Two Worlds of University Life: Role Conflict among Residential Students and Commuters on a Newly-Residentialized Campus

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Abstract

This study examined the extent to which commuters and the first cohort of residential students occupied separate worlds of university life due to differences in role conflict. The population of the first cohort of residents (n = 109) and a random sample of commuters (n = 121) were compared on demographics, use of facilities, and social interaction. Residents were more involved in campus activities, and used campus facilities more. Residents reported a greater number of interactions with other students. Commuters were less integrated into the campus due to role conflict from heavier off-campus responsibilities and time constraints. Suggestions for mitigating role conflict and meeting the needs of these distinct groups are presented.

Introduction

There is a relationship between the living situations of college students and their satisfaction with their college experience. Research suggests that several factors contribute to a more favorable college experience. Some of these factors are: strong links between student and faculty (Boyd 1997; Villella, Widener 1997; Vieira 1996), quality of teaching, involvement in student activities, and social interaction (Chebator 1996; Meredith 1985). If satisfaction with the college experience is the goal, then the question this research attempts to address is: are the afore-mentioned social factors more easily attained by students if they live on campus or if they commute to campus?

Separate Worlds

Living on campus involves students in an environment that is quite different from the environments of commuters. Although studies suggest that grade point average is positively affected by having a commuter status as opposed to living closer to campus (Delucchi 1993), and that traditional students tend to be relatively more anxious about their academic performance (Dill, Henley 1998), results from national samples show that residents are more satisfied with their campus environment than commuters (Schroeder, Mable 1994). This may be at least partially attributed to the fact that social events have more of an influence on traditional students than on commuters (Dill, Henley 1998). Prior research has shown that those who are nearer to activities are more likely to participate in them (Graham, Verma 1991; Glynn, Pugh, Rose 1990; Ostro, Adelberg 1976). Furthermore, quantity of social activities strongly predicts happiness (Cooper, Okamura, Gurka 1992).

In addition, there is a plethora of research which suggests that proximity has a profound effect on one's social life not only in terms of participating in activities, but also in terms of interpersonal relationships. As physical distance between people lessens, the likelihood of social interaction increases (Adams 1985-6), and the likelihood of being chosen as a friend increases (Festinger, Schachter, Back 1950; Yarosz, Bradley 1963; Ebbesen, Kjos, Konecni 1976; Adams 1985-6; Latane et al. 1995). Finally, Rook (1987) demonstrated that friendship was a strong predictor of social satisfaction.

It is also interesting to note that students living on campus are less likely to experience conflict with other students than commuters are (Lundgren, Schwab 1979). Furthermore, residential living has been positively associated with personal growth (Pascarella, Terenzini 1980; Welty 1976) and personal adaptation and well-being (Nosow 1975). These concepts, then, point to the idea that simply by their living situation, residents are more likely to

be more involved in social activities on campus, and more likely to have more friends on campus. Again, this paves the way for a higher level of satisfaction with their college experience, as compared with commuters.

Most prior research has not made distinctions among various types of commuters and residents. At residential colleges and universities, traditional students have moved from the home of their parents in another community to residence halls on campus. As they matriculate, these students move just off-campus. At commuter campuses, most students live with parents, friends, or with their own spouses and children. Most of these students hold jobs, and they commute to campus in cars or on public transportation.

Commuters, therefore, experience more role-conflict than traditional, residential students because they must balance "several important and demanding roles" (Jacoby 1989: 62). Although the status of "student" necessitates performing multiple roles (termed "role set" by Merton 1968) such as: researcher, learner, classmate, writer, etc., most commuters add to their list of roles exponentially with each additional status. This includes, but is not limited to their often demanding responsibilities in their roles in the home (Dill, Henley 1998), which most residents do not have to address. Commuters' access to participation in campus functions and extra-curricular activities usually is limited by constraints of time and distance. Furthermore, commuters report more financial problems than residents (Chickering 1974). Exigencies of work, family, school, and the commute that links them can collide. The result is a harried life in which all "non-essential" activities are swept aside.

