purpose of this Research: The objective of this NMHC-sponsored research project conducted by InnesWorks Consulting was to determine whether qualitative research in the form of focus groups with students could provide insights into what, if any, effect living off campus has on student engagement, persistence, social involvement and maturation.

The type of qualitative research used in this project yields significant insight into how students think about various aspects of their college experience. This research was not designed to contrast specific outcomes between students living on and off campus. In fact, such outcome data is impossible to obtain at schools—including those in this study—where the school provides dorm space only for first-year students. What this research does accomplish is to explore how students understand what effect living off campus in purpose-built student housing has had on their academic and social engagement, persistence and maturation. This exploration, rather than any attempt to refute or discredit other research, was the goal of this project.

Focus group discussions, even with a trained moderator, can take unexpected directions so more topics were covered than what was laid out in the Discussion Guide and some topics yielded unexpected results. Those interested will find the details contained in the session summaries (Appendix B) revealing.

Part III: Methodology

Eighteen focus groups of two hours each were conducted involving a total of 165 students at four large state universities. Those schools were Arizona State University (Tempe), University of Texas (Austin), University of Florida (Gainesville); and University of Missouri (Columbia). There were six focus groups held at University of Florida and four at each of the other schools. Participants were screened in advance of each session and only students who lived in a dorm freshman year and currently were living in purpose-built student housing were eligible to participate. At each university, there was one group of sophomores, two groups of juniors and one of seniors. At the University of Florida, we were able to correct for the under-registration of seniors at the other three schools by adding two additional groups of seniors. Groups ranged in size from seven to 13. Participants received a stipend of \$75. The following table shows the distribution of participants by school and by year.

	Sophomores	Juniors	Seniors	Total
ASU	7	14	6	27
UT	7	17	8	32
UF	10	22	29	61
Mizzou	9	25	11	45
Total	33	78	54	165

- At ASU, the focus group was held at 922 Place on March 25 and 26. The researcher would like to thank Debbie Elliott of American Campus Communities and Michael Polzin, the on-site manager, for their cooperation and assistance in recruiting students and hosting. Most of the students lived at 922 Place, located directly across the street from the edge of ASU's campus.
- The focus groups at UT were held April 1 and 2 at Callaway House, also an American Campus Community. Debbie Elliott and Jacob Musgrove, the on-site manager, were responsible for facilitating the focus groups by helping with recruitment and making a suitable venue available. Callaway House is within two blocks of campus; a slim majority of students attending the UT focus groups lived at Callaway House.
 - At both ASU and UT, some students lived far enough from campus to necessitate either having a car or depending on shuttles to travel back and forth from campus to either apartment complex.
- At UF, the Collier Companies made their corporate office available for the six focus groups held April 8 and 9. Those attending lived at various Collier properties, some within walking distance of campus, but most far enough that they had to rely on shuttles, cars or bikes to travel back and forth. Andy Hogshead of Collier and many members of the corporate staff provided invaluable assistance in hosting the groups. Particular thanks to Allyson Adams, Ashley Griffith, Betsy Guynn, and Dianna Miller.
- The Mizzou focus groups (April 15 and 16) owe their success to the recruitment efforts spearheaded by Michael Orsak of Campus Advantage who offered The Domain as a possible venue for the focus groups and who, through the Domain's staff, helped with recruitment. Lack of a suitable private space meant that the Mizzou focus groups could not be held at The Domain; instead they were held on campus at the student union (April 15) and the Broadway Hotel (April 16). A majority of students attending those groups lived at The Domain, which is far enough from campus that students must depend on the complex's shuttle or private autos to travel back and forth.

Note: It is important to keep in mind that all the focus groups were held near the end of the academic year. That means that the students' perspectives were those of students finishing, not starting, their class years. Sophomores were about to become juniors and had already declared their majors; juniors set to become seniors; and seniors about to graduate.

Caution: While the insights gleaned from talking with students are useful, they may or may not represent the opinions of all undergraduates, especially those at small, private liberal arts schools. That said, common themes and trends did emerge among students at the four universities and between the opinions of sophomores, juniors and seniors.

Part IV: Overview of Findings

The indications from the research are that living off campus in purpose-built student housing does not affect student engagement, academic performance or school loyalty. The factor that does have the strongest effect on student social and academic engagement is the student's year in school. Indications are that, if students had remained living on campus as upper classmen, their social and academic engagement with their universities would have exhibited the same pattern that was revealed during the focus group discussions because both the type and strength of engagement are determined not by where students happen to reside but by their year in school. The one exception is that living off campus tends to increase the likelihood that students will skip class *if* the class is a large lecture format or not directly connected to their declared major field of study.

For most students interviewed, the typical pattern for academic and social engagement can be described as follows:

Freshman Year: All of the students participating lived in a residence hall as freshmen. Their focus freshman year was social, not academic. Typically, their first group of friends was formed by meeting others who lived in their dorm, suitemates or those living on their floor. The group joined clubs and participated in university-sponsored events, not so much because these organization and activities held intrinsic interest but because they offered opportunities to meet people and make new friends. Often, their dorm's Resident Assistant strongly encouraged—or even forced—joining clubs to promote socialization. Typically, groups of friends formed freshman year became roommates when students moved off campus sophomore year.

Academic involvement played second fiddle to social engagement. Very few students reported any type of formal or casual contact with their instructors. The reasons given for this were:

- The majority of freshman classes are taken to satisfy the university's core requirements. The format for required core classes is a lecture with several hundred students attending, making it difficult for students to feel engaged with either the class or the instructor.
- Because of class size, instructors often discouraged in-person contact, shunting students off to their Teaching Assistants.
- Freshmen tend to feel intimidated by their instructors.
- As yet, there is no understanding of how useful it can be to develop a personal relationship with one's instructors.
- For today's students, email is considered a viable "contact" with instructors. Email exchanges tend to mitigate the need for in-person contact.

Sophomore Year: Typically, students declare their majors before the end of their sophomore year. They are taking a mix of large lecture format core courses and smaller classes related to their declared or soon-to-be-declared major. They are now aware of the

many university-offered online resources. These resources include the ability to take courses completely online or access notes or study aids for popular, required courses. They know which courses they can skip, either covering the missed material by reading the text book or availing themselves of various online resources. There is very little in-person engagement with professors who teach large lecture format classes. However, students have a different attitude towards their smaller classes. In a smaller class, one's presence or absence is easily noted by the instructor. The instructor gets to know students by name and, especially if the class is related to one's declared major, encourages in-person contact during office hours. There is also a dawning recognition that a personal relationship with one's professors can be very useful. Students believe that once a professor gets to know a student, there is more leeway when project deadlines are missed; grading, which is more subjective in smaller classes, can tip in the student's favor; and references for internships and jobs are both easier to obtain and more personalized.

During sophomore year, a change begins in the way students relate to the university's activities and events, which accelerates junior and senior years. That process involved giving up membership in the many social clubs they joined as freshmen in favor of focusing on those clubs and organization either related to some strong personal interest, such as playing a particular intramural sport, or to one's anticipated (or actual) major. However, though the type of organization may change, there appears to be the same or greater level of involvement. Note that this change in engagement is driven by year in school, rather than by where a student lives.

Junior Year: Junior year classes are almost all small classes relevant to one's declared major. Students are very focused on building personal relationship with their professors, driven not by intellectual curiosity but by an almost Machiavellian evaluation of the linkage between the quality of relationship and the anticipated benefits—leeway when project deadlines are missed, better grades and stronger recommendations. “If you don't make the effort to develop a personal relationship with your key professors, you're messing up your future, not just your present,” as one student remarked. However, students report almost no *informal* interaction with professors, that is interaction outside the classroom or a professor's office hours. Students believe that while most professors who teach smaller, major-related courses encourage in-person exchanges with their students, there is little to no desire for an informal academic or personal *social* relationship. Juniors continue the process begun in their sophomore year of reducing the number of clubs and activities to focus on those connected to their major or those relevant to some strong personal interest. As one student put it: “I'm weeding out clubs and activities to focus on those that help me, are important to me; it's like changing from a bee to a wasp.”

Senior Year: Seniors are focused on post-graduation employment or admission to graduate or professional schools. They use their carefully built relationships with their professors to garner the best possible recommendations, often approaching this task with studied concentration and purposefulness, a process one student aptly referred to as the “politics of managing one's professors.” While there is a certain amount of cynicism and manipulation involved, both juniors and seniors understand that the foundation for the

“politics” of building a strong student-professor relationship is solid academic achievement—being prepared for class, regular class attendance, doing well on exams, papers and group projects, carrying a high GPA, demonstrating an interest in one’s major field of study through conversations with professors and participation in clubs and organizations related to one’s major field of study (for which major-area professors are often advisors). Seniors who are not continuing their studies put much trust in their school’s alumni network to provide advice and often job offers. Variations of “Mizzou hires Mizzou” were heard at all four campuses. The process of using the alumni network to help place graduates was an official university function at all four universities.

Part V: Key Topics

Maturation/Diversity

Dorms are often presented as encouraging acceptance of diversity and many students did feel they had benefited from living in close proximity to a diverse group of students. However, most students felt that their dorms were not particularly diverse. Even students who said they had benefitted from contact with students from different backgrounds agreed with those who felt they came to the university believing that accepting others was a norm, not something they had to struggle to obtain.

What the dorms do is to expose students on an experiential level to those from different backgrounds. Students from homogeneous suburban enclaves or small towns said they had had very little opportunity to actually engage with others from different backgrounds until coming to college. Dorm living gave those students the opportunity to actually, in one student’s words, “rub shoulders” with students from different backgrounds.

Many students, especially those from large metropolitan communities (Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami) felt that the dorms, even the school, were less diverse and accepting than their high schools had been.

Those universities that assign incoming students to dorms based on certain interests (for example, assigning all foreign or pre-nursing students to the same dorm) were criticized for *discouraging* the mixing of students, leading students to observe that the campus clubs and organizations they joined were more diverse than their dorms.

The following comment could have come from any of the other three schools: “There’s no real diversity here at Mizzou as we commonly think about it. When kids here talk about diversity, they’re talking about co-ed dorms being an eye-opening experience. It’s hard to get them to talk about whether they’re feeling more comfortable with people who are truly different, unless they’re thinking about Greeks as being different from non-Greeks. That’s our big ‘diversity’ issue.”

Often, the diversity issue students most often wanted to discuss because they face it on a daily basis either as a subterranean undercurrent or as outright hostility was between

those students involved in the Greek fraternity and sorority systems and independents. Groups of friends form freshman year, chosen mostly from dorm mates. The group attends events together, joins clubs together, often eats and studies together. Then some members of the group join fraternities or sororities. They are pulled into a different social orbit. They now spend time with their Greek brothers and sisters. Their former friends feel abandoned, forsaken, snubbed for no reason, hurt and looked down on because they did not “go Greek.” The Greeks complain that non-Greeks stereotype them as non-intellectual party goers. Sorority girls complain they are tarred with a reputation for being interested only in meeting a rich (future) husband.

When a dorm is a true “melting pot,” students do come to appreciate the *experience* of living with a diverse population. However, only a few students volunteered that dorm living changed their *attitudes* about accepting those from different backgrounds because, they said, their attitudes were already accepting.

Dorm experience was sometimes negative for some students. A few students related instances of extreme prejudice that had either happened to them or become part of the school’s folklore. Most of those stories revolved around room- or floor-mates from Christian fundamentalist backgrounds being unwilling or unable to accept students because of their atheist, non-Christian or even liberal Christian worldviews. But there were also stories of students not accepting others because of the color of their skin, their sexual preference or country of birth. These prejudiced and non-accepting students apparently found no positive value in coming into close contact with students whose values did not match their own.

When students did discuss diversity issues other than Greek versus non-Greek, they tended to talk about learning to accept different ways of *behaving*—for example, learning to accept different standard of cleanliness. As only children used to having their own room, some struggled with sharing a very small living space. As one student observed: “What these people mean by ‘diversity,’ isn’t what most people mean by it.”

In summary, students do see the dorm as a step in their own maturation process. But they view it as an intermediate half-step between living at home and apartment living. Apartment life contributes far more to their sense of being adults. Paying rent and utility bills, buying and cooking food are among the activities they feel prepare them for life after graduation far more than does living in a dorm. Most students said that the dorm, when it is a true melting pot, enriches their experience but seldom changes their attitude about accepting others.

Conclusion: There is no evidence that students are less accepting of those from different backgrounds because they live in purpose-built housing.

Connection with University

Simply put, freshmen feel a strong *social* connection to the university; juniors and seniors feel a strong *professional* connection. Sophomores are migrating from a social to a professional connection and, therefore, tend to feel somewhat less connected to the university. There was no indication that living off campus works against having a strong attachment for—even love of—one’s university. Students at these four schools appreciate the value of what they’re getting in return for the time and money invested, though “value” is typically defined not as intellectual enrichment but better post-graduate opportunities and the friendships they’ve formed while at school.

Conclusion: While the *type* of engagement changes as students advance and move off campus, there is no evidence that living off campus reduces students’ connection with their universities.

Persistence

Students expressed a strong commitment to graduating regardless of year in school. The primary reason was their fear that, without a diploma, they were likely to end up working in dead-end, minimum wage jobs and living back in their parents’ homes. Most expressed variations of “not graduating is not an option that’s even on the table.” Reasons given for their intense commitment to graduating tended to cluster around the following concepts:

- Diplomas are a necessary prerequisite for high-paying, satisfying jobs or acceptance into professional or graduate schools
- Parental expectations are high and students do not want to disappoint parents
- Students do not want to “waste” all the time and money invested by not getting a diploma

Conclusion: There is no evidence that living in off-campus, purpose-built student housing negatively affects students’ commitment to graduating.

Dorm Living:

Students regard dorm living as a halfway house between living in their parents’ home and having their own homes. They appreciate that dorm living offers the opportunity to make friends, and they appreciate the dorm’s location on campus and, therefore, its convenience to classes and activities. Some found their dorms conducive to studying; however, most thought the study areas were too social for studying. Once students adjust to college life, the dorms become increasingly unattractive and oppressive.

The primary motivators for wanting to move off campus include:

- Not sharing a room
- Having one’s own bathroom
- Less restrictive house rules; no RA
- Ability to eat healthier and whenever one wants by buying and cooking one’s own food (instead of being on the university meal plan). Note that most students

consider renting an apartment and buying food to be less expensive than university room and board.

Socialization

As mentioned, socialization freshman year revolves around the dorms, the clubs and organizations they join and the events on campus. Some sophomores moving off campus can feel disconnected, isolated from campus, especially if their property doesn't hold frequent social events. However, gradually students shift their socialization patterns such that fraternity and sorority houses, clubs, bars and other off-campus locations become the primary venues for socializing with friends. They clearly consider such socialization part of their university experience. The idea that, for most students, university social activities include all social activity, regardless of whether it is an official university function or not, was unexpected. It means that *when students think about their non-academic engagement with their university, they are thinking not just about university-sponsored activities but their total social life, on and off campus*. As a result, most students say they do not feel socially disengaged from their university because they live off campus—even if they are less involved with on-campus activities—because they are including *all* forms of social contact when making such an evaluation.

Conclusion: This study found that students living in purpose-built student housing off campus continue to feel socially connected to their universities, largely because when evaluating their social engagement students make no distinction between university-sponsored activities and those self-initiated social activities that take place off campus.

Travel Factors

When selecting an off-campus apartment community, students have a three-way decision matrix: location, price and amenities. The weight given each factor depends on the student's personality and preferences and his or her economic situation. For some, proximity to campus outweighs any other factor. For others, price is the dominate factor. Most students want a community as close as possible to campus within their price range. It's tempting to conclude that the closer a student lives to campus, the less distance factors into decisions such as behavior during breaks in class schedule or attending events and organizational meetings on campus. Such a conclusion would be wrong. There are transportation barriers that come into play when a student lives so far off campus that travel back and forth requires depending on a property-owned shuttle, city or university bus or personal car. But *there is also a very real psychological barrier that separates on and off campus*. Even most students living literally across the street or within a few blocks walking distance from school say that, once home, they are reluctant to leave. Their apartments are not just places to live; they are "home." As such, they are refuges from campus and, once comfortable within their refuges, they are hesitant to leave. For these students the psychological barrier means that, once home, even a short walk to campus can make campus feel "too far" away to easily return.²

² Students mentioned this concept during the 2007 student housing research project involving focus groups with students at 10 major universities across the country. To quote from that study: "Students see their

Students who must rely on bus service to travel from home to campus face an additional, very practical, barrier. The trip to campus includes not only the time spent riding the bus but the time needed to walk to the bus stop, wait for the bus and then walk from the bus drop-off location to wherever they need to be on campus. Door-to-door elapsed time can easily be 60 to 90 minutes for a trip that would take half the time by car. Bus service is also often undependable; mechanical breakdowns and weather frequently cause schedule delays. Buses are often overcrowded. Bus service is often inconvenient with no or partial weekend service and a schedule that ends in the early evening when most organizations hold their meetings on campus thereby stranding a student who wishes to participate. Walking back from campus, especially at night, is not always an option, particularly for co-eds, because of “sketchy” areas between campus and the property. Offering more reliable transportation (longer operating hours, more frequent service, etc.) would definitely increase a property’s appeal.

Some combination of the psychological and operational travel barriers determine:

- How students schedule their classes. Students say their ideal schedule is one that minimizes trips to campus by having all classes the same day and no gap of more than an hour between classes.
- How likely students are to go home if there’s a break in their schedule. The longer the break, the more likely a student is to go home. Once home, students are more apt to decide to skip the second class. Skipping is more likely if the second class is a large lecture or one outside a student’s major.

As illustrated in the following quotes, students, especially juniors and seniors, will make whatever effort is necessary to travel back to campus if the class following a long break is related to their major.

- “We know all our professors and they know us by name. It’s obvious if we miss class. Even though you live off campus, you have to make the effort to go to class.”
- “You just learn to plan to go whenever it’s convenient for the professor.”

