

## **El impacto de las comunidades de estudiantes en el desarrollo de estudiantes: tamaño institucional y vida residencial**

### **The impact of student communities on student development: institutional size and residential living**

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#### **Resumen**

Colegios comunitarios y universidades juegan un papel importante en el impacto de desarrollo de los estudiantes en la vida universitaria. ambientes educativos no sólo tienen que traer, sino también para crear la configuración para los estudiantes para desarrollarse y crecer a través de su camino correcto. Este estudio muestra el impacto del tamaño y la vida residencial en los estudiantes y su desarrollo.

**Palabras claves:** la educación superior; universidad; el desarrollo estudiantil

#### **Abstract**

Community colleges and Universities play an important role on the impact of student development in their college life. Educational environments not only have to bring but also to create the right setting for students to develop and grow through their path. This study shows the impact of size and residential living on students and their development.

**Key words:** higher education; university; student development

## Introducción

The essence of human being is social development. We can see this at every stage of our lives, at every interaction with another human being, at any different society, or with any intrinsic values. Students go through this stage of human kind development, especially at the college level where they experience extreme changes in their lives that will affect their future forever. Some of them value this stage and try to get the best out of it in benefit for their development, maturity and professional goals. Some others are not able to make it this far and sometimes don't get what life and opportunity bring them, and fall into a whole that won't let them move forward for different reasons.

Community colleges and Universities play an important role on the impact of student development in their college life. Educational environments not only have to bring but also to create the right setting for students to develop and grow through their path. This path is integrated by psychological, sociological, moral, sexual and environmental elements that are created basically by interactions among students. Arthur Chickering (1993) improved his theory of student development by describing seven different stages that students go through college life. He described those stages as vectors where students find themselves at different points in their developmental process. Student communities are part of this process and definitively affect student development, in positives or negatives aspects.

As part of human nature, students find competition as part of their growing progression, initiating and affecting either intellectual or physical elements against other students or student community members. As their "debut", critical thinking and reasoning ability are tested. Emotions are also thrown to the development environment and the more the students interact the higher the exposure they have to recognize, accept and control different situations that demand emotional maturity and self-control. Students, when starting their new college life, they face a significant change very quickly, coming from high school and living under parent's rules to college and autonomy. They have to make their own decisions on different aspects that test and develop their problem-solving ability and interdependence.

The exposure to student life will generate interpersonal relationships that will help students grow their tolerance, appreciation of differences, value of commonalities, and basically respect for others in every aspect from racial to gender or to just a different opinion. As the developmental process continues, students face an identity test as a product of multiple interactions and discoveries. This process involves sexual orientation, gender identity or ethnic background. Strong personality is needed to overcome these challenges and continue with the regular course of action. Some people find themselves stuck in this stage as establishing identity is one of the most meaningful issues to face during college. As the latter portion of student development, they need to make commitments on specific interest and activities, identifying their true vocation and envisioning the future. They need to develop their humanized value system in which interest of others are balanced with their own interest, and be capable of consciously identify the implications of their actions.

In regards to student development, every process or stage involves transitions. Transition is any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles

(Goodman et al, 2006). According to Schlossberg's (1981) research and theory, transitions provide opportunities for growth and development; however, a positive outcome for the individual cannot be assumed or assured. Students may face anticipated transitions such as graduation, unanticipated such as the death of a parent, and non-events such as situations that are expected to occur but do not. The transition process is determined by reactions over time, where students move in, move through and move out of the process, with an uncertain outcome. There are four major factors that influence students' abilities to cope with a transition: situation, self, support and strategies. Student's effectiveness to cope with transitions depends on their resources and ability to approach and go through them.

Exposure to different settings such as student communities, residential living and Greek life contribute to strengthening individuals and make them pass through transitions effectively. "The ratio of assets to liabilities helps to explain why different individuals react differently to same type of transition and why the same person reacts differently at different times" (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Transitioning to college life and specially moving to campus significantly affect students physiologically and sociologically. As students have to make their best effort to take advantage of this unique opportunity, colleges and universities have the challenge to create the environment that better provide and bring students the perfect mix for their transition period.

Colleges and universities have the obligation to provide a great community development environment and exposure; as well as to generate and promote student communities that should serve as learning communities. All these aspects together will create the perfect formula that will train students for their future endeavors.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to evidence, highlight and support the importance of student communities in student development. Particularly, two main elements of student community will be presented and analyzed: college size and residential living. Theories such as Chickering, Pascarella and Terenzini, Chickering and Reisser, and Schlossberg's will be used in order to support the arguments presented.