Research Setting

The University of Colorado at Colorado Springs (UCCS) became a campus in 1965. By 1996, it had grown to 6,000 students (4,000 FTE), but it had neither housing on-campus nor any appreciable off-campus housing within walking distance. In Fall, 1996, the campus opened residence halls for 300 residents, and 215 students occupied these new facilities. Basic services for residential students still were being created as students moved in. For example, parking lots were not completed; in fact, new buildings obliterated existing parking lots which, consequently, meant a more controlled residential environment for research purposes, since the residents had little access to get off campus. Unfortunately, other effects could not be controlled. Residents and commuters were likely to be different in demographic characteristics and in the degree of role conflict, so these variables were measured in an attempt to understand how they affected the lives of students.

Predictions

1) Residents were predicted to be traditional students: younger (Rebellino 1997), having earned fewer units toward graduation, taking fewer courses, and working fewer hours per week than commuter students (non-traditional).

2) Even though the campus could not yet offer a complete residential experience, residents were predicted to participate far more in campus activities than commuters (Graham, Verma 1991; Glynn, Pugh, Rose 1990; Ostro, Adelberg 1976).

3) Residents were predicted to have a greater number of social contacts with other residents (and with commuters) than commuters (Adams 1985-6). Furthermore, residents were predicted to consider the campus a greater part of their social lives than commuters.

4) Residents were predicted to be less concerned about parking than commuters, based on the fact that the lack of parking spaces significantly impacts how much time a commuter needs to get to campus before class, since they would have to leave enough time to find a space.

Methods

Sample and Participants

The population of residents (N = 215) and a simple random sample of undergraduates (n = 215) were contacted via mail beginning in November, 1996. A total of 109 residents responded, 45 men (41%) and 64 women (59%). A total of

121 commuters responded, 52 men (43%) and 68 women (57%). The overall response rate was 53%. The mean age of the respondents was 24.78 (SD = 8.08), and the median age was 21.

Materials

The survey packet contained a cover letter that explained the purpose of the study and sought informed consent. The packet also contained a three-page survey instrument and a business reply envelope that was addressed to a research center on campus housed in the Sociology department.

Respondents reported their use of 31 campus facilities during the first 11 weeks of the semester. Seven items dealt with the extent to which campus life was a part of the respondent's social life. A demographic item asked about the living situation of the respondent. Responses were divided into the following five categories: 1) resident having a permanent address within Colorado Springs (n = 40), 2) resident having a permanent address outside Colorado Springs (n = 69), 3) commuter living with parents (n = 29), 4) commuter living with friend(s)/roommate(s) (n = 28), 5) commuter living with family (e.g., spouse/children) (n = 64). Other demographic items asked about age, gender, and ethnicity. Finally, an open-ended question asked respondents their biggest concern about UCCS.

Procedures

In early November, 1996, packets of wave 1 were mailed to everyone in the sample. After two weeks, a reminder post card was sent. The card thanked respondents who had returned their questionnaires, and it urged non-respondents to reply. After the winter break, complete materials were sent to non-respondents in wave 2. Response rates are presented above.

Results

Resident and Commuter Characteristics

The means on Table 1 show that ages of both residential groups and commuters who lived with parents were about 20 years, but the ages of commuters who lived with friends or family were over 27 years. Using the F-ratio, the differences among the five means were statistically significant ($p < .001$).

The means on Table 1, row 2, show that residents and commuters who lived with parents were taking more semester hours (about 13) than were commuters who lived with friends or family (between seven and eight). Also, both groups of residents and commuters who lived with parents had accumulated between 30 and 40 semester hours, but commuters who lived with friends or family had accumulated over 50 semester hours. Using F, both of these relations were statistically significant ($p < .001$). Finally, the two groups of residents worked less (<16 hours) than the three groups of commuters (>23 hours). The differences among the means were statistically significant ($p < .001$).