The general feeling was that establishing a relationship with one’s professors was so important that it had first priority, no matter how inconvenient. To paraphrase one student: The “transportation hurdle” is lower for making face time, higher for attending class. In other words, the transportation issue is more likely to keep a student from attending classes than from developing a personal relationship with her professors.

Some students find satisfaction in dealing with the logistics of travel to and from campus, stating that it helps develop both self-discipline and time management skills.

Many students miss the on-campus convenience of their dorms and being “in the middle of everything.” However, they point out that while it was easier to get to class and back

complex as a refuge. When they enter the front gate, they’ve entered another world, a world that is set apart from the stresses of academia.” *Student Housing, 2007*, p. 6. NMHC White Paper.

to their dorm rooms during even short breaks in their schedule, napping, hanging with friends or playing video games took precedence over studying. Upperclassmen are more likely to study if they go home when there's a gap in their schedule but not likely to study if they stay on campus during a short (60 minutes or less) schedule break.

Conclusion: There is, then, evidence that the psychological and real travel barriers that come with living off campus can negatively affect class attendance and participation in certain types of on-campus university events.

Study Habits

Looking back on their freshman selves, most students admitted that they didn't have good study habits. Many complained that their high schools did not prepare them adequately for how to study in college. Cramming and pulling all-nighters prior to exams were the norm, not keeping up with course work through regular study. Students who did want to study found it difficult, if not impossible, to study in the dorms.

Roommate issues (what one student aptly called "roommate interference") sometimes made scheduling room quiet times difficult, and the dorm's study areas tended to be crowded, noisy and more given to social exchanges than quiet studying. The main library was not always a good option because as one student said "Don't assume the library means studying. It's a self-delusion. You want to feel good about your work habits, so you say you're going to the library to study. But do you? More students are on Facebook or are talking loud about their lives, not working or studying."

In addition, for freshmen, graduation tended to be an event somewhere over the far horizon. Graduation—and what came after graduation—might become important later but for freshmen didn't translate into a need to study hard and get good grades.

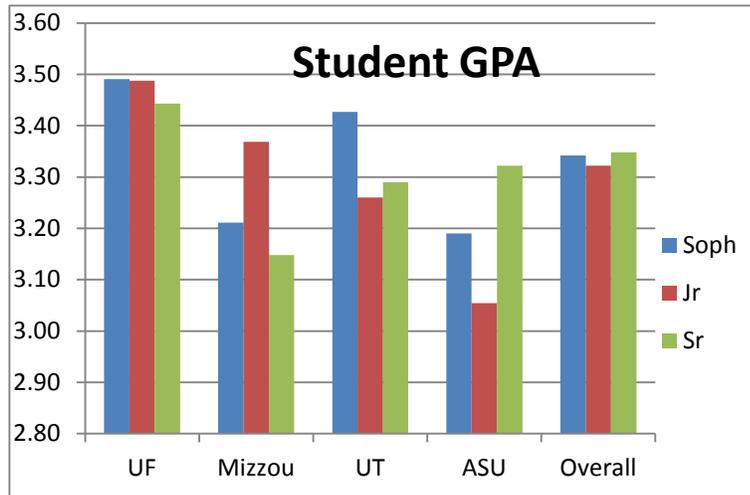
Moving off campus actually seems to be conducive to better study habits, though this may be more a function of upperclassmen taking smaller classes for which cramming is not a suitable study strategy. Living in purpose-built student housing opens additional study venues—one's own room, the apartment common area, the property's study room and, in certain geographical areas, the outdoors, especially poolside.

Students also gradually become familiar enough with their campus to find other areas—especially the smaller specialty libraries—that are quieter and more conducive to studying than the main library.

Conclusion: There is no evidence that the personal freedom that accompanies moving off-campus into purpose-built student housing leads to less studying, poorer study habits, or lower grade point averages. Quite the reverse, but due not to place-of-residence but to upper division classes being smaller, harder, and graded on different principles than the large-lecture format required core classes which typically dominate freshman (and to a lesser extent) sophomore years.

Grade Point Average (GPA)

Students were asked to either bring a recent grade report to their focus group or self-report their GPA. All four schools use a 4.0 system. Below is a chart showing that the focus group attendees were students doing well in school; and, therefore, their opinions cannot be discounted as coming from poorly performing, disaffected students.



Contact with Professors

Freshman year students do not have any real contact with their professors. After freshman year, less than 5 percent of students reported *any* type of one-on-one contact with their professors or teaching assistants outside of the classroom or office hours. Only two of those contacts had an intellectual dimension, one because a pre-nursing student worked alongside some of her instructors in the university's hospital and one who worked on a special film project with one of her professors. In all other cases, the contact was accidental and casual, of the "Hi, how are you?" variety. Most students thought it would be "weird" (their word) if a professor wanted to have dinner or invited you to her house. No one had had the experience of bumping into a professor on campus and having a sustained intellectual chat, nor did they think it likely such an event could happen.

Conclusion: Students living off campus in purpose-built student housing have more frequent and more meaningful contact with their professors than they did as freshmen; however, this is attributable to their year in school, not to where they live.

Value/Loyalty to and Enthusiasm for Their School

When asked to consider whether the social and academic benefits they were getting were worth all the time and money they were investing in attending their university, 98 percent of students agreed that they were getting a superior rate of return for their investments of time and money. They expressed extremely high degrees of satisfaction with their schools and pride in being a future graduate. They also recognized how privileged they

were to be attending highly ranked schools. These students had nothing but praise for the quality of their institution, what a degree would make possible in the way of increasing their future earning power and the friends they had made. There was absolutely no evidence that living off campus somehow damped their enthusiasm for their schools or their commitment to graduating.

The one common area of complaint concerned the ridiculously high cost of higher education in the United States. Moreover, the very few students who expressed dissatisfaction with their universities did so because they felt “lost” among so many students, had not yet found their major or were disappointed that they weren’t more intellectually challenged.

Conclusion: Living off campus in purpose-built student housing does not have a negative effect on students’ loyalty to or appreciation of their schools.

Part VI: Noted Differences

Among Schools

Because the schools included in the study were in many ways very similar (large, public, state schools), only superficial differences emerged among the four universities. For example, at those schools with a strong Greek system, the primary diversity issue was between Greeks and non-Greeks. ASU students recognized and took pride in their school’s reputation as a party school. UT students celebrated their school’s academic reputation. But there were no meaningful differences in what students had to say about the basic issues of engagement, maturation, social involvement and persistence.

Among Sophomores, Juniors and Seniors

Based on what was said by the students participating in this study, students make rational decisions dictated by what *they* understand to be the purpose of graduating from college—namely, a well-paying, interesting job or admission to graduate or professional school. Solid recommendations from key professors ease the way. Therefore, much time and energy is invested in developing a solid relationship with key professors. A student’s typical personal trajectory, as outlined by the students interviewed during this study, moves from a somewhat frenzied, chaotic socialization freshman year towards a very rational, focused junior year (and especially senior year) on doing whatever is necessary to cultivate a solid relationship with their key professors. Students feel that those who cannot make this transition are no longer at university.

Between Sexes

There were no important differences on key issues between men and women.

Appendix A: NMHC Student Focus Groups on the Effects of Living Off- Campus Discussion Guide

Moderator Sets Scene: Hi, and thank you for coming. My name is Bruce Innes. I'm a researcher who's been hired by the National Multifamily Housing Council, or NMHC, to help them better understand how where students live affects the key aspects of their college experience. The reason you're so important to them is that we're trying to determine to what extent living off-campus affects grades and how students feel about their school. So that's what I'm going to ask you about today. I'm going to ask you to think back to when you lived in the dorm and then compare how you feel about certain aspects of college life now versus when you lived on campus. Any questions on that?

Before we start, there is only one ground rule—don't interrupt or have side conversations. It's not only rude, but side conversations don't get into my notes so you may share some brilliant observation with a neighbor, but it's lost forever! You don't have to put your hand up; this isn't class. Just wait until whoever is speaking finishes to make your contribution to the group. And that's an important point, too. This is a *group* discussion. You don't have to always address me as the moderator. Talk to each other. Bounce ideas and feelings off each other.

The rest rooms are [state location]. And please don't be shy about getting up to help yourselves to something to eat or drink.

I'm going to tape this session so I have something to fall back on when I get to my office and start transcribing the notes. Rest assured that any comments I do quote in my report to NMHC about our session will be unattributed, anonymous.

Okay. Any questions? Good. Then let's go around the table and introduce ourselves to each other—name, year in school, major and maybe where you're living now.

Section 1: Involvement/Participation in Academic Life

So, now that we are sort of acquaintances, let me start by asking you to give me your feedback on how involved you feel with the academic life that goes on at your university. Let's start with how you interact with your professors, which includes anyone who teaches a class or leads a section. So talk to me about:

- How often do you get to interact with your professors outside the classroom?
 - Is this different than when you lived in a dorm?
 - If so, why?
- Have any of you ever been invited to a professor's home?
 - If so, can you tell us about it?
- Have any of you ever had an impromptu conversation with a professor outside the classroom, like while sitting on a bench on campus or a table in the Union?
- Do you take your professors up on their offer to meet with you during their office hours?

- If so, how frequently?
- Is this more or less than when you were a freshman?
- Are there any other ways you've interacted academically or socially with a professor?
- Did you interact with your professors to a greater or lesser degree when you lived in the dorm?

Now let's talk about attending class and things like that.

- Where and how do you study?
- How regularly do you go to class?
 - Is this different than when you were a freshman?
 - If so why?
- How prepared do you feel when you do go to class?
 - Is this different than when you were a freshman?
 - If so why?
- How many hours a week do you study?
 - Is that different from when you were a freshman?
 - If so, how?
 - Where do you study?
 - In your room?
 - In your apartment's common space?
 - In your apartment complex's study room?
 - In the library or Union.
 - Anywhere else?
 - Is where you study different today than when you were a freshman?
- What if you're on campus and have a couple hours to kill before your next class or club or whatever, what do you do?
 - What, if anything, would you have done differently when you were a freshman living in a dorm?

Section 2: Involvement/Participation in Extra-Curricular Activities/Events

Great input so far! Now share how engaged you feel with the extra-curricular activities and events here at [name of school]. By this I mean, do you participate in or go to intramural sports, plays, concerts, clubs—anything that goes on at the university which isn't related to academics. And I'm very curious as to whether your year in school affects this type of engagement. So talk about this.

- How many hours a week do you think you spend on campus?
- Are you on a team?
- A member of a club or group or activity?
- Do you go to see things at the university—art shows, performances, sporting events.
- How about major events like Homecoming?
- And do you do more or fewer of those things now than in prior years?

- Do you feel that where you live prevents you from enjoying the full scope of what the university has to offer in the way of extracurricular activities that appeal to you?

Section 3: Maturation (Person/social growth, experience with kids from non-similar backgrounds, comfortable with oneself, etc.)

One feature of dorm living that is often cited as beneficial is how it throws together young people from every conceivable background—religious, cultural, sexual orientation, country of origin, race, affluence—and perhaps a score more. So, tell me about when you move off campus.

- What was it about your current roommates that led you to live together?
 - How similar would you say your backgrounds are?
- Is your complex as diverse as the typical dorm—assuming that the typical dorm is in fact diverse.
- Do you think your experiences here at [name of school] have had an impact on how tolerant you are of others?
 - How so?
 - Was this mostly as a freshman?

Section 4: Degree to Which Students Feel Positive about Their University Experience

Now let's explore your feelings about [name of school].

- How do you feel about the overall experience you personally are having here at [name of school]?
 - Has this feeling changed any since you were a freshman?
 - In what way?
- Do you think where you live has any bearing on how you feel about your school experience?
- What do you think you'll remember most about your school years 20 years from now?
 - Why do you say that?

Section 5: Intent to Graduate (“Persistence”)

Academic folks who write articles about the influence of residence hall living on students use the term “persistence,” by which they mean how many entering freshmen graduate. To oversimplify somewhat, when they're doing their research, they look at where graduating students lived. If 95% of students living in dorms graduate versus 70% of students who don't live in dorms, then (all else being equal) the conclusion is that if you live in a dorm, you're more likely to stick with it and earn that degree.

You haven't graduated yet so all I can ask you about is your intent.

- I assume you all at least intend to graduate.....
 - But you may have differences when it comes to how strongly you feel about earning a degree.
 - Is that an accurate statement?
 - So, do you think where you live or have lived made any difference in how strongly you feel about graduating?

Section 6: On or Off Campus

You've been a great group. So let's wrap it up with a couple of overview questions. First, give me your feedback on this idea—how big is “campus”? Like I understand that technically you're not living “on-campus” because you're not living on university-owner property. But in your head, do you feel like you live on or off campus?

- How would you define
 - On-campus?
 - Off-campus?
- What are the major differences between living on and off campus (if haven't come up in discussing other questions).
- Do you feel alienated from your university and its goings-on because you live where you do?
 - Is this different than when you were a freshman and lived in the dorm?

Now let me ask you how you use the core campus:

- How many hours a week do you spend on campus?
- How important was housing in your decision to attend [name of school]?
- If the University offered the option of living in a dorm to upperclassmen, how likely would you to be live in one?
 - Why?
- If you had to live in a dorm all four years of school, would that have affected your even considering [name of school]?
- Is where you live convenient to school?
 - Is “convenience” one of the positives about dorm living?

Any thoughts on the following?

- How did moving off campus affect your:
 - Grades
 - Academic performance
 - Enthusiasm for your university?
 - Relations with your professors?
- Has living off campus affected how likely you are to:
 - Attend your classes?
 - On-campus events?
- If your complex offered informal lectures of general interest by professors, how likely would you be to attend?
 - How about if food—as in meal-level—was served?
- If you knew prior to coming to [name of school] that the school required all students to live in its dorms, what would your reaction have been?
- Do you have friends who are renting in a private house?
 - Do you think all the things we've talked about as far as on-, off-campus living applies equally to them?
 - Do you see any differences because of where they live?

Section 7: Wrap

Thanks. You've been great. Now come up and sign for your incentives. It's been a real pleasure.

Appendix B: Student Focus Groups Session Summaries

Arizona State University
Sophomores
7 Students, April 25

Academic Engagement

Most students reported no meaningful meetings with their professors freshman year, changing to more frequent interactions now that they're sophomores. The most frequent reason for not seeking out professors was in some way feeling intimidated. "It's hard to talk to them," said one student. Some tied the frequency of their seeking out professors to the difficulty of the class; the more difficult, the more they felt personal interaction was important. Two thought their frequency of interaction was "about the same" as when they were freshmen, and that was very little and concerned routine matters like getting permission to take the course online. All the students felt email counted as a valid interaction and, in fact, was the most common form of interaction.

Asked if they ever met their professors or TAs off campus, two students said that they had, in the Union, in bars or at house parties. These students thought "the meeting could go either way. You ignore each other or not. If it's a house party and there's under-age drinking going on, the professor has to leave. If I see one in a bar, I go up and say 'Hi, how are you?' and leave it up to them to take it from there." One film major said she had spent 13 hours working on a film with one of her professors and "found out how smart he was." Since that experience, she has taken advantage of office hours to further the relationship.

There was no indication that living off campus hindered getting to know one's professors. If anything, there was more interaction than in freshman year, but it was because these students were now sophomores. Where they lived had no effect.

Study Habits: The social nature of the library made it an unpopular place to study unless it seemed quieter than the extremely social dorm study areas or students made their way to the higher floors, the library tending to become quieter the higher the floor. Several students had found various quiet places around campus, including vacant classrooms, which had become their favorite study venues. One of the most popular study areas was "any place outside," including the property's pool deck. These students also commented that they needed to study more now than as freshman because their classes were harder.

Skipping Class: Whether or not these students skip class depends on the class, not where they live. The less engaging the class, the more likely students are to skip. Large lectures are particularly skip worthy because "the online study guide is more important than

attending the lecture.” Students felt more motivated to attend classes pertaining to their major. A few said they make every effort to attend all their classes and feel bad if they skip; one emails her professors if she’s going to be absent for any reason.

Preparedness: Most students felt adequately prepared when they did attend class; but they felt that hadn’t changed significantly since they were freshmen. Rather than tie it to whether they lived on or off campus, they tied it to personality type. “If you’re the type who is always prepared, then you’re going to be prepared no matter where you live and vice versa.”

Break in Schedule Behavior: Despite how close to campus most of the students lived, only a few said they would walk back to their apartments during a two-hour break between classes. “I would feel no obligation to stay on campus,” the student said. The rest said they would stay on campus, but whether they would study or not “depends on what’s due.” If nothing major is due, they would hang out in the dining hall, find some type of recreation or, in one case, “go to the library to stay ahead of my class assignments.”

Social Engagement

For many of these students, sophomore year had brought a certain level of *disengagement* with the university. Most felt more connected to their school and engaged in more activities and clubs when freshmen. This shift was due to being “so involved with other things [left unspecified],” wanting more “me time” because of having harder classes that required more study time or not having a group (or at least a close friend) to do things with. “In the dorm, you’d just grab some friends and go do it. It was a group thing, not a ‘me’ thing.” The experience of one student had been the opposite. He reported being more engaged—founding a service fraternity, playing intramural basketball—because freshman year he was focused primarily on being on his own.

No one connected the shift away from participating in extracurricular activities to living off campus.

Diversity

A majority of students said they were already accepting of people regardless of background before coming to ASU. Several commented that they had become more accepting, perhaps only of people from basically the same background but not the same situation. For instance, one student said that growing up, she, as the only child of wealthy parents, had always been the center of attention; she admitted she had been spoiled but also that she hated it. Coming to ASU, she took the opportunity to learn new ways of relating to people that weren’t based on echoing her parents’ “arrogant” behavior towards others. Another said she had to get used to ASU’s “Asian population,” which was so unlike where she had grown up. For these and a few other students, the dorm experience made them more accepting.

One student thought ASU was not, in fact, very diverse because “there’s a self-selection by income going on here.” One student felt her off-campus community was not as

diverse—or friendly—as the dorm, but another said it was easier to meet new people at the community, largely because of the pool. There was a common lament that “my friends all live somewhere else,” leading to the feeling that while the property was “clean, safe and nice, it’s not really a community.”