### **Community Development**

#### **Institutional Environment**

The learning process involves not only retention of information but also a dynamic social environment. Social interaction could not be separated from learning and learning could only occur in the context of social interaction (Vygotsky). Boyer described four essential elements of education: community, curriculum, climate and character. He postulates that community is the first and most essential ingredient of an effective education.

Environmental factors that maximize persistence and educational attainment include a peer culture in which students develop close on-campus friendships, participate frequently in college-sponsored activities, and perceive their college to be concerned about them individually as well as an emphasis on support services including advising, orientation, and individualized general education courses that develop academic survivor skills (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Colleges and universities administrators have the challenge to create natural social interaction settings based on collaborative environment that help develop learning communities such as residential living, institutional size, student-faculty interactions, and student oriented programs and services. Social interactions, as one of the key influences for student development, will vary from one institution to another. Institutional size to racial-ethnic composition or to gender composition plays a major factor for social exposure and interactions.

For instance, nowadays, coeducational institutions occupy the majority of the offer in higher education; however, there is still some debate that women's only educational institutions offer a better education for women rather than men. Recent evidence tends to support the earlier conclusions concerning a modest educational advantage associated with attendance at a women's college, although the dynamics of how any influences exert themselves remains unclear (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). As part of social interactions role, ethnic composition should be considered as a key element for successful interactions. This element help student grows and develop their interpersonal relationships through intercultural and interpersonal tolerance, acceptance of differences and exposure to real and complex life. Also it will develop student's identity by creating a great environment where students experience different situations that make them establish their own identity.

Interactions with peers constitute a powerful socializing agent, as stated by Astin: "The student's peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years". As social interactions increase, the level of exposure and maturity increases as well, providing students with psychological and sociological development thorough share beliefs, community memberships, and affiliations among others. Institutional objectives need to be clear and aligned with the vision and mission statement. Policies, programs and practices need to be consistent so they can promote a better environment and generate learning communities through different programs and more importantly through student involvement.

The clarity and stability which objectives are implemented largely determine whether any substantial development will occur or whether the student, subject to opposing forces, remains fixed or changes only in response to other external pressures (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). These external pressures involve not only academic development but institutional development as a generator of learning environments based on social interactions.

### **College size: impact and student exposure to large or small institutions**

Institutional size is an outcome of institutional strategic planning and objectives. Colleges with clear and consistent objectives provide a better learning and community environment. Small colleges should be successful at creating this environment as their flexibility and fast reaction provide them with tools to enhance student satisfaction. On the other hand, large colleges are less reactive and slower than small colleges, as a diversity of people and programs are higher, it turns difficult to create a perfect institutional environment.

In the student development process, significant participation in campus life, activities and satisfaction with the college experience is needed. In order to generate this environment, college

size plays such an important role as from it derives most of activities and campus life appreciation. Institutions administrators need to address the needs and balance the growth of their institutions with the opportunities that are offered by the campus environment and students interactions. Large institutions offer more opportunities to socialize and interact, however the excessive number of students could overcome the number of opportunities ending up in a diminishing returns situation. On the other hand, small colleges are certainly more individual-oriented, have a strong sense of community and bring students more control of activities but not necessarily more exposure or more social or academic interactions.

Baker and Gump (1964) used the term redundancy to emphasize the number of persons for a given setting, when this number exceeds the opportunities for active participation and satisfying experiences, then redundancy is present, it exists. Chickering & Reisser (1993) describe this situation as three runners ending up on second base, then two are redundant; or ten players on a tennis court or one thousand players on a golf course, there is evidently a redundancy. This circumstance affects student development as activities and responsibilities of some student become more difficult to enter and more difficult to achieve. However, there are always some groups, students in this case, that are able to take advantage and participate in all activities and opportunities brought to them. All these interactions will definitely affect and contribute to student development and growth in terms of maturity, establishing identity, developing competence, managing emotions and developing purpose.

Large colleges could bring lots of opportunities, but if the number of persons outstrips these opportunities, student's participation will be affected negatively and they won't be able to get an entire positive satisfaction experience. Small colleges could bring fewer opportunities for interaction and community development; however, it will generate a stronger sense of community that will help students foster their personal growth and increase their exposure to their student development cycle.