Prior to the analyses below, the possible correlations between semester units, length of commute, hours worked, and gender on dependent measures of use of

Table 1. Differences Among Mean Ages, Current Academic Hours, Academic Hours Completed, and Hours Worked per Week for Five Types of Residential and Commuting Students

	Permanent Address: Resident (Within City)	Permanent Address: Resident (Outside City)	Lives With: Commuter (with Parents)	Commuter (with Friends)	Commuter (with Family)	p
Age	21.33	19.68	20.41	27.39	33.40	.001
Current Hours	13.50	13.78	12.55	7.65	7.74	.001
Total Hours	38.94	31.06	38.90	52.39	58.93	.001
Hours Worked	15.50	11.27	23.83	32.39	27.00	.001

facilities, social contacts, and perception of campus problems were investigated. No statistically significant relations were found, so analysis of variance was used to examine differences in means of dependent variables (DVs) across the five categories of residents/commuters (IV).

Use of Facilities

Principal components analysis resulted in 11 factors that represented 29 items on use of campus facilities (see Appendix A).

The scales shown on Table 2 were created by weighting items by their loading on a factor and adding them. The sums were divided by the number of items so that entries presented in Table 2 were roughly comparable to each other.

While the means on Table 2 showed greater use of Special Services (Factor I) by residents, results were not statistically significant. It was not surprising that for the next three factors, Residential Services, Sports, and Residence Halls, results showed greater use by residents, since these facilities were connected with residential life. Differences among the means were statistically significant for all three analyses ($p < .001$). No statistically significant differences among means were observed for Use of Library/Science Labs, Advising, or Bookstore/Communication Help Labs. The Student Success Center and the Arts were used more by residents ($p < .05$). No significant difference among means was observed for the Math Center. Commuters who lived with friends, and commuters who lived with family appeared to use day care more than the other groups, but large variation within groups prevented these differences from being statistically significant.

Social Interaction

Residents considered the campus to be part of their social lives far more than commuters did, and results were statistically significant (see Table 3; $p < .0001$). Furthermore, residents had many more contacts with residents than commuters did ($p < .05$). Residents also had more contacts with commuters than commuters did, but due to large within group variation, the difference was not statistically significant.

Problems

Commuters were twice as likely (42%) as residents (21%) to voice that parking was their "biggest concern about the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs" (see Table 3). While few respondents cited costs of college education as a problem, 15% of resident respondents who listed a permanent address in Colorado Springs cited costs as a problem. This percentage was five or more times higher than the percentage for the other groups, and the

Table 2. Significant Differences Among Factor Scores for Use of Campus by Five Types of Residential and Commuting Students During the First 11 Weeks of the Fall Semester

	Permanent Address: Resident (Within City)	Permanent Address: Resident (Outside City)	Lives With: Commuter (with Parents)	Commuter (with Friends)	Commuter (with Family)	p
Special Serv.	1.96	2.82	.98	1.25	.78	NS
Resident Serv.	2.87	3.04	.04	.02	.02	.0001
Sports	2.03	5.01	.58	1.08	.04	.0001
Resid. Halls	24.71	24.83	.44	.26	.09	.001
Lib/Sci Lab	10.78	10.68	10.46	8.68	7.30	NS
Advising	.36	.40	.22	.29	.51	NS
Help Labs	1.41	1.58	1.45	.77	1.52	NS
Success Center	1.60	.54	.17	.14	.16	.05
Arts	.19	.19	.06	.08	.05	.05
Math Center	.55	.65	.62	.25	.18	NS
Daycare	.02	.00	.00	1.57	2.06	NS

differences among means were statistically significant ($p < .01$).

Discussion

Residents and commuters have different activities, and they live in distinct social worlds that have varying amounts of role conflict. Part of this separation was a result of proximity.