Value

The most common sentiment about ASU was that, at least so far, it had been rewarding:

- “Great experience.”
- “Rewarding experience. It’s like intermediate adulthood.”
- “A good thing. More exciting, more people, more social activity, lots to do; it’s like opening up.”
- “Good experience. I have more freedom to do what I want.”
- “Great experience. Beautiful, positive, upbeat people here.”

Asked if they appreciated ASU more or less than they did the first year, two said “the same” and four said “more,” giving as reasons “because my classes are now smaller and I have more interaction with my professors” and “I feel more socially connected.”

Housing Selection Criteria

Students moved out of the dorms because:

- “The dorms suck; and it doesn’t cost any more to live here.”
- “To get off the meal plan. It’s stupid. The food’s unhealthy.”
- “This place adds to my overall satisfaction with ASU.”
- “Location: It’s right next to campus.”
- “There are small things here that make a big difference, like having your own kitchen. There’s no kitchen area in the dorms.”

If dorm living were required for all four years, none of the students thought ASU was worth dorm life and would go somewhere else for college.

Most Likely to Remember:

Students said that what they will most remember about their sojourn at ASU are:

- “The hot girls.”
- “The people and that there was so much to do here. If you find something here you like, it’s your fault, not ASU’s.”
- “How nice the campus is and there’s so much to do. Eat. Walk. Watch.”
- “How clean the campus is.”

Persistence

All the students expressed strong commitments to graduating. For some it was a matter of personal motivation. One saw a dead-end job ahead with no diploma. And one wanted to ease the financial pressure on his parents.

They specifically said that living off campus had no effect of their commitment to graduate; in fact, one student said that if she had to live in a dorm all four years, her commitment would probably decrease.

GPA

The average GPA for this group based on self-reported data was 3.19.

Arizona State University
Juniors, first group
7 Students, April 25

Academic Engagement

This group of students reported having frequent and multi-level contacts with those professors who taught smaller classes. As freshmen, this contact was absent. Freshman year is, in the students' opinion, given over to socializing, making new friends and experimenting with new-found freedom. "The last thing you're focused on as a freshman is school," said one. As Freshmen, some reported feeling "too intimidated" by their professors to reach out; others felt that in large lecture classes "who needs the professor?" because the professor didn't really have much leeway in assigning grades.

But as the number of students in a class decreased—especially after sophomore year—and the subject matter becomes "more conceptual," there is more room for subjective judgments on the professors' parts. The better the relationship, the more chance the subjective judgments would work in the student's favor.

Students considered email and text exchanges with their professors viable channels for establishing and maintaining the personal relationships they formed with their professors by talking to them after class and taking advantage of office hours. Most students felt their major-subject professors welcomed and encouraged face-to-face contact. Such contact not only helps the student but, in the opinion of several students, provides the professor with positive feedback. "It's good for the professor to know that he has students really interested in the subject matter."

Students also thought the responsibility for initiating the relationship lay with the student. "You can have real talks with your professors if you make the effort. When that happens, it's cool and deepens your relationship with a teacher." One student summed up the majority's feeling when he talked about "the politics of managing your professors." The relationship's goal is not the relationship *per se* but how the relationship can affect "grades on the tipping point" or "recommendations for graduate school."

Three students reported talking with a professor outside the academic setting (that is, before or after class or during office hours) and those were casual meetings at a coffee shop or similar venue. The exchanges in such venues were social, not academic, but the students felt it fostered their relationships with those particular professors. If a professor were to invite them to his or her home, they would think it "weird."

Study Habits: The primary study venue for three of the students was the library because of their "demanding course work"; the others found the library too "social" and studied in their rooms or outside. Some of the heavy library usage was also explained by how, as juniors, they had learned to concentrate their class schedule such that it made sense to stay on campus an entire day. For example, one said she spent 50 percent of her day on campus Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Another had all his classes Tuesday and

Thursday and spent those weekdays on campus. Schedule gaps provided the perfect opportunity to go to the library or student union to study, though others would just hang out. Most reported heavier library usage than when they were freshmen.

Social Engagement

This group of students was unusual in that almost all of them missed living on campus to some degree. They felt “more isolated” living off campus and that they “don’t see many people here [at their community].” “Living here feels like we’re on campus, but we’re not a community.” [Note that the focus group was held at a property located immediately across the street from one edge of campus.] They hook up with people at clubs and sporting events, not at or through the property.

Three out of the seven students are in clubs and/or on various intramural teams. The types of organizations they belong to changes from social, as freshmen, to “professional,” to use their term, by which they meant connected to their major area of study.

Diversity

These students felt they were already accepting before coming to ASU and explained it was “a generational thing; our generation is just more accepting.” They considered the campus diverse and the people nonjudgmental. As far as the dorm being a melting pot, the group agreed with the student who said, “What the mix teaches you is that there are just a few personality types and people are the same underneath any differences.” They believed that “A lot depends on the type of person you are going in rather than the [dorm] experience.”

Value

The entire group was very positive about their experience at ASU. Most said they “loved” being at ASU and agreed with the student who said, “I couldn’t see myself anywhere else.” One student said ASU offered a doorway to new opportunities: “I didn’t want to get stuck in my community.” Another said “I always thought ASU was great, but now I have a reason for believing that.” There’s a sense of excitement emanating from being “surrounded by people who are motivated to achieve great things.” Perhaps the most telling personal comment was this: “My world is richer now.”

Persistency

All of the students expressed a deep commitment to graduating.

- “Dropping out is not even in my brain. For one thing, I’ve invested so much time and money in this.”
- “Without a degree you couldn’t get a good job.”
- “I’ll earn more money with a degree.”
- “I want it for myself and also my mom; she’s breaking her back to help me afford it. It would be a slap in the face if I didn’t graduate.”

GPA

The average GPA for this group based on self-reported data was 2.84, the lowest of any group.

Arizona State University
Juniors, second group
7 students, March 26

Academic Engagement

How students in this group interacted with their professors seemed to depend on both the type of course in question and the preferences of individual students. They were more likely to have personal interactions as juniors than when they had been freshmen because of the size of most introductory lecture classes and feeling too “shy” to talk to professors. A few used email as their primary way of interacting with their professors and TAs, finding the TAs more responsive in providing in-depth answers to course-related questions and feeling that “email exchanges are easier for both of us.” Others focused on developing in-person relationships knowing that “graduation is looming” and they would need letters of recommendation. No one in this group mentioned the possible outcome of enhancing grades as a reason for developing relationships with professors.

Personal contact becomes more important for students as class size decreases. In-person visits occurred both after class and during office hours. One student said one of her professors offered inducements (extra credit, pre-submission critique of papers, etc.) to encourage students to visit during office hours. But one student wondered if professors really cared about their students.

Several reported informal meeting with professors. One met and talked with one of his professors through his campus job. Another belonged to a club that included as a member/advisor one of his professors. Another said one of his professors periodically visited the café in the library and would come and talk to students there. One astute student talked about the “politics of knowing your professors” to get good recommendations, with nods of agreement from most of the rest of the group.

Study Habits: These students tended to go to the library to study, though some considered the library too noisy and preferred to study in their room (if their roommates were being quiet or weren't there) or outside. In response to being asked in there had been any change in their preferences since freshman year, one said there hadn't. Two thought their community was louder than the study areas in the dorm and so still went to the library. The rest said that, when they were freshman, they didn't really study much and so the change had more to do with the amount of time they spent studying rather than change in venue.

Break in Schedule Behavior: What students would do during schedule breaks depends on how far from campus they live and where in the day the break comes. If the break comes later in the day or they live far from campus, they'd go home and most likely skip the second class. If the break is mid-day, they tend to stay on campus and study, eat or find a couch somewhere to take a quick nap. They try to arrange their class schedules so there aren't any large gaps between classes. That way, they're on campus for a set time,

minimizing the likelihood of skipping class. It's also more difficult to get away with skipping small classes.

Feeling Prepared: Three students felt they were more prepared for class when freshman (the three who still studied in the library). Four felt that as freshmen they were less prepared because their focus was on partying and hanging with friends, not studying, characterizing their freshman selves as "less mature."

Social Engagement

The most prevalent activity for this group of students consisted of playing intramural sports. They all had reduced the number of clubs and activities in which they engaged because freshman are "pushed into joining clubs" by the school with the dorm RAs as the agents. "Our RA would push into going to things and joining clubs. No longer. Now I only do the things that really interest me." The other reason for joining lots of clubs and going to events as a freshman was the offer of "free food."

One student made the point that she was less active in clubs and less likely to go to events not because of where she lived but because of personal preference. "I dropped a club not because I moved off campus but because I didn't like the club." Instead of their social life being centered on involvement with university events and clubs, students say they substitute "hanging with friends" and also are forced by harder course work to spend more time studying. "I don't have as much time as when I was a freshman for those sorts of activities."

Diversity

All the students in this group said they were already accepting of those from different backgrounds before coming the ASU. However, they had different takes on their experiences at ASU, not just freshman year in the dorm but beyond. One student, who described himself as a "hillbilly" from "a small hick town" had a group of friends who turned out to be from "rich, I mean really rich, families" and felt totally accepted by them and was totally accepting of them. Another student didn't feel as welcome and accepted as she would have been in her home state of California. One said that "your freshman experience can change you a little but not always for the better because you realize how many rednecks and racists are still around."

Value

Students expressed a surprising degree of dissatisfaction with various aspects of ASU. The most positive remark came from the student who said "My satisfaction with school is a real up and down thing." The most common source of dissatisfaction had to do with cost. One student felt the university "nickels and dimes students to death." Two felt that they weren't getting good value for the high cost of out-of-state tuition. Another complained that summer session was more expensive. The amount of sunshine and good weather was mentioned as one of the primary benefits of going to school in Tempe.

Most Appreciated: Most replies focused on social aspects of their university experience with the friends they had made being number one, though one student said he would most

remember Mill Street, “where all the bars are.” One student spoke at length about ASU’s “social” reputation. “That’s why most students come here. We’re even a host school for students from all over the country during Spring Break; they come here and stay with us so they can party.” One student did say she would most remember those students and professors who had served as her “mentors, providing an inspiration; they were my role models.” Another thought she would remember the “whole package—the people, the place, what I learned.” And one, the same student who encountered so many racists and rednecks, said the whole experience at ASU was most memorable for helping her develop a “thicker skin because of the nuts I’ve met here.”

If Dorm Living Were Required All Four Years: All the students in the group said they would transfer or not attend ASU if they were required to live in the dorms all four years, mainly because dorm life is seen as limiting self-development and the growth that comes from personal freedom and the ability to make decisions about what to do and when.

Persistence

Despite certain reservations about ASU (see the Value section above), all the students seemed determined to graduate, primarily for two reasons. Either they saw getting a diploma as a necessary step to a good job (which itself was needed either to enjoy “the good life” and/or to pay back student loans) or they felt a strong obligation—to themselves or their parents—to finish what they started. One student did say that he was considering transferring to a community college because ASU was just “too expensive.” The group agreed that their persistence level was either the same or higher than when they were freshmen.

Living off campus had no effect on their persistency.

GPA

The average GPA for this group based on self-reported information was 3.22.

Arizona State University

Seniors

6 students, March 26

Academic Engagement

Students in this group saw a real progression in their relationships with their professors from freshman through senior years. As freshmen, mostly attending large lectures, they had almost no interaction with their professors. They attributed this to their own timidity and feeling that professors “don’t really notice freshmen” or, if they do, “deflect them to their TAs.”

The picture changes as classes become smaller and focused on a student’s major. Now, professors notice students, get to know their faces and names, and notice skips. “I’ve come to view my professors as people who can help me and advise me, something I never did as a freshman.” “As a first year student, my professors were up on a pedestal. Now I don’t see much of a gap between me and my professors.”

Another student pointed out that that might depend on one’s major; for example, in the law school, “many professors have such distinguished resumes that they’re always going to be up on a pedestal.” Also, for some students, the increased complexity of upper division courses requires more personal interaction. In some majors, there are group projects/assignments that include a faculty member.

Students say they still use email sometimes to communicate with their professors but put more emphasis on face-to-face contacts. A few students had serendipitously seen or encountered one or more professor on or off campus but, except for one instance, those encounters were of the “wave-and-say-‘Hi’ variety,” not meaningful exchanges. One student said one of his professors—“one of the wackier ones”—had surprised her students by holding a discussion group in a local bar. Most students said they had no exchanges with their professors outside of email, before or after class, or during regular office hours. One barrier that prevents even upper division students from taking advantage of office hours is schedule conflicts with either other classes or jobs. No one mentioned asking if they could arrange an in-person meeting outside normal office hours.

Study Habits/Preparedness: Students agreed that it was hard or impossible to study effectively in the dorms; most utilized the library. They thought their freshman study habits were “sporadic,” tinged with a certain amount of “panic” and geared around tests and exams. But as seniors, they said they actually feel *less* prepared because “so much more is expected of you before you walk into the classroom.” Some find they have less time to study because of other commitments such as involvement in extracurricular activities and job responsibilities even while courses require more study and preparation.

Social Engagement

For most students in the group, there had been a shift from the “sporadic” engagement typical of freshmen to “more consistent,” purposeful engagement with activities, events

and clubs that either appealed greatly to their interests or were “professional,” that is, related to their major. As one student so vividly describe it, “You move from big but flabby to smaller but firmer as you give up burying yourself by joining lots of clubs and activities as a freshman and focus on fewer activities that are “professional” rather than “social.” One student, looking back on her freshman year, commented that for her and her friends, ASU appeared “so big, it was disorienting and everything was so new. You spend a lot of time trying to find your way and build a network of friends.” One activity that continued to engage students were the major sporting events, especially the big ASU/University of Arizona football game and its attendant gala events, including “top flight” tailgating.

Break in Schedule Behavior: The group was split between those who would stay on campus (go to Memorial Union, eat, “there always something to do on campus”) and those who would walk back to their apartments.

Housing Selection Criteria

The primary reasons for choosing their property were location and the pool/pool area amenities. One student said the properties catering to ASU students compete with each other mainly on the basis of how big their pools and pool areas are and what amenities are included, like cookout area, sand volleyball, waterfalls, slides, hot tubs, etc. The pool is the social center of the complex; it’s where students continue to meet other students and make friends; often the pool is more utilized for studying than the property’s designated study area.

A few students said that living off campus did keep them from making class 100% of the time. Others thought it made no difference, especially for small, upper-division courses. One student thought there really wasn’t a reason to live off campus except that it’s “a cachet thing.” Another said that the number one reason students want to move off campus is that ASU is a dry campus.

Diversity

One student said living in the dorm had made her more accepting because she got to know so many different people. Most believe they came to school already accepting of diverse people. And several thought off campus was as diverse as the campus. However, as the discussion developed, it became clearer that “acceptance of others” was often about accepting different ways of behaving, different cleanliness standards, different beliefs or idea shared by people who, to most observers, would not be considered especially diverse. Partly this is because, as the students themselves pointed out, there is “natural cluster segregation” where students who share backgrounds, cultural values, racial makeup, etc. tend to stick together.

Value

Students in this group were split between feeling they were getting good value and those with some reservations.

- “I’m getting a good education.”
- “ASU takes you and your money but then laughs at you when you fail.”

- “ASU invests a lot in their students. They have a great grant program to foster entrepreneurship and hold career fairs so you can make the right connections for after graduation.”
- “I feel under-challenged when it comes to practical life experiences. There are too many joke classes you have to take that aren’t related to your major.”

There was subsequent discussion of whether students felt ready to leave college for the “real world.” Some were ready to “hit the ground running.” Others recognized that they had been living in something of a “bubble,” not quite part of what they would face on the other side of graduation day. Those students had a certain amount of regret, wishing they could stay in the bubble a little longer.

Asked if they thought they would leave ASU feeling satisfied with the overall experience, they answered:

- “I guess I’ll leave satisfied because it’s all about the total experience.”
- “I got what I expected, if not more.”
- “I’ve grown more as a person.”
- “The networking opportunities are huge, both professionally and socially.”
- “I feel I didn’t waste my life in a book. There’s lots to do here but it’s up to you to take advantage of it.”

Persistence

All the students in the group intended to graduate.

GPA

The average GPA for this group based on self-reported data was 3.27.

University of Texas
Sophomores
7 Students, April 1

Academic Engagement

Interactions with Professors: The majority of students found living off campus, even in properties across the street from the edge of campus, imposed both a psychological and distance barrier to frequent in-person contact with their professors. There was more contact freshman year because living on campus made it more convenient to take advantage of office hours. The substitute was increased email contact, which one student justified by saying it wasn't the quality of interaction that counted but the frequency. A few students said that as sophomores about to become juniors, they were beginning to recognize the importance of in-person contact with their professors. They stayed later on campus so they could visit during office hours or made an extra effort if they had a substantive issue that was "super important" to discuss.

Study Habits: These students preferred to study "at home," in their apartments. As freshmen, they found the dorms too noisy and devoted to socializing. Several students expressed how depressing their dorm rooms were and, therefore, not conducive to studying. Students also find their apartments more suitable for studying because of the convenience they offer. "If you want to study late into the night, there's no one in the same room wanting to sleep; or, if you want a snack, it's right there. You don't have to go out to get something to eat."

Dorm living for these students was unpleasant, "like a hotel" or, according to one student, "like a prison. No light. Little slit windows that didn't even open. The dorm was just somewhere I slept. Now I have a home." They also disliked the rules and restrictions of dorm living: "Here [at the property] I feel I'm at college for a new experience." They thought the dorms depressing, very generic and monotonous with every room basically the same—all of which tended to make the dorms inhospitable for studying. Most students agreed that they studied better now that they weren't living in the dorm, though group study sessions were more difficult to organize because not everyone lived close by.