Chickering & Reisser (1993) list six general consequences that are associated with redundancy. 1) A smaller proportion of persons actively participate; 2) the activities and responsibilities of those who do participate become less varied and more specialized, 3) persons with marginal ability are left out, ignored and actively denied opportunities to participate; 4) evaluation shifts from criterion-referenced evaluation to norm-referenced evaluation. In other words, as numbers increase and put pressures on the need to discriminate, judgments are made on the basis of increasingly fine distinctions; 5) a hierarchy of prestige and power develops; and 6) rules of conduct, definitions of appropriate behaviors and standards for performance become increasingly formalized and rigid. All these consequences of redundancy leave some thoughts about appropriate size of an institution. It should be determining by analyzing the number of settings, activities and responsibilities required to offer the right and desired institutional environment.

Large institutions could avoid falling into redundancy by becoming active in small groups that provide students the feeling that even though it's a large college there is an environment that invite individuals to develop opportunities and be actively involved in activities participation. These strategies could be segmenting the university into small colleges and empowering them and its deans, faculty and staff to organize and create the desired institutional environment. As

the institutional size is fragmented, there will be more opportunities for students to take advantage of the different settings, social involvement and integration. Large institutions must work hard on having these “learning groups” but at the same time not losing the institutional purpose and values as a whole.

Another characteristic of large institutions that can affect student body is faculty concern and interaction. Bayer (1975) found that the size was the attribute most highly correlated with the criterion: the larger the institution the less was the concern for the individual student. It is normally perceived that the institutional size is negatively linked to faculty contact and interaction. Alexander Astin stated that students learn by becoming involved. This involvement could be threatened by the size and such the outcome could be different as expected. Faculty would spend time with better and brighter students, and there always be a marginalized group that won't get attention. This group will generally find help in other students or friends; however, they will miss an important stage of the development cycle.

College size can affect persistence and retention of students. Beal & Noel (1980) reported that “inadequate student faculty contact, lack of quality care and concern, and inadequate academic advising” are the three top negative campus characteristics in relation to retention. It can be inferred then, that bringing students with these services and support would conduct to a better retention outcome.

The frequency and quality of student's interactions with peers and their participation in extracurricular activities are positively associated with persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). One of the top priorities of a college is to increase retention and promote persistence, which could only be possible by creating and generating the environment where students not only grow and develop but also feel comfortable and compromised. College student body size plays an exceptional and essential role in order to promote these multiple interactions.

### **Residential Living: On/Off Campus Residence**

As emphasized earlier, social interactions are one of the most critical element of student development during college. Pascarella & Terenzini (1991) remark the importance of “socializing agents”, who are people with whom students come into contact. Students develop new and great relationships in college with classmates, hallmates and teammates. Usually a friend becomes a teacher during finals, term project or during the four years of college. These relationships are strong components for learning, communication, reflect, discuss, tolerate, and clarify values among others. They conclude that living on campus versus living off campus was the single most consistent determinant of the impact of college, and that living on campus appears to foster change indirectly, by maximizing the opportunities for social, cultural and extracurricular engagement.

Whether living on campus or off campus, relationships will form subcultures that will impact students for life. When students feel part of their community in the form of residence halls, sorority or fraternity affiliation, their development will foster. Chickering & Reisser (1993) describe five major characteristics of organizations for optimum student development: 1) encourage regular interactions among students; 2) offer opportunities for collaboration and

shared interest; 3) avoid redundancy; 4) include people from diverse background; and 5) have rules and norms to mark boundaries that help differentiate from right to wrong.

Powerful learning is acquired when people come to know each other as close friends. College residence halls provide this environment that creates a community with great impact on learning and development. Residence halls can boost student development regarding competence, purpose, values, integrity, mature interpersonal relationships, and exposure to diversity of backgrounds and attitudes among the residents, opportunity of significant interchange, and existence of shared intellectual interest (Chickering & Reisser (1993). It also has a significant impact on moral issues, intellectual, autonomy and independent enhancement. Achieving all these elements retention and persistence to earn the bachelor's degree strengthen. Even though residence halls are proven to be statistically of positive impact (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), it can also by exception be of negative impact and poor student development. If institutions do not plan accordingly to their strategic plan and objectives, and don't put the right people to manage this source of development, it can go the opposite way where students find themselves encapsulated, demotivated and distracted from their main purpose: academic achievement and graduation.

Students living on campus versus off campus or commuters appear to be benefited by residence halls environment or Greek affiliation. It increases the opportunity of social interaction, academic developing and moral judgment. Chickering (1974) found that campus residence rated themselves higher than commuters on six of eight skills, including academic, writing, artistic, public speaking, and leadership skills. On the other hand, living at home during the freshman year was negatively related to measures of social confidence and popularity. Self-confidence and popularity were greatest among resident students and lowest among commuter students. From a sample of 14,600 students at sixty-two colleges from 1979 to 1982, Pace (1984) found that the largest differences in self-reported gains in personal and social development were between on-campus and off-campus subjects. It is evident that a communal setting fosters a unique kind of bonding that allows students to develop social skills and cross cultural connection.