Proximity

Residents were more likely to use some of the facilities on campus and to get involved in campus activities because these amenities were close to "home." The independent effects of proximity were separate from those of differences in stage of life cycle and work and family roles, as shown by similarities throughout the study between residents who had a permanent address in Colorado Springs and commuters who lived with their parents. Furthermore, on many dimensions, including degree of role conflict, those commuters who lived with parents were midway between residents and commuters who lived with friends or with spouse/children.

Another interesting group was residents who had a permanent address in Colorado Springs. These students were older than other residents, and had accumulated more semester hours. Why would non-traditional students want to live on-campus, a place which has been considered more appropriate for younger students, and one that is constrained by rules, regulations, and even a curfew? Many of these students may have been commuters who preferred the idea of leaving their parents' house to live in a dorm, fulfilling the desire to be "on their own" and perhaps to lessen role conflict involving family obligations to parents and siblings. Further, based on the high rates of renting an apartment in Colorado Springs, it is likely that many residents chose the campus life for sheer financial reasons. It is not surprising that more of these students considered costs of college education to be a problem than students in the other groups.

Matriculation

Of course, differences between commuters and residents went deeper than proximity, and results pointed to more fundamental differences between the groups. Residents and commuters who lived with parents were taking more courses, but they had not accumulated as many semester units as commuters who lived with friends or spouse/children. Advanced courses were smaller, and many of them were offered only in the evening once per week. This scheduling issue highlights the likelihood that more commuters are on campus taking classes in the evening (after work) than residents: another distinction between the two groups, and something

Table 3. Differences in Perception of Social Life, Number of Social Contacts Per Week, and Perception of Campus Problems for Five Types of Residents and Commuters

	Permanent Address: Resident (Within City)	Resident (Outside City)	Lives With: Commuter (with Parents)	Commuter (with Friends)	Commuter (with Family)	p
Campus as part of social life	4.15	4.33	2.10	2.03	1.50	.0001
No. of Contacts with Residents	36.78	32.29	2.72	1.03	.91	.05
No. of Contacts with Commuters	76.98	26.04	5.27	5.68	7.04	NS
Parking cited as a problem	.22	.20	.52	.32	.42	.01
College costs as a problem	.15	.03	.00	.00	.03	.01

to consider in terms of commuter's inability to participate in campus activities in the evenings during the week. Students taking fewer, but more advanced courses that met less often would be expected to be on campus less, to use some facilities less, to have fewer social contacts, and to have a greater problem parking.

Social Interaction

Another theoretical difference between commuters and residents stems from the fact that, as predicted, commuters had fewer social contacts than residents. Perhaps the difference goes beyond mere time constraints, and points instead to the way each group conceives of social interaction on campus. It is possible that residents view contact with others, and the act of establishing relationships, as part of a goal of their college experience. In fact, Moffatt (1989) states that residential students claim that fifty percent of their "total college education" takes place outside the classroom. Based on their relatively more complex lives and greater role conflict, commuters, on the contrary, might view contact with others as more of a time-consuming hindrance to their objective of acquiring their degree.

Stage of the Lifecycle

A fourth explanation of observed differences was stage of lifecycle. Residents rarely were parents, but among commuters, many were parents, and many commuters lived with their parents. Thus, their role conflict was higher. This fact was illustrated graphically by the fact that while commuters took about half as many courses, they worked more than twice as many hours as residents. Furthermore, of the 121 commuters, 64 (53%) lived with spouses/children, so they were at least partially responsible for 1) maintaining a household, 2) contributing to financial support of others, and 3) caring for a spouse and/or children. This surplus of responsibilities carried a much greater potential for role conflict, and it served as another broad explanation of observed differences between residents and commuters. In retrospect, role conflict should have been measured more directly by asking specifically about the cross-pressures of work, family, and school.

Conclusion

Based on the research previously cited regarding the social factors which can contribute to a more satisfying college experience: involvement in student activities and social interaction, it seems that the new residents at UCCS might have a more positive experience in store for them.