Break in Schedule Behavior: The group was split regarding what they do if they have a gap between classes. Half the group said they would stay on campus and study, go to the student union to eat and hang out or go to a friend's room on campus to nap. The other half would return to their apartments. Most of that group would skip the later class, not wanting to make the trip back to campus, which began across the street from the property where most of these students lived. A couple students said it depended on the length of the gap. Short gap, stay on campus; long gap, go back to their apartments.

Social Engagement

Participants characterized their freshman phase as "dabbling" in a lot of different organizations to meet people and to discover what truly interested them. "As a freshman, you're trying to figure out where to go, what to do." Organizations were viewed as great places to meet people, certainly better than classes. Most have narrowed down the

number of organization/clubs they're involved with in favor of making a leadership contribution to the ones that really mattered to them. They report being more "focused" than they were as freshman. Another reason for limiting the number of clubs and events is that "classes are harder now; they take more of your time." No one gave living off campus as a reason for reduced involvement with university-sponsored events or organizations.

Maturation: The students agreed that apartment living was a step towards full adulthood, but some also said it also presented difficulties. The primary benefit, though, was the lack of the restrictive rules that come with dorm living. "I didn't understand the concept that I'm paying to living in the dorm but they can say what I can and can't do." It felt more grown up for students to be able to select a property, sign a lease, buy groceries, cook meals, have a checking account. No one reported missing dorm living.

Housing Selection Criteria

Convenience to campus, not price, was the major factor in deciding where to live. Students defined convenience as either easy walking distance to campus or on a bus route.

- "Wanted to be off campus but as close as possible so I could easily get back and forth."
- Wanted to be in the UT area. I pay more but the convenience of being able to walk is worth it."
- "I moved to Riverside; it's further away but cheaper."
- "I'm off campus here but my classes are all on the other side of campus. It takes me 15 minutes to walk to them; about the same as when I lived in the dorm. So do I really live 'off' campus?"
- "On a bus route. If there were no bus, that would change where I live." (two students)

Secondary reasons for selecting their off-campus community included price, privacy/more personal space (the dorm rooms are "so small" and "there are people everywhere all the time"), getting off the meal plan and being able to cook what and when they wanted, getting away from "disturbing" dorm roommates and having their own bathroom: "My biggest worry freshman year was how I'd survive the communal bathroom."

Diversity

All but one student felt they were already accepting of people from different backgrounds prior to coming to UT. The dissenter said living in her dorm had made her more accepting. One felt the property was more diverse than her dorm. On polling the group, half felt the off-campus community where they were living was more diverse than their dorm had been; the other half said it was less diverse.

Value

Students were positive about the university and what they were getting for their investment. Several had qualifying issues. One said "There's tremendous school spirit

here. I don't especially care about the sports. I expected something different; my experience hasn't been bad but I thought it would be different. I don't feel as involved in the life of the university as I thought I'd be. I thought I'd meet more people, but those I have met are good for me. UT is just too big to grasp." Several other students agreed with his last statement. Another said "As a freshman, I got everything I expected about the social life I'd enjoy. Now it's just the grind." Echoing that thought, another said "I thought I'd make so many new friends. I did meet some, but it's more about me now—having to focus on my grades and class work." Another simply continued to hang with those from her high school who also went to UT.

If dorm living were required all four years, three students said they would transfer, two would just accept it provided they'd never had the experience of living off campus, and two would find it "really unpleasant" but wouldn't transfer because UT is such a great and well regarded school.

Persistence

While most students expressed unshakable commitment to graduating, two wondered if a diploma was as important today as it had been for their parents and were unsure whether they would graduate. The reasons they gave had nothing to do with living off campus. "The glamour of the degree has worn off for me. My classes are stupid. My high school classes were better than here." "Having a degree may not be as important now. Parents stress getting a degree because for them it was important. Today, with the Internet and other new media options, I wonder if it's the only road. There are other paths to success. Plus there's the expense of obtaining a diploma. It's crippling." Those who did express commitment to getting a degree gave various reasons ranging from improved earning capacity to personal commitment:

- "Being educated and having a degree just opens so many doors. It's really necessary if you want to be extremely successful. Always has and will be true."
- "I'm so committed, I'm planning to graduate a year early. I want that degree!"
- "Not graduating is not an option. I made a commitment."

GPA

The average GPA for this group based on self-reported data was 3.43.

University of Texas
Juniors, first group
11 Students, April 1

Academic Engagement

Relationships with Professors: These students were taking a mix of large lecture format, core classes and smaller classes leading to their major. The type of class affected both how they related to their teachers and their likelihood of skipping. They felt professors teaching large lecture classes wouldn't know who they were so it didn't make sense spending a lot of time trying to establish a relationship. Therefore, they tended to communicate via email. Small classes were different because the professors were more likely to know each student and note an absence from class. One student felt that living off campus had had no effect on whether he would try to talk with his professors during their office hours. "If I have a real issue to discuss, I'll go. Distance is not a factor." Another felt that whether or not a relationship could be established with a professor depended on the professor's personality. Some encouraged it while others discouraged it.

Study Habits: "My parents didn't really want me to move here because they knew it was a party complex, but my grades are so much better and I'm less stressed so they've accepted it." Students all said they studied in their apartments or the community's study room and that they find it easier and more conducive to studying than the dorms. The library isn't considered a good study venue because "there are so many people in the library; it's crowded and noisy." Drawbacks to the dorms as study venues included loud roommates and a tendency to put off studying because there are so many tempting distractions on campus. One student said living off campus had had no effect on her study habits other than to change where she studied. Another said she was actually closer to most of her classes living off campus and, therefore, more likely to attend early morning classes. Several said they skipped classes more because of inertia "Getting out is the big barrier, especially when it's super cold."

Asked to estimate how many hours per week they typically studied, they answered:

- 15-20 (2 students)
- 10-12 (3 students)
- 6-8 (6 students)

They agreed that UT is a demanding school, one that emphasized teaching students how to think.

Break in Schedule Behavior: When they were freshmen, they went back to their dorms, provided the dorm was in the main part of campus. (One dorm is so far from the main part of campus that many of the off-campus communities are actually closer.) Problem was, they said, once back in the dorm room they were not likely to study but watch TV, nap, play video games or just hang with friends. They did not address the issue of what they do as juniors, though one student did remark that her apartment was too far from campus for her to go back to it if the break in schedule was short (two hours or less).

Skipping Class: The group felt that as a freshman, not attending class can really affect grades. But as students advanced in school, it's not as important to attend large lectures because students know where to find the resources to "patch over" classes they've skipped.

Preparedness: Students feel more prepared if the class is small or is one they're interested in, unlike some classes they have to take as part of the core curriculum.

Housing Selection Criteria

Reasons for Moving Off Campus: Students felt moving off campus put a psychological barrier between "home" (their social pursuits) and "work" (their academic pursuits).

Criteria: When they moved price, proximity to campus, personal space (apartment size) and amenities (primarily a pool) were the major considerations. As far as location is concerned, as with most schools, closer means more expensive. Students for whom price was the major issue tended to gravitate to an outlying area called Riverside, but then felt the need for a car to get back and forth to campus and had to put up with living in a "sketchier area." The five blocks to the west and north of campus were the preferred areas. Not only are they within easy walking distance but safe and "full of the same people you see on campus," that is, other students. They thought "energy" defined campus better than legal land ownership. "If you look at it that way and include west campus and north campus, then there's no night on campus, the sun never sets."

Diversity

Most students said they were already accepting of people from different backgrounds before coming to UT. Nonetheless, a few thought the dorm experience was positive in this regard because "it gives you the chance to actually live with people who are different, like the foreign exchange students." They also felt that in the dorm everyone's "in the same boat; it's social so you meet people. Some are like us; some are very different. It's a good experience." But two black students, each from different metropolitan areas in California, found Texans as a group, and even some students, "more distasteful, racist, conservative and pro-gun" than those in the communities where they had grown up.

A couple students volunteered that they found their off-campus communities less diverse than their dorms, partly because "We don't know any off our neighbors; but from the people we see around the building, it seems less diverse than our dorm."

Value

Students found the university challenging but were excited to be part of an "elite institution." They felt the caliber of students created a nice balance between the academic side of the university and the social side. A few said their university experience had been "more than expected," largely because of the caliber of their fellow students. One was proud of the intellectual standing of the university. One said simply: "It's my school. Yeah!" Another said that her feelings about UT were very different now than when she was a freshman. She felt that no matter what you expected to get from your university

experience, it's more than you expected and different. "The experience changes you. When I come back each year—or even from a long school break—I'm excited to come back. It's like starting anew." Another student found UT "overwhelming" freshman year. It was "difficult" making the adjustment from high school to college but "gradually it gets better."

Most Likely to Remember: When asked what they would most remember about their years at UT, most students answered with some variation of "my friends" or "the social side." This remark summed it up: "I've been so close to the friends I've made here and we've been through so much together. I know it will never happen again in my life." One student mentioned her professors, who were "outstanding." Another mentioned football because it "brings people together."

If Dorm Living Were Required all Four Years: Five said they wouldn't have come to UT. Most of the others gave versions of "deal with it," feeling that having a degree from UT was worth any hardship. One student, who apparently liked living in the dorm but hadn't expressed that before, said it would be "awesome" because one would always have the conveniences associated with living right on campus.

Persistence

All the students expressed strong commitment to graduating. The reasons they gave were:

- "You've put out all the money; you need to get something back."
- "I feel I have to get going with my life and my career."
- "Financial aid stops if you say you're not going to graduate."
- "You just dedicate yourself to it. If you've got some boring classes, you try to take more interest."
- "So I get the position I want in the workforce."
- "I never want to have to move home."
- "I'm the first person in my family to go to college. I want to make my parents happy and proud."
- "Having a degree from here means something."
- "I'm scared of failure and optimistic about my chances for success at the same time."
- "The big companies are already recruiting and hiring here. Makes you realize how important that diploma is."
- "Better pay."

There was no sense that living off campus had any effect on their determination to graduate.

GPA

The average GPA for this group based on self-reported data was 3.2.

University of Texas
Juniors, second group
6 students, April 2

Academic Involvement

All the students in this group seemed to recognize that establishing personal relationships with professors teaching smaller and/or major-related classes would both make for a better class experience and be useful down the road when they needed letters of recommendation. Some said their cultivation of their professors included trying to get some personal recognition from professors teaching large lecture classes typical of the core curriculum. Several thought professors teaching smaller classes were more likely to encourage a personal relationship. “If they have 350 students in their class, they don’t offer an open door. But when there’s only 12 to 15 of us, they encourage a more personal relationship. They introduce themselves; they get to learn your name. They say ‘Hello’ if they pass you in the hall.”

All of them used and felt it was perfectly acceptable and normal to use email to “talk” with their professors. Most used email to pose routine procedural questions, saving face-to-face meetings for more substantive issues. A few had undertaken “email recognition campaigns” as freshman to try to get some recognition from their core class professors. However, one student drew the distinction that “emails to professors you don’t know at all feel cold, too business-like; emails to professors you do know feel more like a valid interaction.”

In-person exchanges with professors became more common as students moved up in year, from extremely unlikely as freshman (“No motivation to have a relationship”; “Classes are so big with multiple lecturers; it’s hard to have any kind of relationship with them”; “They’re too intimidating when you’re a freshman.”) to “almost mandatory” as juniors. Students felt face-to-face contact was both more informal and “richer.”

Several students in this group reported exchanges totally outside the classroom or office hours, talking with professors when they met accidentally on campus, near campus (for example, at a Starbucks) and, in one case, having been invited out to dinner by a professor. All of those exchanges were, however, non-academic, that is, “chit chat” about sports, etc. One student who admitted to finding it difficult to approach even her small-class professors observed that “UT is so large, it’s a milestone if they just know who you are.” In response, another student commented that “It’s up to you to put out the initiative; and they are open if you do make the effort.”

Study Habits: As juniors, they tend to study in their apartments. As freshmen, these students used (or were driven to) the library either because they felt cooped up in their shared dorm room or it was too noisy in the dorm. Only one student reported any distance-related increase in skipping classes. They did occasionally take shortcuts, such as tailoring the amount of study hours invested to the grade desired for a particular class or never reading the textbook for a lecture class because notes were posted online. The

tendency to skip seemed tied to the way the course was taught rather than distance lived from school. One student observed somewhat cynically that in the end it wasn't all that important whether you went to class or skipped, read the material or not, receive a C or a B: "It's not the grades you make but the hands you shake" that determine your career.

Break in Schedule Behavior: Not all students responded to this question. Those who did had mixed responses. Most said they had arranged their class schedules so they didn't have more than 30 minutes between classes, in which case they wouldn't try to go home. If they had a longer break, they were slightly more likely to go home but most indicated they would stay on campus and put the time to good use. A couple students said they "never stay on campus"; for these students, home is such an attractive place for both studying and socializing that they want to be there as much as possible. Temptations to socialize or nap instead of studying were negatives of having their dorm rooms easily accessible.

Social Engagement

In general, as freshman, these students participated in many more clubs, organizations and intramural sports than they do as juniors. As freshman, the involvement in clubs and other activities was done primarily to meet people. The most common reasons for narrowing their focus revolved around filling leadership positions, focusing on those organizations that had strong personal appeal, joining those connected with their majors, or devoting time to other activities such as a job or internship. Those less involved with their former clubs, sports and Greek societies tied reduced involvement (or change of focus) not to living off campus but to lack of time, lack of interest or realization that only certain clubs and organizations have a positive impact on their resumes. One student, generalizing, said that "Once you move off campus, there's no real motivation to go to all the university events. You already have your friends."

Diversity

Several students felt living in the dorms had had a positive effect on their meeting and accepting people from different backgrounds. Most of those students also said they were from very small farming towns where "everyone is basically the same." One second-generation Asian student said she had been the only Asian person in her high school and felt she fit in better at UT because of the presence of so many students from Asian countries. One student said where he had grown up was not as "open" as his dorm and so felt he had "learned more about my own culture by meeting people from so many different cultures." Most students said they were "open and accepting" before coming to UT but still appreciated how diverse UT's student body was.

Two students were more reserved in their opinions of the dorms as melting pots. One said, "Some students are open to diversity; some aren't. It's a two-way street." The other felt that "how a person acts is more important than their background. You can choose to see the stereotypes in action or not. The stereotypes are the surface. These more to a person than the surface." Another student commented that "After you're a freshman, there's not a big drive to meet people. Your group of friends may still be diverse, but it's a smaller circle of friends."

Housing Selection

For these students, moving off campus represents a step towards adulthood; it's more "mature" to live off campus. One student made the distinction that on campus is where one works and studies; off campus is where one has fun. Students said they were dissatisfied with dorm living because:

- It's "lame" (especially the rules)
- One has to eat, have guests in, etc. "on their schedule, not on your own"
- It's more expensive than living off campus
- You don't have enough personal space or any privacy
- If you stayed on campus, you would have to "hang with a bunch of freshmen, who are hyper and immature compared to juniors."

They moved to their off-campus community (which for most of those in the group was within easy walking distance of campus) because:

- Price/location; within walking distance/no bus needed
- Price/quality
- Reputation, specifically as a Greek community ("Most of my frat brothers live here.")

Value

The biggest values these students saw to their university experience were connected to the social, not the academic, side of their experience. One felt he was "paying for a degree, not an education" and that his freshman year had been "a waste." He went on to say that he thought "we pay way too much for just a degree. What I've learned are study habits, how to prioritize tasks, networking. I know when I get my first job, they'll train me in their company practices. My internship was more valuable than any class."

Others disagreed and felt they were getting a lot more than they ever thought they would; but, again, the primary value was not associated with academic rigor but with learning management skills from working with different personality styles: "My group projects have taught me a lot about how to deal with people," or "I've come to understand something about the fields of the team members I'll need to work with after I graduate," were typical comments.

Students again emphasized the social aspects of university life when asked what they would probably most remember about their years at UT. Their answers were as follows:

- "The connections and my professors."
- "The social life, especially my friends."
- "The relationships I formed here."
- "The football games."
- "The friends I made."
- "Growing up as a person."
- "The professors and rubbing shoulders with people who are different."
- "The opportunities UT affords."

Persistence

None of the students expressed reservations about graduating.

- “I can’t think of reason not to.”
- “Because of the time and money I’ve invested, I have to graduate.”
- “You have to have a degree to get a good job. It’s a big job to pay off student loans; I need a good job.”
- “I’ve persisted already—in time and money. It’s a personal achievement.”
- “I’ve wanted to go to UT all my life. I’ll feel fulfilled having that piece of paper in my hand.”
- “My dad went here. It’s always been assumed that I’ll be a UT graduate, too, and I don’t want to waste the skills I’ve gotten here by dropping out.”

GPA

The average GPA for this group based on self-reported data was 3.38.

University of Texas
Seniors
8 Students, April 2

Academic Engagement

For most students in this group, there was definitely a change in behavior after freshman year in how diligently they worked at making personal contact with their professors and TAs. As freshman, most felt too “timid” to approach their professors; they also felt that those who taught the large core classes “have an attitude” that discourages student contact.

Once finished with their core classes and are taking smaller classes, they say they make much more of an effort to meet with their professors during office hours and, in other ways, strive to create a personal relationship. The main goal of this relationship building has to do with getting solid letters of recommendation. Some commented that professors who teach smaller classes are friendlier and seem to want a more personal relationship with their students. Two students who lived farther from campus than most of the group said that distance was a factor. Though they might drop in during office hours if they were already on campus, the “distance factor” and the inertia that seems to appear when students are at home, made it less likely they would make a special trip to campus just to take advantage of a professor’s office hours.

Several students in the group said they had had informal exchanges with their professors and TAs outside of an academic setting—in bars, restaurants, coffee shops around campus. Students considered email a viable way to contact professors and, hopefully, move the relationship forward. Grades in core classes are mostly based on multiple choice exams; the professor’s subjective opinions about a student do not enter into the grading, “so why bother establishing any relationship?” In smaller classes, the opposite is true. Grading is more subjective; if students know their professors, they feel they often get the benefit of the doubt when he or she is grading their work. Plus, professors in upper division “expect a relationship so you have an opportunity to show your expertise [in their subject matter area]. As a freshman, you just don’t feel connected.”