Students living in residence halls constantly associate increases in altruism, support of civil liberties, racial integration and political liberalism. They have also reported that residence halls provide an opportunity for students not only to interact with classmates and friends but also to become hall officers or resident assistance (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). This kind of exposure, to be on two different sides, one from student's perspective and the other from an authority perspective, make them experiment by their own experience different situations that will make students develop moral reasoning and judgment.

This is explained on Kohlberg's theory of Moral Development that focuses on moral reasoning as the cognitive component of moral behavior. Kohlberg's saw moral development as representing the transformation that occurs in a person's form or structure of thought. Students develop their moral reasoning by living in residence halls and passing through the difference stages offered from freshman to senior.

Student's interpersonal relations with peers and faculty affects psychologically and sociologically their development. While faculty play and influence academically and intellectually on students, peers influence in non-cognitive areas such as personal autonomy, and independence. Pascarella & Terenzini (1991) found that student-faculty interactions as well as peer's interactions in terms of frequency are less important than the quality of those interactions. Therefore, living on campus increases the opportunity to cultural, social and extra-curricular activities. Students who live off campus and commuters have a disadvantage in this sense, as they miss several opportunities to be more socially involved.

For instance, Newcomb (1962) found that even within a small sample and research, students in a two floor residence house with maximum capacity of seventeen students, significantly more close relationships existed among eight men on one floor and among the nine men on the other than between the men on different floors. It can be inferred by this research that human beings are most likely to maintain close relationships already established rather than searching for new ones. Residence halls can become living and learning communities, where social and academic life is interconnected, it can become a place where books, parties, fraternities, classes, assignments and cultural events can be shared as a learning community. Pascarella & Terenzini (1991) showed evidence of the impact of residence in a living-learning center compared to a conventional residence hall. They found that residing in a living-learning center had positive effects on freshman student's progress in getting a better understanding of self, developing interpersonal skills and developing self-reliance and self-discipline. Surprisingly, decreases in dogmatism and authoritarianism were also found.

Schroeder (1981) proposes that students need a balance between their need for privacy, control, and social interaction. Administrators and residence halls managers should take this into account and provide students with the right environment that will allow social and academic interrelation. Students should be involved and feel responsible for their halls as a tool for successful development. Previous research found that students who live in long corridors spent less time studying and socializing in their residence halls, experienced more housing related problems, described their building as more crowded and had more difficulty controlling interaction than short corridor residents did. Students in low rise structures expressed more satisfaction and established more friendships in the halls than those living in high rise buildings (Baum, Aiello and Colesnick, 1978)

Similar principles can be applied to off-campus housing; however, the lack of social interaction make it very difficult to achieve the same results as on-campus living. Off-campus residents lose touch with other members of the community and become more commuter students with the advantages and disadvantages this may bring. Without the residence halls students will miss interaction, motivation, competition, confront, question, compare, criticize, differentiate, analyze, evaluate, tolerance and persistent.

### **Conclusions**

Students move through a transition period when starting their new college life. They face significant change very quickly and can get frustrated and unidentified. Coming from high school and living under parent's rules to college autonomy and interdependence. They have to make their own decisions, manage their emotions, and develop identity, purpose, competition



and integrity. Exposure to different settings such as student communities, residential living and Greek life contribute to strengthening individuals and make them pass through transitions effectively.

Institutional size plays an important role on student development and environment. Size is an outcome of institutional strategic planning and objectives and have to be clear and consistent in order to provide a better learning and development. Small colleges are more flexible and react faster than large colleges; however, they must put much effort to create a perfect social-learning environment. Large colleges have more diversity not only of students but of faculty and programs and therefore are less reactive and slower than small colleges which make it difficult to generate an adequate institutional environment. Colleges and universities, regardless the size, have the challenge and responsibility to provide a perfect learning community environment.

Another element of student development is residence living. Students develop new and long lasting relationships in college with classmates, hallmates and teammates. These relationships become strong components for learning, communication, reflect, discuss, tolerate, and clarify values. Students living on campus are benefited by residence halls environment or Greek affiliation. Residence halls become living and learning communities, where social and academic life is interconnected. Institutional objectives, in terms of institutional size and residence living, need to be clear, aligned and consistent with institutional practices and planning as the route to promote a better environment and generate learning communities to accomplish the desired development outcomes.

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