Given the high level of role conflict that most commuters face, their challenge is to create effective means to deal with their myriad of responsibilities. One suggestion is offered by VanderZanden (1988):

> *"One way to handle role conflict is to subdivide or compartmentalize one's life and assume only one of the incompatible roles at a time. For instance, college students may attempt to segregate their school and home experiences so they do not have to stage their behavior before their parents and peers simultaneously"* (pp. 94-95).

Merton (1968) called these concepts of compartmentalization and segregation, "insulation". He suggested "insulating" one role from another by taking them on at different parts of the day, thereby alleviating some of the strain or conflict associated within or between specific statuses.

Another effective solution to dealing with role conflict is to establish priorities. Continuously choosing which role is most important and demands immediate attention might help to organize one's time, and potentially alleviate stress. Another helpful option would be for universities to provide, and students to utilize, facilities such as childcare centers on campus that are easily accessible and inexpensive. In addition, the availability of work-study programs might help to reconcile students' conflicting demands.

Another question that this research raises is whether the addition of residence halls to a long-time commuter campus inevitably creates inequality between the university and/or residents on one side, and commuters on the other. Based on the inher-

ently greater needs of the residents (for food, shelter, entertainment, etc.), the administration must give residents relatively more money and attention. Further, for the residents, the university is not only a place to learn, but also their home, often making their allegiance to the school stronger.

Early research suggests, in fact, that prejudice has been shown by college administrators toward commuters (Foster et al. 1977). If future research shows that these attitudes still exist, and are widespread, how will this potential inequality be perpetuated against the commuters, many of whom have been loyal students of the university long before the residents came along? Will the needs of commuters be taken as seriously as those of the residents?

An example of this competition is the parking situation on campus. In addition to a loss of existing parking lots by the construction of new residence halls, the addition of residents meant the loss of several hundred "prime" parking spaces because residents were permitted to park their cars in these spots overnight. The result is that not only commuters, but also residents, cited an emerging and pressing problem that became rancorous. Fortunately, it did not further divide the students, but it points out pitfalls of growth and change.

Additionally, the introduction of a resident population creates the need for a wider spectrum of services on campus. Given tight budgets, priorities are necessary, at least in the short run. One suggestion would be to focus on the "life" needs of the residents while providing the commuters with only the necessary services they have found, through research such as this, that commuters actually make use of. Research, such as the present one, can identify facilities and activities that are used by students in all groups, and the identification of five student groups seems to represent a more effective way of grouping students for assessment of needs. It is clear that the structural mentality of the administration must be one of flexibility and continual inquisitiveness in order to fulfill its role of meeting the needs of each group. It is important to note, however, that by their very nature, the needs of each group may keep commuters and residents segregated and competing for facilities and activities.

Appendix A
Factors and Factor Loadings

I	Special Services	Student Employment (.84)
		Activities and Special Events (.85)
		Computing Services (.69)
II	Resident Services	Weight Room (.74)
		Game Room (.78)
		Laundry (.66)
		Lounge (.68)
III	Sports	Intercollegiate Player (.74)
		Intercollegiate Spectator (.72)
		Intramural Player (.60)
		Use of Sports Facilities (.86)
IV	Residence Halls	Dormitory Suites (.81)
		Dormitory Food Service (.81)
		Student Health Center (.66)
V	Lib./Science Support	Library (.66)
		Science Learning Center (.67)
		Science Labs (.58)
		Parking (.60)
VI	Advising	Student Support Center: Advising (.86)
		Language Learning Center (.89)

Appendix A Continued

VII	Book./Comm. Support	Bookstore (.71) Writing Center (.81) Oral Communication Center (.55)
VIII	Student Success	Student Success Center
IX	Arts	Theater (.74) Art Gallery (.47)
X	Math Learning Center	Mathematics Learning Center
XI	Daycare Center	Daycare Center

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Acknowledgments

The authors are indebted to Lynette Andrus, Terry Dasher, Elizabeth Dominique, Curtis Gustafson, and Jerry McCombs for assistance in design, data gathering, and initial analysis.

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