Study Habits: Using campus facilities to study was, for most of these students, “easier” and “more convenient,” when they lived on campus, especially during the winter months. But a few said the opposite because they found library and the study rooms in the dorms crowded, noisy and too social for serious studying. For these students, the study room in the off-campus community was the better alternative because, as one student said, “It’s full of focused people, so you focus, too” or because there are “too many distractions in my apartment.” One student shared that as a freshman, he missed class frequently; but, when grades came out, he got a “hard kick in the butt” and became more serious about studying.

Break in Schedule Behavior: Faced with a two-hour break between classes, most of these student would go back to their apartment and eat, study, nap or “do whatever.” A couple

said that once home, they “would be unlikely to go back [to campus].” By implication, this means they would skip their second class. Another said he couldn’t go home so would hang with friends still living in the dorms. One asked “What’s the point of staying on campus?”

Social Engagement:

As freshmen, these students say they joined clubs and organizations to meet new people or to “get free stuff,” especially food. Several felt it was easier to join and participate when they lived on campus but most said that they stuck with some of the clubs or organizations to provide leadership, moving from members to officers. Some reported changing their focus to “things that could help my resume” or clubs that appealed to their interests such as various service organizations. One student felt she “heard more about clubs and what’s going on” when she lived on campus. One reported he had given up certain activities because the people who had attracted him graduated and because he wasn’t comfortable around the freshman who were joining the club; “There’s a big gulf [in maturity and attitude] between freshmen and seniors.”

Except for not hearing as much about campus activities after moving off campus, no one mentioned distance as a barrier to participating in those activities that were especially meaningful, either personally or in contributing to having a superior resume.

Housing Selection Criteria

Generally, the decision on where to move was based on the concept of “affordable location.” The list of raw factors included:

- Convenience [to campus]
- Price, especially once location is selected
- My friends all moved here, too
- Parking (two students mentioned)
- Can have your own food, “more variety and there the convenience of being able to eat whenever you want.”
- Choice (in what to do and when; free of the dorm’s rules and regulations)
- Lease period (12 months instead of the dorm’s 10-month lease)
- Washer/dryer in apartment

Except for the student for whom not having a washer/dryer in the apartment was a deal breaker, amenities other than parking, while nice to have, were not “deal breakers.” Two students (both male) saw a downside to having to buy and prepare one’s own food, feeling that it took so much time so they tended to eat fast food or just microwave something.

Diversity

Most students in this group described themselves as “already accepting” before coming to UT. What they appreciated about the dorms’, school’s and city’s diversity was the opportunity to “rub shoulders” with fellow students and adults from different backgrounds and be in a milieu that considered such acceptance the norm. “You embrace the culture here, and it is diverse and accepting.” Two students remarked that the culture

of diversity helped attract them to UT. One student felt differently. Her observation was that UT tended to reinforce people's existing stereotypes because students from different backgrounds, races and cultures tended to "hang together" and not mix well with those from different backgrounds, races and cultures.

Value

The general feeling in the group was that they "loved" being at UT; in one student's word: "The longer I'm here, the more in love with UT I am; it's life changing." Perhaps they liked UT too much because none seemed particularly excited about graduating in two months. A couple came right out and said they wished they could just stay at UT because "there's so much more to do here than I've time to do." Some were fearful about going out into the job market. One wondered if she had received what she needed to meet her career goals.

Most Appreciated about UT: When looking back and remembering the experiences they had at UT, several students said their professors would be most memorable:

- "The impressive professors I had."
- "My professors; they've changed me and how I see the world."
- "The academic life of the university."

Others mentioned:

- "The freedom I had here."
- "All the opportunities, in education, in living in Austin, in learning."
- "How active I was in the organizations I joined."
- "The friendships I made."

Persistence

Every student intended to graduate, feeling that the investment in time and money would be worthless if they didn't. One student questioned the whole idea of coming to UT and not graduating: "There are such smart students here; we're all 100 percent dedicated to graduating. When I was a freshman, and I think it's true of more people than just me, I thought everyone was smarter than me; it pushes you to reach your full potential."

GPA

The average GPA based on self-reported data was 3.29.

University of Florida, Gainesville
Seniors, first group
8 students, April 8

Academic Engagement

Interactions with Professors: Students report that as freshmen, they did not visit their instructors during office hours, feeling both too intimidated and that professors would not be interested in talking to one of 500 students from a core curriculum lecture class. They became more confident as they got older. Several said that as freshmen or even as sophomores they didn't understand how important it was to have a relationship with their instructors; but, over the past two years as class size decreased, their instructors were more likely to know them through class attendance. That familiarity made them feel more confident about approaching their instructors.

A few students felt that their freshman instructors simply didn't care about meeting students face to face, especially those teaching large core lecture classes. Therefore, they relied on email for contact or went to see their section TA. One student said she went to an instructor's office hours once as a freshman and the instructor was "super rude" to her, discouraging any further visits. Another student said her freshman mentor urged her to go visit her instructors during their office hours to promote face recognition; now, as a Senior, she goes because she has substantive questions to discuss. "My reasons for going have changed substantially." Most students felt it was important to have a more personal relationship with their professors because they needed letters of recommendation for future research positions, intern positions, and graduate school.

Social interaction with professors was very rare. Only one student reported non-academic interactions with her professors. She attributed this to being in pre-med and working closely with some of her professors at the hospital and then running into these same professors at basketball games.

Skipping Class: This group did report skipping class more often now that they live off campus. They gave several reasons.

- No motivation to go to class because many classes can be taken on-line ("Almost all my junior and sophomore classes were offered online or I go to the Tutorial Zone to get what I missed in class.")
- Once home, a sense of inertia sets in.
- When they were freshmen, classrooms were closer, so it was more convenient and they went more.

Scholastically, university life is very rigorous for upperclassmen, so the sense of peace and calm attached to living off campus becomes a respite from the rigorous of being on campus ("at work"). Once they're in that bubble of peace and calm, students tend to want to stay there.

As freshman, some students say they felt “terrorized” and hated school because it was confusing with so much happening on campus. Students also felt that some large class formats encouraged skipping—“If the professor is just going to read the textbook to you, why not just skip and read it on your own? Plus you’re putting your brain to work when you’re teaching yourself from the textbook.” The teachers’ personalities do matter to students. If he or she is entertaining and personable, students are more likely to attend that class. However, students agreed that most professors teaching first- and second-year students don’t really care; they are interested only in their research. “They don’t care if you succeed; they don’t really want to teach. Others are real teachers; I’ll go to their classes.”

Students also agreed that it’s different when you get to your major. Professors are more interested in making sure their students succeed. One student said—and others agreed—that when she was a freshman, she struggled more even though she went to class more often; but, while in class, she spent the time texting. Some students felt that for the first three years, professors were trying to weed out students so that only students “who could run the hurdles” got to senior year. Another said that freshman year 2,000 students were enrolled in pre-med classes. The professors didn’t care about any of them. But as seniors, those left were “serious students, not just kids going to school.” Bottom line is that class attendance goes up in junior and senior years because class sizes are smaller and students have recognized how important a personal relationship is to getting solid letters of recommendation.

Email: For most students, email is a frequent way of conducting “meaningful” contact with their instructors, but, they say, it’s better for small questions and issues. Some say it depends on the instructor’s preference; some discourage email in favor of in-person contact. Most faculty reply to emails within 24 hours, but “if they’re not on top of their game,” it may take longer. One student said he only make in-person contact and doesn’t use email.

Study Habits: Most students said they found it difficult to study in the dorm. For some, the dorm was “where I sleep,” so if they tried to study in their room, they ended up napping. Once living off campus, students tended to study in their room or in their apartments’ living areas rather than going back to campus to study in the library or at a coffee shop. For one thing, going back to campus means having to lug everything that might be needed—books, notes, laptop, food. Plus, “if you have to get up, say to use the bathroom, you have to pack up everything and take it with you or it might not be there when you get back.” And the library can be a very social place, especially for freshmen. “After so many minutes, someone says, ‘I’m hungry,’ so we’d all get up and go out.” It can be difficult to find a place in the library. “I can’t waste 30 minutes trying to find a table.” Several also said they could only study while alone. Others found their off-campus apartments more conducive to their all-night study habits. But a few said their apartments were too distracting—it was too tempting to turn on the TV or play a video game or cook, rather than study.

Break in Schedule Behavior: If students have a two-hour break and the second class isn't important [for example, a large lecture], students say they probably would go home and skip the second class. Others would find something to do on campus, like go to the gym and work out. Several would take the bus home and then drive back, especially if they had to be on campus late and couldn't or wouldn't take the bus back home—mainly because the bus stopped running or walking from the bus stop to home was “dicey.”

Most said that the library was popular but not productive. Most students are just killing time between classes, not studying. “Don't assume the library means studying. It's a self-delusion. You want to feel good about your work habits, so you say you're going to the library to study. But do you? More students are on Facebook or are talking loud about their lives, not working or studying.” Some specialized libraries (law, health sciences, etc.) are sought out by students who want to put in serious study time. They're not only quieter (“full of serious people”), but they have ample outlets for charging equipment; the main library is lacking in outlets.

Social Engagement

The freshman mindset is “let's do everything!” Students go to meetings and clubs because their friends go. Or they go because “walking around campus, you see stuff going on or being advertised and you're more likely to go.” Or “freshmen are almost forced to socialize, especially in the dorms. It's hard to separate school and your social life; now I'm only in organizations that I appreciate and they're on campus—so I still go on campus.” But living on campus has its drawbacks. “On campus, you run into events that turn out to be a total waste of time. Living off campus, I'm more choosy about what I go to.” All the students report that they have limited their on-campus engagement but “do more things that mean something to me now” whether that's volunteer work, clubs related to one's major or another activity “that's something I personally want to do.”

There is also more time spent with friends independent of any university event. “As a freshman I was in a ton of clubs. But I got to feel too spread out, like every day I was at my sorority house. I'm not in any clubs now and hardly ever go to my sorority house. I do feel less involved, but I don't feel like driving to my sorority house for a mediocre meal. I see my friends versus clubs; we're doing what *we* want.” “As a freshman, I was so involved, lots of intramurals. Now I hang out with my friends. I'll go to selected events that interest me, but I don't join organizations.”

Students involved in university organizations tend to focus on organizations that they believe will help build their resumes. Freshman year joining is all about socialization. As students progress, they participate in those activities that are resume building or personally important. “It's a future-looking thing. I'm involved with organizations that are important to me and my future like the business fraternity and women's organizations. When I was a freshman, I had time to waste; now I don't.”

A couple students had a different opinion. For them, the organizations they're involved with are “for fun.” “As a freshman, I was focused on getting into medical school. Now my activities are social, for fun, to take my mind off school. I spend my days studying;

night is for fun.” “As a freshman I joined organizations for social reasons; I have a full-time job now. I don’t have to be interning to build my resume. Now I can do something for fun.”

Barriers to Being On Campus: The distance from campus is a barrier (social and academic) for many because “driving is an issue; driving and parking eat up time.” The shuttles are “too inconvenient.” Students who miss the bus that would have gotten them to class on time, stay put, skip class.

Housing Selection

Students gave as reasons for wanting to move out of the dorm:

- Apartments are less expensive (than the dorm plus food plan) and nicer (than the dorm)
- Own bathroom
- Kitchen
- Dorm was gross; sharing a room was gross; wanted own bedroom
- Dining plan is expensive, more than buying your own food and cooking
- Get away from RAs and the dorm rules
- Independence
- Most people do it; it’s the thing to do.
- Able to decorate
- Privacy
- So I could study at home, which I couldn’t do in the dorm

All the students considered living off campus as a step towards adulthood and feeling more independent. “It makes you feel more grown up, even in ways you don’t like, like having to clean the toilet or take the trash out.” “It’s also bad in the dorms when you have to schedule your life, like taking shower. You have to work around the popular times and it’s creepy to have to walk down the hall wrapped in a towel [to use the communal bathroom].”

The students agreed that they felt dorm living was more stressful than living off-campus. The belief that apartment living is a step towards adulthood was best summed up by this student’s remark: “Apartment life is like a commercial training wheel—paying rent, knowing when to clean, having to cook, do laundry, how leaving the light on increases your utility bill. It’s like a growth process—you live with your parents, then the dorm, which transition you to living by yourself, then sharing your apartment with your roommates and then after school you’re totally on your own.”

Asked what factors they had in mind when selecting an off-campus property, they replied:

- Price
- On a bus route
- Size of bedroom
- Safety

- Pet friendly
- Location (ability to get to classes easily), but prices increase the closer you are to campus
- Price
- Safe
- Same money as dorm plus meal plan
- Privacy (ability to have my own room)
- Price
- Convenience
- Safety
- Lots of other sorority girls; close to my sorority house
- Looked for a place in Midtown, where all the bars and parties are
- Convenience
- Amenities
- Price
- Location—on bus route
- How cute (how decorated)
- Furnished (“unfurnished would add to my cost by making me buy a lot of furniture”)
- What’s included, what’s not (electric, water, cable, internet, parking)
- Walking distance and time to campus

Group consensus:

- Location (convenience) tempered by price. [Note that for some students convenience is defined as walking distance, others by proximity to a bus route.]
- Safety
- Parking
- Privacy (for those for whom this was important)
- Amenities

Required Dorm Living: Students agreed that the dorm experience should be required for first-year students, otherwise they would be “closed off” from meeting other students. Several students said they would transfer—or not attend UF—if required to live in a dorm all four years unless they could be an RA and thereby be assigned a private room. But most said they would put up with it just to attend UF.

Diversity

This group’s discussion of diversity was rather weak. For most students, the dorm is a real melting pot, especially if they’re from a less diverse area or a “themed” high school. For example, one student who attended a religious high school defined the term “diversity” as learning to live with those holding different or no religious beliefs. Many felt that because the university itself is so diverse, “you don’t have to live in a dorm to experience diversity.” The feeling is that any club, activity or study group—even one’s group of friends—is going to be diverse.

One student felt she was less tolerant because “People here are rude, don’t care about you. Sorority girls are not diverse at all. I come from a part of Florida that is a lot more diverse and more accepting than UF.”

Value

All but one student felt very attached to the university and positive about their experience and the value they had received for the time and money invested. Individual comments were as follows:

- “I loved my four years here. I wish I had done more. I feel I got disengaged a little as a junior and senior.”
- “It’s been a real learning curve but I’m really happy.”
- “Enjoyed it. I brag about UF all the time.”
- “My first two years were difficult. I couldn’t find my voice; there are too many people here. But the last two years, I found my voice (social and intellectual) and am happier.”
- “Once I got into a program as a junior that was closer knit, I felt more a part of the university.”
- “I never found my niche. I would push off people socially, never felt connected with UF. If you’re not into football, you’re not part of the group.”
- “Thankful. I feel there are countless opportunities ahead of me not just socially but professionally. The entire school is a resource.”
- “I feel UF has helped make me a better person.”

Persistence

There was no indication that students would not graduate.

GPA

The average GPA for this group based on self-reported data was 3.59, the highest of all groups.

University of Florida, Gainesville
Seniors, second group,
10 students, April 9

Academic Engagement

Most students in this group agreed that as seniors they had far more contact with their professors than when freshmen and that their study habits—and grades—had improved. Some reasons given for this were that when you live on campus:

- You're near all the "distractions" on campus
- Your roommate might not be on the same schedule or is "just a pain."
- You feel you don't have to be serious about schoolwork when you're a freshman.
- Living off campus gives students "a quieter place to study," typically, their room.

Drawbacks to living off campus included more difficulty in scheduling group study "because everyone lives someplace different; takes some negotiating" and the "transportation barrier." "The bus just takes too long." That was also a reason given for not going to office hours.

Students did not bother with going to see their professors as freshman and were more likely to do so as juniors and seniors living off campus. "I got more serious about school and have had more contact with my professors [than I did as a freshman] because they're interested in helping you for the long term." One student, who has frequent contact with her professors, said that when she lived on campus, the convenience made it easy to postpone going to see them.

The transportation issue also affected whether or not students would skip classes: "It was easier on campus; you could just roll out of bed 15 minutes before class and make it; that's not true now." Some students, especially those without their own means of transportation, did miss the convenience of being on campus; but, for most, the dorm experience was less than pleasant, the big irritants being incompatible roommates and lack of space and privacy. In general, students did not feel dorm life facilitates studying, though one student remarked that "the study rooms are the best feature of dorm living."

Students feel many professors "are not really present." They're only there to do research, not teach and have no background in educational methods. They may know the material but can't teach it.

The one student who felt he was not doing as well academically as when a freshman traced it to the freshman courses being so easy, not that he had moved off campus.

Study Habits: Most students study in their apartments and gave two reasons—the hassle of going back to campus to study and the lack of outlets in the main library. Others did use the specialty libraries, which are not only quieter than the main library but often closer to the university's parking facilities.

Housing Selection Criteria

When picking a property, students say they thought about:

- Price and location (not sketchy)
- Space/privacy
- On bus route
- All inclusive
- Good kitchen (to be able to cook instead of use the university's meal plan)

Asked why there were no amenities on their list, they replied that property amenities were not very important because the university offers all the amenities.

Students were pretty certain that being required to live in a dorm all four years, while it might make them miserable, wouldn't deter them from coming to UF.

- "I'd still go here; what other in-state options are there?"
- "I'd be miserable but I'd still come here."

Social Engagement

This group of students showed the same general pattern—joining lots of clubs and activities on campus freshman year to meet people and then, after freshman year, focusing on clubs related to their majors and/or those related to some meaningful personal interest. Students are fairly utilitarian when it comes to which clubs they join with those related to their majors being their first priority.

Several students reported a spike in taking on club leadership roles sophomore year, but giving that up as they moved into their majors in favor of clubs and organizations related to their major, their jobs, and internships. A few said they dropped out of all their clubs "because of the difficulties in going." Two students reported feeling disconnected living off-campus because they didn't find out about events they might want to attend or because of the difficulties of getting back and forth to campus. "You feel disconnected if you don't physically go to campus." Another student commented that "of course we feel disconnected; we're about to graduate and already looking beyond the university."

Diversity

The few students from large metropolitan areas such as Miami, thought the university not at all diverse. They, and several other students, felt the biggest diversity issue was because of the way Greeks look down on non-Greeks. Picking up on the "quality of roommate" theme, one student said that if she had had a roommate who was more accepting of her, her entire college experience would have been different and better.

On the other hand, one student commented that "I didn't think I'd be able to get along with people so different than me. I found I could. What matters is how you spend your free time!" This last statement about free time picks up on the thought that students feel the clubs are more diverse than the dorms. Students felt the university keeps students—especially foreign students—segregated by assigning students different dorms depending on their interests, majors, citizenship, etc.

Value

All the students thought the university had given them an outstanding education and experience and their degree was something to be extremely proud of. Several mentioned the outstanding level of school spirit, attributable to the school's "sports culture." One of the most common things they said they will take away from their four years is the friends they've made (along with the expectation that these friends will be useful to them in their careers). Several also mentioned the personal growth they underwent while at university.

- "I got more serious and stronger; more confident in myself and my goals."
- "I learned how to prioritize my time."
- "Looking back at where I was when I got here and where I am now, I'm very proud of how far I've come."
- "I learned a lot about myself and other people, how I would react to things."

Persistence

All the students expected to graduate and gave the following reasons:

- "For my parents. They pushed me and my siblings to do better, so I did. I pushed myself to live up to their expectations."
- "Family expectations. My sister dropped out so I just said 'I'm going to do it!'"
- "Because of my family's support and their being proud of me. I'm the first one in my family to go to college."
- "I'm a first-generation college student; that's very motivating."
- "We worked so hard to get here; I'm going to get that degree."
- "Fear of not succeeding in getting a good job and salary."

There was no comment indicating that living off campus negatively affected persistence.

GPA

The average GPA for this group based on self-reported data was 3.55.

University of Florida, Gainesville Sophomores

10 students, April 8

Academic Engagement

Students felt that as sophomores they interacted more with their instructors than when they were freshmen. “I feel older, more confident, can talk more easily to my professors. I felt less confident as a freshman.” One student was particularly vocal (but most students nodded in agreement) about the need to make the effort to interact one on one with professors to get solid letters of recommendation for professional school. He also made the point that whether a student feels comfortable approaching his or her professors depends somewhat on the professor, whether she is intimidating and put-offish or approachable.

Several students commented that face time with professors could also help grades: “If they know you, they’re more likely to be more lenient on you.” Some had very sophisticated approaches to what students call “psyching out their professors.” They offered each other advice such as, “Get to know them before you fail that first big test,” “Don’t be all business, chat them up a bit,” and “As a sophomore, you have to realize it’s up to you [to make the first step]; what grade you get is up to you.” “*Wanting* to go [to office hours] gets replaced when you become a sophomore with *needing* to go because now you need that letter of recommendation.”

But students tended not to take advantage of office hours basically because often office hours are not convenient to when the students are on campus. One student said, “I would be more likely to go if I lived on campus but, when I lived on campus, in fact, I didn’t go!” Another observed that as a freshman you think you have lots of time, four years is never going to come. “Now it’s just two years left.”

Some said that it’s not the distance they live from campus that determines whether they’ll visit their professors or attendant classes but the time (“wasted time”) and hassle involved in getting there. A couple students remarked that they had “little reason to be on campus because most courses are online.” [Note that sophomores are still taking a lot of core classes which are large lectures available online.] Other students rely on email contact with their professors, often because “the bus takes 30 minutes to get to campus, emails take seconds.” For some, a sprinkling of harder classes prompts them to go to office hours. Also many have tutors who have office hours; they are more likely to visit their tutor than their professors. If they’re on campus and it’s close to office hours, they’ll stay if they need to. One student mentioned that the dorm RAs (the good ones) put on programs to ensure you go to office hours and even assigned study buddies based on mutual coursework. By contrast, it is harder to find study-buddies in the off-campus community.

A couple students mentioned having had interactions with their professors outside class. One while working out in the gym. One had to meet one-on-one with a TA as part of a large lecture class. Another sometimes would walk to class with a certain professor

because he taught two of her classes. Another said that her business school professors had morning coffee and doughnuts for their students in the courtyard outside the School of Business.

Skipping Class: While there were some comments about students being more inclined to skip due to the transportation hassle (especially early morning classes), most respondents seemed still highly motivated to attend their classes. Typical comments were: “It’s [going to class] the difference between passing and learning” and “I need that structure to learn.” However, one student felt she learned more from her clubs than from many of her large lecture or online classes. “I don’t miss the classroom.” Several other students agreed with her, at least about not missing the classroom.

Study Habits: This group of students was almost unanimous in expressing a preference for studying at home rather than in the library because it’s more comfortable, more soothing and relaxed and all their study material is handy. Trying to study in the dorm was difficult because “It’s jail-like; gets you depressed.” Only one student said she couldn’t study in her apartment and had to use the library.

Social Engagement

Dorm Life: One student commented that, when living in the dorms, the level of social activity depends on what floor and even which dorm. If you’re in a suite with its own bathroom, you may have four roommates, but you’re not really involved with everyone on your floor. Engagement with the entire floor happens in the older dorms, the ones with communal bathrooms. And students do feel that there’s a change in the level of social engagement when they move off campus. One student told this story: “My roommates and I love to cook. When I moved into my off campus apartment, I baked chocolate cookies and then we took them around to everyone on our floor. Most people could have cared less and very few remembered us when we would pass in the hall later. The cookies were a little burnt; maybe that had something to do with it!”

Joining Clubs: This group was not high on clubs. Many felt the clubs were very cliquy or the speakers were “lame.” The way the students expressed themselves, they seemed to be in the midst of a process of culling their clubs and activities to ones that better matched their academic and personal interests, met at convenient times and whose purpose was “helping others” in some way. They recognize that they have to choose the ones that are “worth it” because more factors come into play now that they live off campus and are sophomores. Those factors included the transportation barrier, harder class work, jobs and more focus on organizations connected to their potential majors. “I’m weeding out clubs and activities to focus on those that help me, are important to me; it’s like changing from a bee to a wasp.” One student, who was in training to become an RA, said that when she was a freshman she joined 20 different clubs. Perhaps because she considers herself to be in “sophomore slump,” she realizes that she can’t do all 20 so she’s in one professional club and one club for fun.

The convenience issue was critical for several students. As one observed: “Most organizations meet in the evenings. How do I get home if the bus has stopped running?”

Another reason for limiting the number of campus events but increasing the likelihood of attending those judged most important or relevant was the feeling—acknowledged by several students—that when on campus it’s easier to say “Well, I’ll miss this meeting because I can just go to the next one,” whereas when there’s a degree of logistical planning required, students are more likely to attend an event or club meeting than postpone it.

Housing Selection Criteria

When selecting a property, these students looked for/considered:

- Price (primary consideration if location ok)
- Location, including all the surrounding places to shop, eat, drink (#2) but sometimes your budget forces you to sacrifice a convenient location closer to campus to something more affordable much further away.
- Good kitchen
- Study room(s) on site
- Own space, own stuff
- Cleaner

Summation: This group of students used the concept of “affordable location” as the basis for their search. For some “affordable” was stronger than “location”; for others, the opposite. Often, but not always, which factor dominated was influenced by the amount of parental contribution to the cost of school.

One student was particular eloquent on how coming through the front door of her off-campus apartment gave her a “glorious” feeling. She felt if you lived in a dorm you were still at school, so it felt like “never-ending school.” The dorm didn’t feel like home, but her apartment did. One needs “a place to sit and relax and that’s not a shared bedroom.

Moving off campus made the students feel more responsible, several because it requires better time management skills, and, for all, more like they had grown up some.

Diversity

The dorms are definitely something of a melting pot, and some did say it gave them the opportunity to meet people they wouldn’t have “bumped into” in their hometowns. Even cities like Tallahassee are so segregated that the white student from Tallahassee said he had never had any black friends growing up: “The dorm gave me that opportunity.” Nonetheless, most students in the group thought “like sticks with like,” and felt that there was more diversity in their clubs and organizations than in their dorms.

They also said they were already accepting of people who were different, some because of how they were raised and some because they came from extremely diverse metropolitan areas like Miami. The RA-in-training in the group said putting diverse roommates together could go either way. The university is extremely hesitant to make roommate changes when roommates can’t get along, preferring that the student “dual it out.” Sometimes they do; sometimes they just don’t talk for the rest of the year. In some cases, the kids are afraid to confront each other and the parents get involved, which can

get very unpleasant. She noted the potential for violence when roommates don't get along, citing an example of a straight roommate who fantasized that his gay roommate wanted to "jump him," and pulled a knife on the gay roommate, though the gay roommate wasn't the slightest bit attracted to him and had made no overtures.

Value

This group loved their university (exactly how they put it!) though several complained that, in general, college costs too much money, leaving students saddled with huge student loans. Several said whatever the cost, it was worth it because UF was a "top flight school."

One observed that many students who complained about the school also didn't maximize what the university has to offer; another noted that the scale of the university provides additional opportunities to do research, get internships, etc. Another observed that the cost "forces you to be accountable and responsible," that is, get good grades and graduate.

Persistency

The group only had a few minutes to discuss this issue but everyone expressed a strong intent to graduate.

GPA

The average GPA for this group based on self-reported data was 3.49.

University of Florida, Gainesville
Juniors, first group
10 students, April 8

Academic Engagement

Interaction with Professors: Students were much keener than they say they were as freshmen or sophomores to establish some type of personal relationship with their professors, primarily because of the importance of receiving excellent letters of recommendation and because a personal relationship can have a positive effect on grades. Students agreed that while building a relationship was more important, it was also harder because they do live off campus and there is at least a perceived transportation barrier. Students also report better interactions with their professors because classes get smaller as you “go up,” so professors get to know you and that makes them “more approachable.” Two students said they had no contact with their professors, one because “the work is not challenging enough to motivate me to go to talk to the professors” and the other because “most of my business courses I can take online so I have no connection with my professors.”

Study Habits: This group felt they were more serious about all facets of their academic life than when they were freshman living in the dorms mostly because there was so much socializing (and drinking) going on in their freshman year. Studying took a back seat. Several students mentioned how difficult it was to study in the dorm because of the noise and socialization. “The minute I would open our dorm room door, there would be 20 people in our room wanting to do something other than study.” The library became the default study area, though it was described as noisy and crowded. None of the students mentioned using the dorm’s study room. They were split on their current use of the library.

As barriers to using the library, students mentioned how hard it was to pack up everything needed to study in the library and the transportation barrier. Others mentioned how noisy and crowded the library typically is and how many students “including me, reward themselves for the struggle to get to the library with Facebook sessions, not studying.” On the other hand, a few students found the library a better place to study than their apartments, only because the apartment offers too many distractions—cleaning, cooking, etc.—or “roommate interference” (noise, wanting to go out, etc.). Still, the majority of students study in their own room or apartment living room and frequently stated that it was easier to study there than in the library or in the dorms.

One reason students aren’t too worried about skipping core classes is that they can avail themselves of various online resources and services that help them stay current with their school work. UF, for example, provides a service called “Tutoring Zone” that, according to students, offers the ability to take UF core courses in a shorter time. There’s also a private service, Smokin’Notes, that works with the major Florida universities to offer, for a fee, study guides for 17 of University of Florida’s core classes. The guides include class notes, reading summaries, flash cards and practice exams. So, as one student put it, “You

can't cut your smaller classes and they're harder, so you get smarter about what you can cut by using Tutoring Zone and Smokin'Notes."

These juniors did feel more focused on their studies and grades. By contrast, as freshmen, they were "focused on the new—meeting new people, doing new things. As a freshman I probably went out three nights a week, and the library, that was just talk, nothing productive. Now I don't go out as much. I recognize that graduation is coming; it's a wake-up call." As another student put it: "I take my classes a lot more seriously now than I did as a freshman. I feel I prioritize better, use my time better. I feel busier, like I have better life habits. It's okay to be lost as a freshman, but now you can't hide. Classes are too small. You have to make decisions and grow up. When I was a freshman, the herd was my guide; wherever my friends went, I tagged along. You think, 'Hey, I've got all this time [before graduation].' Now I worry about my grades, getting an internship, paying bills."

Peer Support: Asked whether their freshman friends provided a social safety net during periods of personal crisis, students felt that the number of friends they had now was smaller but the quality of support they received from those friends was better. "My roommates are my bros; they're *always* there for me."

Social Engagement

The group agreed that as freshmen they often selected events based on whether they were free and offered food. Engagement tended to be random. Little time was invested in any one club or activity. Though a couple students reported an absolute decline in the number of university events they attend (some level of disengagement), most reported a shift from social- and sport-related clubs to ones with an academic flavor, especially those connected with their majors.

Of the ones reporting some level of disengagement, the disengagement is not as absolute as might be suspected. The primary cause is having to devote precious time to one's job; but, for many students, their jobs are campus-related, for example, working at the student paper, which probably provides more engagement with the university than membership in a random number of clubs. As one student put it: "Your priorities become work, school, home; I'm probably in as many clubs as I was as a freshman but I don't do the random events like I used to do."

The transportation barrier also comes into play when students discuss withdrawing from clubs and campus activities. "Most clubs and organizations meet in the evening; if I go, then I don't have a way home." One student said that "club quality" had something to do with her shifting to more academic clubs; "it's less like high school, more like college now."

Housing Selection Criteria

The dorms are noisy, offer little to no privacy and the communal bathrooms are "yuck, requiring you to wear flip flops when you shower." So the desire for one's own bathroom

often becomes, especially for women, a primary apartment requirement. What students were looking for was an apartment that:

- Was mine
- Had no RAs
- Allowed you to have friends come and visit whenever you wanted
- Furnished with a real bed (as opposed to the dorm's twins and bunk beds)
- Offered a good location
- Cost less than room and board at the university

The students agreed that the basic formula was #1—location; #2—price, or what could be termed “affordable location.”

Transportation: This group of students expressed some but not major frustration with having to take the bus. Typical comments included: “The bus is not a hassle” and “it’s not a big deal to take the bus once you get used to it and allow for the time.” In fact, the need to plan (development of time management skills) was even mentioned as a positive by a couple students. There were a few who felt the bus could also be an excuse not to go to class if the class is 60 to 90 minutes long and one where the students feels that “I don’t really learn anything.” A few students choose not to take the bus and bike to campus. At night, the bus was less convenient because it stops running too early for students to use it as a way of getting back from campus after evening classes, events or meetings.

Diversity

Most of the students felt the dorm experience was positive in exposing them to students from different backgrounds. One felt that some people close themselves off and thereby lose the opportunity to get to know people from different backgrounds. One recounted an incident in her dorm where a black girl was assigned a roommate who was white and from a very well-off family—and also a racist who accused her black roommate of “some awful things; the rest of us were horrified.” Another student felt the dorms were less diverse than her high school. Most students commented they were accepting before coming to UF but that the dorm experience was still positive. This comment, “I feel I’m more rounded because of it,” was typical.

Value

Everyone in the group felt they were getting good value from their university experience and were proud to be part of a top-ranked school with so many famous faculty members. They did not express any feeling of being disengaged from their university. Quite the contrary; they seemed dedicated to their major field of study, eager to move into their senior year and graduate.

GPA

The average GPA for this group based on self-reported data was 3.48.

University of Florida, Gainesville
Juniors, second group
12 students, April 9

Academic Engagement

Interaction with Professors: As for involvement with their professors, students felt as freshmen their professors were “super scary” and, therefore, not approachable. Now they make time to see them. In large lectures, it’s hard to get to know the professors. But as juniors, the ratio of students to professor is around 20 to 1, making it easier to get to know one’s professors and the professors seem to try to get to know their students, too.

Study Habits: This group was mixed in their opinions on whether moving off campus helped or hindered their study habits. Several thought they had better study habits living on campus because it was so much more convenient to go to the library or because their apartments offered too many distractions; plus, once home, the effort involved in going back to campus seemed overwhelming. A couple students solved the problem by routinely using the study room in their student housing community.

But most of the group felt they had better study habits living off campus because on campus it’s too easy to get distracted by everything that’s happening there, plus for some the dorm room is more a place to sleep than study so naps take precedent over school work. The library is irritating because students talk too much, interfering with concentration. For these students, their apartments are home, not just a house like the dorm, so there’s a healthy separation of life and work.

A few students in the group agreed that the independence that comes from living off campus “comes at a time price, decrease in study habits, a loss of the camaraderie of studying with a group of friends.” Not everyone finds studying with a group appealing and several students made that point in follow-up comments.

Skipping Class: Students in this group do skip classes when it’s safe to do so. The larger the class, the “safer” it is to skip without harming your grades. Attendance is much more important in smaller classes, especially those related to one’s major. One major justification for skipping classes is the availability of class material online. “For some classes, you can skip all the time and still get a good grade if you do the online work rigorously.”

Social Engagement

Only one student in this group acknowledged a “transportation barrier” that prevented involvement in clubs or organizations. But the pattern of membership described by students was that they joined many clubs and activities as freshmen either to get to know people or because one followed one’s friends. After freshman year, clubs were winnowed down to those that either were strongly related to their interests or, even more, were related to their majors.

There was no mention that by living off campus students felt less engaged with their university, but they did seem to have formed a narrow definition of “university,” so that it came almost to mean “major area of study.” As long as they felt plugged into their major, they felt just as much a part of the university living off campus as they had as freshmen living on campus. “My major is my hub. Everything revolves around that.”

Non-University University Events & Activities: Students made a very interesting observation about events and activities by pointing out that the Greek system “has its own events within the matrix of the larger university.” Therefore, when talking about social engagement, one should include not just participating in events sponsored by the university (either directly or through its many clubs and organizations) but also events held by—and often but not always limited to—Greeks. This is something we didn’t foresee.

Selecting Housing

Student preferences when selecting a property included:

- Space, personal, private; not wanting to share a room
- Less expensive than living on campus
- Price
- Location
- Ability to choose roommates: “In the dorm you’re stuck with someone whether they’re nice or not”
- Own bathroom; not having to wear flip flops in the shower
- Convenience to bus line
- Just wanting to get out of the dorm “Bad things happen in the dorm” and away from the RAs “RAs are always watching you.” Dorms feel like a “prison.”
- Better security (this student felt security was better at her property than it was on campus where “anyone can slip in the front door of any dorm and get to your room.” Others agreed.

The group did agree that “affordable location” was a good description of their basic search paradigm, but wanted to make it clear that the issue of getting private space and not having to share a bathroom were also extremely important to them.

Students made multiple references to how their apartment felt like “home,” whereas the dorms never did. Some typical comments:

- “Who wants to live at school?”
- “My apartment feels more like my home now than my parents’ house.”
- “No matter what the time tradeoff, it’s worth it to live off campus.”
- “It’s an essential experience, part of growing up.”
- “There’s like an invisible barrier when you get home; cross it and the rest of the world’s shut out.”

On the other hand, students also recognize the value of living on campus for freshmen:

- “It’s the way you meet people.”

- “I always had my own room, so it was sometimes hard to share space with my roomie. But you learn to share. At least I did.”
- “It’s easier to learn about campus if you live there.”
- “Dorm living forces you to be on campus and part of all its activities.”
- “The culture on campus is very different when you’re there 24/7.”

Diversity

This group felt there was only a minor increase in their acceptance of students from different backgrounds because of living in the dorm. As with other UF groups, students felt the campus and its clubs and organizations were more diverse than the dorms. One student did say she had become more considerate of the way other people do things, but she was referring more to how those from a similar background are raised to do things differently as opposed to a better understanding of people from different backgrounds. As for the property being diverse, one student summed it up by saying “My apartment [community] could be diverse. How would I know? I only know my roommates.” A theme heard in other groups and at other schools, too.

The biggest diversity issue was between Greeks and non-Greeks and the impact on friendships once a friend joined a fraternity or sorority. One student summed it up—to agreeing nods from the other students—this way: “The question you have to answer is ‘Where are your friends?’ Greek life is a powerful magnet pulling you away from the friends you made in the dorm. During rush, Greek life is very time consuming. If you try to maintain friendships with both your old dorm group and your new brothers, that takes commitment and time. It gets hard.” Several of the non-Greek students in the group said, as follow up, that they felt suddenly abandoned by their dorm friends who had gone Greek and, worse, made to feel like “we’re not good enough” because they hadn’t pledged.

Value

These students were unabashedly Gators! “I will always be a Gator. I wouldn’t change this experience [of attending UF] for anything.” One very strong reason for this was they understand that Florida alums will be of immense help during their professional lives, immediately after graduation and thereafter. “Gators hire Gators” “The Gator Nation is EVERYWHERE” were common remarks. They felt the university encouraged networking, accumulating real-world experience through internships and would facilitate their talking to successful alumni in their field. Plus students believe that the university has “the largest career resource center in the country,” making them confident of finding meaningful, well-paying jobs after graduating.

They said they were “excited” and proud to be at UF, specifically mentioning the school’s culture and its team spirit.

Persistency

Every student intended to graduate. One wished her school (Architecture) wasn’t so hard but she planned to stick with it. For these students, there was no relationship between

where they lived and their intent to graduate. They know how important it is to have that diploma.

GPA

The average GPA for this group based on self-reported data was 3.50.

University of Florida, Gainesville
Seniors, third group
11 students, April 9

Academic Engagement

Interaction with Professors: This group of seniors felt establishing and maintaining a personal relationship with professors was very important for both grades and recommendations. As one put it: “For me, talking with my professors is even more important than attending class.” Most maintained that moving off campus actually improved their interactions with their professors, though, for some, the type of interaction tended to change from in-person conversations to using email and, for those professors who had Facebook pages, exchanges via Facebook.

Several students mentioned that living off campus forced them to develop better time-management skills because it took additional planning to get to campus early enough to talk to their professors either during office hours or before class. “It’s not about how close or far from campus you live; you just have to learn to set your time to include talking with them.” Several of those students also thought dorm living made it easier to go back to their dorm rooms and sleep between classes instead of studying or trying to meet with a professor. Having to use the bus was a barrier to meeting with professors for several students—“It’s a five minute drive to campus but a 45 minute ride on the bus and the buses are always packed.” Two students felt they were less inclined to make the effort to talk with their professors, one because of job commitments and other priorities and one because it just seemed so logistically difficult (“It’s a major production to get to campus and take everything you might need with you”) compared to when she lived in the dorm.

Study Habits: This group was split between those who prefer studying in their apartments and those who still went to campus to study because “there are too many distractions in my apartment,” including the temptation to nap. Yet those who preferred to study at home said they did so partly because there are too many distractions on campus, including too much noise in the library. Several students mentioned the benefit their apartment provided by creating a sense of separation from what they called their “job” of attending school. “If I study at school, I feel like I’m still in class; it feel like I’m at work 24/7.” A few who felt they had been forced to hone their time-management skills by living off campus talked about arranging their class schedule so they had days when they stayed on campus, using the time between classes to be more prepared and/or meet with their professors.

Housing Selection

Students gave as reasons for moving to their current property:

- Ability to pick roommates/live with friends
- Location (how far from campus)
- Price
- Amenities offered
- It’s cool not to live on campus

- Cheaper than room and board on campus
- Have your own space/privacy
- Have your own bathroom (and not having to wear sandals when you shower)
- Dorm room is not a “home”
- Safety (gated community)

Groups of friends often moved together with the group weighing the members’ various issues (price, location, amenities, etc.) and picking a property which was acceptable (though not always preferable) to all members of the group. As one student said, “I really didn’t mind dorm living and didn’t really want to leave; I moved to be with my friends.” Note that most students wouldn’t agree with her on dorm life. What appealed to them was moving to a less restrictive environment with no RAs and more personal space. Several students were attracted to off campus housing because of the sense off campus apartment living gave them of being separated from their “job” of attending university.

Safety was a significant issue for the women in this group. Many considered Gainesville “sketchy,” partly because the university texted so many alerts about crimes on and off campus that students began to question the safety of areas previously considered “safe.” A couple students felt safer in the dorm because all the residents were students whereas their apartment community, though billed as for students only, was actually mixed. For these students the campus was a “sanctuary,” with campus police easily available via strategically placed call boxes. Other students, mentioning the university’s text alerts, believed that the notion that there was better safety on campus was simply university propaganda.

Diversity

Yes, living in dorm forces students to interact with strangers, but students said it could be good or bad. A couple felt there would be inevitable roommate friction (even between two students from similar backgrounds) just from having to live “too close” in a space that’s “too small.” The school’s organizations and clubs were considered more diverse in their makeup than the dorms.

Value

Students spent a great deal of session time explaining how much they love UF and why. With only one exception, students said they loved their school and felt they were getting a quality education for the price they paid. More than one student mentioned as a real positive the role of the town, feeling that because the town grew up around the university (and not vice-versa), Gainesville is really just an extension of the university. As a result, the entire town is welcoming to students and enthusiastic about the sports program (celebrating when the Gators win). There were a few students who thought many of their professors were interested only in their own research and didn’t know how to and weren’t heavily invested in teaching undergraduates. The “value” of classes conducted by such professors was considered “minimal.”

Most Appreciated: Statements about what students most appreciated about UF included:

- “UF is the premier university in Florida.”

- “The team spirit here is infectious, infecting not just us [students] but the whole town.”
- “When I apply for a job, this will count a lot.”
- “I had a difficult time my first two years with how hard the coursework was because my professors were leaders in their field.”
- “I feel proud to be here. The university does care about you.”
- “Having a UF diploma brings you a silent confidence.”
- “The vastness of the school offers more possibilities for research, internships, jobs.”
- “We’re cocky. People hate us because we’re the top in Florida.”
- “I’ll be proud of the school throughout my entire life. It’s partly a family thing.”
- “The Gator Nation, our alumni network, makes job finding easier.”
- “UF is harder to get in; you have to be better to get in.”
- “The university sets an expectation that you won’t be just a nerd but will graduate as a well-rounded person. It changes who you are”
- “Graduating from UF gives you confidence. And you’re with other people who are aiming high. Sets the bar higher for you.”
- “I most appreciate that UF lets you tailor your school experience. Like encouraging voluntarism. I know I wouldn’t have done many of the things I’ve done if I hadn’t come here.”

Persistence

All of the students intended to graduate. Most looked forward to it with confidence, two expressed worries about finding jobs (“I’m anxious and confused because I don’t have a job lined up yet.”) One looked forward to “putting the tools I’ve learned here to the test [on my job]; it will tell me what did I really learn here.” One student commented on how important he thought it was to have lived off campus because it was “such a good experience being so independent; I know I can figure it [life after school] out.”

GPA

The average GPA for this group based on self-reported data was 3.55.

University of Missouri (Mizzou)
Sophomores
9 Students, April 15

Academic Engagement

Contact with Professors: They were split on the value of email contact with their professors. Some felt it was better than nothing at all (“I got my grades up by email, even though I never actually met my professor face to face.”). Others, while they might use email for simple questions, recognized the value of in-person contact and tended to address “substantive questions” in person. Some professors encouraged, some discouraged email contact. One devoted an entire class period to email etiquette.

There was no mention of any social contact or informal exchanges with professors.

Several students mentioned that living off campus made it harder to have face time with teachers for two reasons. First, frequently a professor’s office hours don’t coincide with when a student normally would be on campus. Second, the long bus ride (“I’m just not going to ride down for 30 and back for another 30 minutes to have a 10 minute conversation with my professor.”)

Study Habits: Most of these students said it was easier studying and their grades were better now that they lived off campus, primarily because there are far too many distractions on campus, few quiet places to study and passing required core courses didn’t require studying, just cramming before tests. The same cannot be said for the smaller classes they are beginning to take as they approached their junior year. “The only study habits I had, I brought with me from high school. That meant cramming for exams. Now I’ve got to buckle down more than I did.” Some missed the camaraderie they felt studying in the dorm with a group of friends.

Some students appeared to be having issues getting used to the self-structured nature of apartment life. “It’s a new experience, all this freedom; there’s so much else to do. My friends live close and downtown [where all the bars and restaurants are located] is just a five-minute walk.” These students said they either used the library (“though the bus is a hassle”) or the study room in their apartment community. One student thought she had better study habits in the dorm. She blamed her current roommates: “In the dorm, I just had to share space with one person and we got along. Now I have three roommates. We’re all on different schedules, so I can’t study in my apartment.”

Skipping Class: Students quickly realize that they can more easily skip a large lecture class than smaller labs and classes, where lack of attendance is more likely to be noticed. One student questioned whether it was where or how you studied that led to cutting class or was it because “it’s easier to skip because there are more options [living off campus]. In the dorm, you lived like boxed in; what else could you do but study? Now you can get up and do things. That’s distracting.”

Break in Schedule Behavior: The group's consensus was that if the break is an hour, they'll stay on campus and find something to do, perhaps study, perhaps hang, perhaps eat. If the break is two hours, they'll go home and not come back to campus for anything else that day. If the break is 3 hours or more, they'll go home but return if they have another class or event on campus. The explanation lies with the bus. Excluding wait time and walking to and from the bus stop, it typically takes 30 to 40 minutes to travel from campus to home. So, literally, it's impossible to take the bus home and then get back if a student has only one to two hours. It's possible to go and return if you have three hours or more and, if you're motivated enough. However, judging from other remarks students made, it seems highly unlikely they would actually return to campus. Once they get home, they're more often than not home to stay.]

Transportation: Having to take the bus was a major irritant. As one student put it: "All your activities depend on the bus schedule." The bus doesn't run on weekends, making it difficult to attend many university events. Plus, in the students' opinion, the buses are unreliable. The realists—or perhaps more mature—students felt you have to "just get used to it; adjust your personal timetable. It's only when you first move in [to your apartment] that it's a problem."

Social Engagement

Students agreed that as freshmen they were involved in more campus organizations and activities. Some students had just begun to get involved with clubs and organization related to their majors or their interests. "As a freshman, you just say, 'Ok, let's go.' Now you have to plan it out and pick what's most important to you, like opportunities for volunteering." "Freshman year I joined the Cupcake Club; now I just buy them." "I join certain clubs like Microbiology Club to stand out; that professor has a lot to say about who gets an internship and you need to have had one to graduate."

Several students expressed feeling of being disengaged from campus and its goings on. For one thing, living off campus makes it harder to hear about events on campus. Plus, there's the distance factor. As one student explained, "Living on campus, you can walk anywhere. You feel involved in the college atmosphere. Your feet see what's going on. Plus your room is so small, it forces you out." Still others said they didn't feel left out because their off-campus community did a good job of holding events. "Lots going on right where I live."

Housing Selection

These students had the following criteria in mind when they selected their current property:

- Wanted someplace nice, nicest I could afford
- Price
- Safe, even though the surrounding neighborhood might be sketchy
- Reputation
- What's included
- Study room

There was no discussion of location (other than the safety issue), perhaps because no one in the group lived at a property within easy walking distance of Mizzou's campus.

Dorm Living: Perhaps because their memories of dorm living were still so fresh, this group of sophomores could not be steered away from talking about the pros and cons of dorm living. Their observations on why they so strongly wanted to leave the dorms included:

- "I couldn't wait to be out on my own."
- "No RAs; you can have fun without someone breathing down your neck."
- "There's more freedom but also more responsibilities and chores like taking your trash to the dumpster."
- "Wanted to eat real food, be off the meal plan."
- "The dorms close during breaks and in the summer; my apartment doesn't"
- "I feel more mature living off campus."

Diversity

On the whole, students said their experience had been that the university and the clubs were more diverse than the dorms, primarily because the university seems to foster separateness. Foreign students have their own dorms and the black sororities give black students other choices of where to socialize and live. Even some of the clubs were said to lack diversity because they attract only certain types of students.

Nonetheless, several students felt that living with others, even though they weren't very diverse, was maturing (especially for those who had never shared a room before) because you were forced to get along (or not) with people who do things differently. Several students felt that was as true or truer of sharing an apartment as sharing a room in the dorm.

- "Dorm living definitely opens your mind. It's a maturing experience even if not diverse."
- "You get closer living in an apartment. It's like being married—you have to resolve issues."
- On the negative side: "Rooming with someone from China my freshman year was very upsetting because of her habits and attitudes, but she did respect the way I liked things."

Value

All the students were enthusiastic about their school. One student expressed reservations about his major. One positive cited by several students was the cost of out-of-state tuition and the ease with which one could qualify for in-state tuition. Another positive cited by more than one student was that "Mizzou is a big school in a small town." "We're not in the middle of a big city," said another. They felt the school had a lot to offer, not just academically but, because of its location, easy access to outdoor activities such as hiking, camping and boating. Other reasons offered for "loving" Mizzou were: "It's an ideal distance from home"; "it's easy to get fake IDs"; and the network of alumni who could help you after graduation is extensive. In one student's memorable phrasing: "You can't throw a dead cat in St. Louis without hitting a Mizzou."

Persistence

All the students intended to graduate for the reasons stated below, but one had some reservations because he had not yet declared a major.

- “Fear of eating Big Macs in my parents’ basement.”
- “To repay my parents with my degree and being financially stable.” (two students)
- “Earning power to repay my student loan.”
- “Follow in my parents footsteps.”
- “Not graduating is just not an option.”
- “Fear of failure.”
- “Earning power.”
- “Can’t see working jobs that don’t require a degree.”
- “Because I want the job that makes me happy.”
- “You get more flexibility with your career with a diploma.”
- “This is where the winners are.”
- “Already put in this much.”
- “I’m more dedicated now [than when I was a freshman.]
- “It’s hard to have any goal when you don’t have a major; it’s too easy to be undeclared.”

GPA

The average GPA for this group based on self-reported data was 3.21.

University of Missouri (Mizzou)
Juniors, first group
13 Students, April 15

Academic Engagement

Interactions with Professors: As freshmen, these students report they had little to no interaction with their professors outside the classroom. Now, as juniors, they are focusing in on their majors, classes are smaller, with a high chance of several being taught by the same professor, which means that professors “make more efforts to get to know you” and the students invest more effort in getting to know their professors, certainly more than they did as freshmen. This affects their class attendance and utilization of office hours. “We know all our professors and they know us by name. It’s obvious if we miss class. Even though you live off campus, you have to make the effort to go to class.” “You just learn to plan to go whenever it’s convenient for the professor.”

Whether students are effective in establishing personal relationships with their professors depends partly on each professor’s attitude. Some come across to students as not caring about performance, attendance or establishing a relationship; they feel these professors are saying, “Prove to me that you’re worthy of being in my class.” In such cases, students feel it’s up to them to care enough to at least try to establish a relationship.

There’s a not-so-hidden agenda to getting to know one’s professors, even difficult ones. Here’s how one brutally honest student put it: “I email my profs if I have something simple to ask or say. But email’s impersonal. If you want to create a relationship, best to see the professor in person. That [relationship] helps with grades since so much grading is subjective, letting you make revisions on your papers and granting you leeway on assignments. If you have that personal relationship, your professors are more understanding of issues like a missed deadline. Plus there’s letters of recommendations and internships which are easier to get if your professors know you.” There is “no negative side” to creating a personal relationship with one’s professors.

Study Habits: Most students said they study in their apartments or in the property’s study room, largely because it’s too inconvenient to go to the library unless they’re already on campus and have planned to stay. One student did say she found her apartment to be distracting and studied at the library, but “it’s a big event [because of everything you have to take and the transit issues]; if I’m going, it has to be for four or five hours.” Another student summed up the majority’s opinion by saying “I used to use the library more; now I study at my apartment. It’s more distracting, but not enough to affect my grades.”

The group was split between those who study alone. Some miss their study groups from the dorms, made up of friends or just other students taking the same class. Others found the dorms too social for good study habits. Those who missed—and thrived on—being part of a study group had two complaints. First, living off campus made it more difficult

to find students with whom it was convenient to study and, second, the lack of group study facilities at their apartment community.

As freshmen, they said, there was always something else to do on campus other than study. “Being a freshman has a lot to do with freedom, feeling you can do what you want. There’s a real rush to being free.” Most students say that now they tend to study alone in their apartments. Not only is it difficult to get back and forth from campus but students find the library crowded and noisy, full of freshmen “talking about silly things.”

Nonetheless, several students said they find studying in their apartments difficult and go to campus to study. Students advanced two reasons for going to campus to study. First, the apartment offers, in its way, just as many distractions as did the dorms. Second, the complex’s study room gets too crowded for those needing solitude to study. For most students, whether they go to campus to study is determined largely by the bus schedule (buses don’t run at night) and availability of parking. During the day, it’s extremely difficult to park on campus, easier at night.

And they said they study more now than did as freshmen. For one thing, “the future’s in sight.” For another, courses are harder; cramming doesn’t work like it did for freshman courses.

One student, who took most of his courses online, was very harsh on academia’s online trend. The lure is the convenience of taking self-paced online courses with no time requirement other than the course be completed within nine months. The drawbacks include no milestones along the way (“not having a rigid class structure has hurt my grades”) and no incentive to establish a personal relationship with the professor.

Transportation Issues: Transit inconvenience is a factor that contributes to skipping classes. To paraphrase several students’ comments: If the bus is on schedule—which it frequently isn’t—you have to be at the bus stop early, so there’s 15 minutes. Then it’s a 30-minute ride to campus and you have to allow for walking time and making sure you’re in the classroom before class starts so there’s another 15 minutes. So if you’re going to get to class, you have to leave pretty early.

Break in Schedule Behavior: What students do on breaks between classes depends on how long the break is. The longer the break, the more likely students are to go home. Once home, the less likely they’ll go back to campus for *any* reason, including class attendance.

Social Integration

It was difficult to get a consensus on this issue. The group was divided into several factions, each with its own take on if/how their participation in university events had changed since they were freshmen. One (small) faction felt they had given up some random clubs and activities to focus more on those related to their majors. Another faction was focused on the difficulties of finding out about events (“there are no notices about university events posted in our clubhouse”) and then getting to and from them (“it’s

really a pain in the butt to get home if you've been tailgating all day") [because in Columbia, Missouri students can be—and frequently are—arrested on the street for public drunkenness.] A third faction didn't think there had been any change of focus, just a narrowing down to those clubs they really liked and where they could assume leadership roles. "You just have to decide which ones are most important."

One thing all the students agreed on was that living off campus required considerably more planning to attend university events.

Friends: For this group, interacting with friends had become more difficult since moving off campus, if those friends still live on campus or at different properties. In the dorm, it was easier; a short stroll down the hall would put one with one's friends. Now "planning replaces spontaneity." But, as several pointed out, they're busier with jobs and course work so perhaps it's natural that they feel less engaged socially.

Housing Selection

When asked what criteria they had in mind when they started looking for an apartment, students replied:

- Pool
- Social—reputation, events every month, amenities to support, like a fire pit, theater, volleyball
- "The" new place to live
- Deals
- Price
- Where my friends moved
- Shuttle to campus
- Parking (right outside the building)
- Safety
- All inclusive rent
- Furnished
- Recreation
- Workout room

Most students in the group lived in the newest property around Mizzou, which had offered very attractive lease-up incentives.

One student said, with nods of agreement from the rest, "My complex is like an intermediate step between the dorm and a house of my own after graduation."

Diversity

For most students, their classes, study groups and clubs put them more in contact with students from different backgrounds than their dorms did. Most said they were already accepting before coming to Mizzou. Often, however, the concept of accepting those from different backgrounds boiled down to accepting those from similar backgrounds who had different habits or beliefs. As with the sophomore group, the biggest diversity issue was between Greeks and non-Greeks, with some of the Greeks in the group feeling non-

Greeks castigated them by characterizing “white sorority women as lazy and just wanting to marry rich.” However, one student strongly felt her college experience of meeting people from different backgrounds had contributed greatly to her growth as a person. “I’m from a small, hick town; very conservative. There are no minorities living there. Everyone is basically the same. Very few young people leave to go to college. Here, I’ve met and learned to accept a lot of different people. Those with an urban mindset, LBGT, non-believers. It’s something I’m proud to take home and talk with my parents about.”

Value

Students were sensitive (and defensive) when people outside the university community expressed the opinion that Mizzou was a second-rate school. They pointed to the national reputation and strong ranking of some of the departments (business, nursing, etc.) as proof that their school was just as good as other large state universities. The network of Mizzou alumni is something that students greatly value about their school. “There’s a Mizzou Mafia out there that will take care of you; Mizzou hires Mizzou.” Other positives mentioned about Mizzou included:

- The friends they made, with some students who mentioned friends going on to say how useful they might be later in life.
- Forced me to step out of my comfort zone.
- A Mizzou degree sets you apart.
- Full of spirit.

All but one student agreed with the one who said “I love it here. I wouldn’t change it for the world.” That one student thought the academic side of the university wasn’t up to par but said that overall he had gotten pretty fair value for the time and money invested.

Persistence

No one in the group expressed doubts about graduating. Why? They very clearly recognized that a college diploma was the key to getting a well-paying job.

GPA

The average GPA for this group based on self-reported data was 3.41.

University of Missouri (Mizzou)
Juniors, second group
12 Students, April 16

Academic Engagement

Interactions with Professors: No student reported having a casual or informal meeting with a professor. As one student put it, to the group's agreement, "You never see professors around campus. Maybe at a bar, but that's usually a TA."

Most felt that as freshmen, despite the convenience of living on campus, they never made much of an effort to meet with professors face-to-face.

- "Too intimidating."
- "Didn't understand how important it was."
- "On campus time gets away from you; you keep postponing it so you never actually meet with them."

Several students felt that certain professors didn't want to be of assistance or establish a personal relationship with their students. These professors were only interested in weeding out students. "Some professors do care whether you succeed or not. Others use their classes to weed out students from school and from one's major." One student felt too many professors were on a "power trip," having the attitude that "no one is good enough to get an A in my class." But most students thought that their professors, now that they were taking classes related to their majors, did want their students to succeed and were interested in helping students and having a more personal relationship with them.

On their side, students also recognized that it was advantageous to establish a personal relationship because professors hold the key to letters of recommendation, internships, and better grades (which students also see being influenced positively by a strong personal relationship with their professors). Relationship-building becomes more important as students go up in year; as freshmen, they said they didn't understand that it might be a good idea to try to build that type of relationship plus the large lectures typical of freshman and many sophomore classes makes it difficult whereas smaller classes make it easier. One student put it well when she said, "Professors want you to succeed if they see *you* want to succeed." Another said he thought professors were waiting to see "how hard you're willing to work to apply what they're teaching."

Study Habits: Students said they tend to study mostly in their room/apartment. Reasons for not studying on campus included first and foremost the transportation barrier. The shuttles are packed and not dependable ("didn't run in the severe cold weather" and are "an extra 30 minutes of agony"). Then there's the hassle of packing up and taking everything one needs (laptop, food, books, notes, etc.) to study on campus. Finally, there's the noise and crowds in the library. Several students said it was much easier to use the library when they lived in the dorm and could easily walk back and forth from the library to their dorm rooms, if they forgot something or just wanted a break.

Skipping Class: Students seem to practice “selective skipping,” knowing which classes they could safely skip because they could make up the material by accessing various on-line resources. The increased skipping was definitely related to the transportation barrier caused by living off campus, though one student pointed out that skipping is not an option for every class. Most students who admitted to skipping “a lot more” as juniors didn’t think it had affected their grades. One student said he felt much more withdrawn, not a part of Mizzou, because he lived off campus. His straight A average had slipped some, which he attributed to lower motivation because of the difficulties of getting easily back and forth to campus and his tendency to stay “holed up” in his apartment.

Break in Schedule Behavior: Discussion of this topic ended up returning to a discussion of how bad the shuttle service was and the consequences thereof. As one student said, “The shuttle is the barrier, not the distance we live from school. The shuttle is actually anxiety-producing.” They went on to describe at some length their frustration with the shuttle service. One student said she was planning on moving closer to campus so she could avoid the shuttle and walk. The one positive thing students had to say about the shuttle was that it was safer than walking because walking takes you through some “sketchy” neighborhoods.

What students do when there’s a break in their schedule depends on the length of the break. If it’s long enough, they go back to their apartments. Once there, making the effort to return to campus depends on “why you need to come back to campus. If it’s a lecture, probably not. If it’s a small class, probably.”

One further comment on the shuttle: Several students in this and other groups said the shuttle schedule ran their lives and how they scheduled their classes; they even sometimes select courses based on when they would have to catch the shuttle to get to and return from class. Those with cars tend to take the shuttle to school during the day but drive if they have to go to campus at night. Very few students used bikes; for one thing, they’re not particularly convenient during Columbia’s harsh winter weather.

Social Engagement

Students said they had reduced the number of clubs and organizations they belong to and also changed the type. There was less involvement in clubs like the Cupcake Club in favor of those that would enhance one’s resume—national honor society, clubs related to one’s major (Biology Club, Engineering Club, etc.). But they also make room for non-academic clubs that appeal to a strong personal interest.

A major complaint was that, because the shuttle doesn’t run all day on Saturdays, it was difficult to get to football and basketball games unless a friend was willing to be the designated driver (rare). One student had given up supporting intramural teams because her studies were so demanding. Several students defined their involvement by referencing the activities of their fraternities or sororities that included both Greek-sponsored events and attending university events as a group of brothers or sisters. Greek membership was also “a way to find out what’s happening on campus once you move off campus.”

Diversity

Only a few students thought their dorm experience made them more accepting and more “tolerant” of those from different backgrounds. There was a tendency to confuse true diversity with different ways of behaving or having different values or beliefs. “Mizzou pulls from different demographics more than from different racial or religious groups; like where are the Hispanics? Where are people of the Islamic faith?” Several students thought the university was “less diverse than America itself.” At this comment, most of the students in the group had facial expressions that read shock and/or rejection that someone would be so blunt. But no one in the group disagreed. Others characterized the university community as “diverse but not integrated.”

Those from truly diverse metropolitan areas (in and out of state) saw the university as less diverse and were more likely to say they were accepting before coming to college. Those from more homogeneous Missouri towns and suburbs saw the university as more diverse. It was mainly this latter group that either appreciated the opportunity to get to know people from different backgrounds or found they were more comfortable sticking with their own.

Sororities and fraternities were frequently cited as especially non-diverse. In fact, much of the “diversity tension” on campus appears to be between Greeks and non-Greeks, with, as one student put it, “judgments and stereotypes on both sides, which is weird. I think the Greeks take being Greek too seriously and the non-Greeks take their own status too seriously.” But she went on to say that non-Greek students often feel betrayed when their former friends join a Greek organization and then reject them in favor of spending all their time with their new brothers or sisters. Several of the Greeks in the group agreed with her that “friend dumping” was often a problem and resulted in fractured friendships.

Value

All the students agreed, for various reasons, that they loved their school and thought they were getting a good value for their investment.

- “I love the tradition. I know my children will come here, just like my parents did.”
- “I didn’t really want to come here but I’m glad I did.”
- “I love it because of the spirit, mostly from the sports teams.”
- “I was scared I’d just disappear into the crowd, be just a number because I was from such a small high school. But once you become involved, the smaller the campus becomes.”
- “I like Mizzou because I’ve made new friends from such different areas. My friends who stayed home just hang out; they don’t *do* anything.”
- “I’ve grown a lot, made a lot of new friends.”
- “It’s beautiful here, not just the campus but the surrounding countryside.”
- “The resources for students are tremendous.”
- “Coming here from out of state, I feel like Mizzou has made me a more independent person.”
- “The school itself may not be the mechanism [of my personal growth]; it’s more the place and the diversity.”

Persistence

No student in the group expressed any reservation about graduating on schedule.

GPA

The average GPA for this group based on self-reported data was 3.30.

University of Missouri (Mizzou)

Seniors

11 Students, April 16

Academic Engagement

Interactions with Professors: Students felt they had almost no interaction with their professors freshman year. Several reasons were given.

- Referencing a difference they saw between professors who *want* to teach and those who *have* to teach, they felt some professors—even in the upper divisions—don't want a relationship with their students and discourage them by shunting students off to their TAs, “who are mostly clueless.”
- As a freshman, they felt too intimidated and did not know what to say to them; “I was terrified of my teachers freshman year.”
- Not understanding why it might be important to build that relationship.
- No need if it's a large lecture class. “So many courses are given online or have their class notes posted online, why go to class at all, especially if when you try to talk to them they just push you off on their TAs?”

Students agreed that the situation changes when you get into your major. “If you don't make the effort to develop a personal relationship with your key professors, you're messing up your future, not just your present.”

There were a couple complaints about the convenience of office hours but the general feeling was that establishing the relationship was so important it had first priority, no matter how inconvenient. To paraphrase one student: The “transportation hurdle” is lower for making face time, higher for attending class. In other words, the transportation issue is more likely to keep a student from attending classes than keep him from developing a personal relationship with his professors.

There was no comment on *why* it might be important, simply the assumption and recognition that it was. A couple students hinted that the concept of “personal relationship” extended beyond the professional to include some amount of chit-chat after class or in the unlikely event of a chance meetings around campus (considered highly unusual and rare). One student asserted that she wouldn't make social contact with one of her professors because “I simply wouldn't know what to talk to them about unless it was my [school] work.” However, one student went against the grain and stated that one of her professors “liked seeing and talking to students around campus.”

Transportation: For most students in this group, transportation was a major (negative) issue. The inconvenience of having to depend on the rather “unreliable” shuttle to and from campus emerged as the biggest barrier to social and academic involvement, especially attending class. They complained that they were more likely to miss class (as opposed to a planned skip) because of the bus. It was late. The ride was long (time-consuming). The schedule is inconvenient and constantly violated, especially in severe weather. They sometimes found it difficult to arrive at the bus stop on time and missed

the only bus that would get them to campus prior to class starting. When the bus did come, it tended to be over-crowded. One student characterized this as “especially agitating.” Others agreed with her. One student, hearing these comments, said simply: “How can you *not* miss class?” Another said she had learned to use the long ride to study and prepare for her classes. There were several comments similar to the following: “You just learn to deal with it [the shuttle].” A few students added that having to plan for the bus and its vagaries improve one’s time management skills. Only two students said they had “no problem” using the shuttle to get back and forth to campus, even if their schedules sometimes required more than one bus trip per day.

Skipping Class: Most felt that they were less inclined to miss classes when they lived in the dorm, largely due to transportation issues. A couple students felt their grades hadn’t really changed despite skipping classes more because of the transportation issues.

Study Habits: The group was mixed on how conducive their apartment was to studying versus their dorms. Some felt the dorms were too social and, therefore, noisy and distracting for solid studying. Others felt the same about their apartment and either used the property’s study room or scheduled certain days as “on campus” days so they could study at the library.

Social Integration

The amount of time spent on transportation and academic engagement issues precluded the group from talking about social integration. However, there were several comments on the same theme scattered throughout the session when more than one student would allude to the biggest issue they had to deal with moving off campus—“alcohol freedom”—that is, learning how not to let drinking and partying destroy their social lives and their GPAs.

Housing Selection

When asked what factors were important in selecting their current property, students said:

- Price, less expensive than dorms plus meal plan
- Location
- Availability
- Own bathroom
- Own bedroom
- Safety (can lock my doors—front and bedroom)
- Computer lab with free printing
- Early signing bonus
- Pool
- Big bedroom
- Furnished option
- How many of my fraternity brothers lived here

Students all agreed that the primary search paradigm was “affordable location” but tempered somewhat by the fact that the property where most of them resided was new

and offered great lease-up deals. A couple students said they now wished they had selected a complex closer to campus even if that meant paying more money.

Diversity

The concept of true diversity (accepting people from very different backgrounds, races, cultures, religions, sexual orientations, countries, etc.) remained somewhat elusive for this group. A few students felt they were already accepting of anyone because they had grown up in extremely diverse settings with accepting parents.

But one student really caught where the group was coming from when she said: “There’s no real diversity here at Mizzou as we commonly think about it. When kids here talk about diversity they’re talking about co-ed dorms being an eye-opening experience. It’s hard to get them to talk about whether they’re feeling more comfortable with people who are truly different, unless they’re thinking about Greeks as being different from non-Greeks. That’s our big ‘diversity’ issue.”

Another student said she felt the school was “diverse but not integrated.” She explained that freshmen have FIGs, Freshman Interest Groups, and as much as possible are assigned to dorms based on their interest group. As a result, jocks dominate one dorm, pre-nursing students another, etc. And then the Greeks hang together: “Being Greek draws you into a whole other universe.” There are “groups within groups within groups!”

A discussion followed concerning how being Greek helps you network with Mizzou alumni who share your Greek affiliation and can, therefore, be more easily approached when it comes to trying to get the internship needed for graduation. Perhaps, that’s a valid point based on another, non-Greek student’s immediate comment: “I have no real understanding of how to network with alumni. Makes me wonder if that network is a myth.” Definitely not for Greeks!

Value

With one exception, these students had unreservedly positive things to say about Mizzou and their university experience and believe they got a good return on their investment.

- “I had my sights on attending Mizzou since I was in the 8th grade.”
- “It was all worth it!”
- “The people I met drove me to graduate school.”
- “You have to have that sheepskin.”

There were, however, some minor issues. The lone dissenter worried whether the school was adequately preparing him for his chosen career. Two thought their first two years were a “waste of time and money” because, if they had learned anything beyond what they had learned in high school, that material wasn’t relevant to their major.

Persistence

All the students in this group, even the ones who had issues with the university’s value, intended to graduate. With graduation only a month away, the major reason can be paraphrased as “We’ve come this far, might as well take the walk!”

GPA

The average GPA for this group based on self-reported data was 3.15.