

# ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN COLLEGE TOWN

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This study investigates academic performance among college students living in three different residential environments: dormitory, apartment housing, and commuter. Analysis is conducted on a sample of 471 students attending a 4-year public institution. Significant differences are found between commuters and apartment residents. Controlling for several background characteristics, being a commuter student positively influences grade point average in comparison to living in an apartment adjacent to campus. Age, educational objectives, and race also have significant effects on academic performance. Recommendations are made regarding future research into the relationship between residence and academic performance in higher education.

## Introduction

What impact does apartment housing adjacent to campus have on the academic performance of college students? With a few exceptions (Astin, 1977; Selby and Weston, 1978), research on the effects of residential life focus on differences between commuters and dormitory students and fail to consider apartment dwellers (Anderson, 1988; Chickering, 1974). Several studies comparing commuter and dormitory students suggest that living on campus fosters academic performance through expanded opportunities for integration into the academic (e.g., interaction with faculty) and social systems (e.g., frequency of peer conversations, informal social activities) of college (Chapman and Pascarella, 1983; Pascarella and Chapman, 1983; Tinto, 1975). Commuter colleges and those with few students living on campus are believed to lower students' integration by: 1) making it easier for students to become involved in competing social roles; 2) limiting access to faculty outside the classroom; and, 3) thus decreasing peer and faculty socialization to traditional academic norms and values.

The literature described above on the impact of commuting versus dormitory residence suggests that the proximity of apart-

ment housing to campus will produce an environment similar to that of dormitories, but there are some important differences. First, dormitories tend to have more extensive staffing than do apartment units. Second, most dormitories offer opportunities for student participation in policy setting and activity programming in residence halls. Finally, security is likely to be more elaborate (e.g., security guard patrols and desk monitors in residence halls to control admission to buildings) in dormitories than in apartment complexes.

Apartment housing near college campuses continues to be increasingly popular among students. Some of the dwellings in these "college towns" are acquired by colleges from private owners and remodeled to meet the contemporary living-learning needs of students. Still others, including the apartment buildings in this study, remain privately owned and are located next to campus.

There is a need for further empirical research comparing the multitude of residential options available to college students. The issue addressed here concerns the impact of residing next to campus in a student community versus living in a dormitory or commuting. This study is designed to determine

whether apartment, commuter, and residence hall students differ in their academic performance. Controls for relevant background characteristics are also considered.

#### *Data and Methodology*

Data were collected at a large state-supported university on the West Coast of the United States. In the Spring of 1985, students completed a questionnaire with items examining background characteristics and a variety of attitudes, behaviors, and college experiences. A shorter version of the 1985 questionnaire was administered in the Spring of 1986. Only those items that appeared on both surveys are analyzed in this study.

A random sample of 500 students was selected for each of the two years from the Student Directory. The selection process was scientifically constructed to ensure a random sampling of the student body. On both occasions, questionnaires were completed and returned anonymously. A total of 220 students responded to the 1985 survey, for a 44 percent response rate. In 1986, 251 students returned the questionnaire, yielding a response rate of 50 percent. The results from the 471 students were combined into a single file. A comparison of respondents' residence and grade-point average with non-respondents revealed no statistically significant sample biases. Furthermore, the sex composition, age, socioeconomic status, and race of the respondents did not differ significantly from the original pool of students. Table 1 summarizes the operational definitions and descriptive statistics for all the variables used in the analysis.

#### *Method of Analysis*

Regression techniques illuminate the data. In particular, a linear, additive, single equation multivariate model is estimated using ordinary least squares (OLS). Multiple regression reveals which independent variables significantly effect academic perfor-

mance. The analysis proceeds with the regression of college grade point average (GPA) on the independent variables. Standardized regression coefficients are compared to assess the relative importance of each independent variable on GPA.

#### **Results**

The results of multiple regression analysis for academic performance are shown in table 2. The eleven independent variables account for 27 percent of the variance in GPA. The effects of four variables (i.e., age, race, educational objectives, and commuting) have a significant influence on academic performance. One of the background factors, race, has a negative effect on GPA. Specifically, controlling for all other independent variables, on average nonwhites have GPAs .15 grade points lower than whites. Age has a strong positive effect on academic achievement, producing a .02 increase in GPA for each one year increase in age. Not surprisingly, educational objectives exert a strong positive influence on GPA. The standardized coefficient (.34) shows that educational objective is the strongest determinant of academic performance.

The multiple regression analysis reveals that GPA is influenced by residence type. Interestingly, being a commuter student has a significant positive effect on academic performance in comparison to living in an apartment next to campus. Illustrative of this point, holding constant all other independent variables, commuter students have GPAs .19 grade points higher than residents in the student community. The effect of dormitory residence is also positive, but not statistically different from apartment housing.

#### **Discussion**

Concerning the stated purpose of this study, apartment and commuter students differ in academic performance. Commuters have significantly higher GPAs than apart-

Table 1  
Variables, Indicators , Means, and Standard Deviations

Variable	Indicator	Mean	S.D.
<b>Background Factors:</b>			
Age	reported age at the time of the survey	22.00	4.44
Male	1 = male, 0 = female	.42	.49
Nonwhite	1 = nonwhite, 0 = white	.13	.33
SES	1 = upper/middle class, 0 = lower class	.88	.33
Catholic	1 = catholic, 0 = otherwise	.18	.39
Jewish	1 = jewish, 0 = otherwise	.12	.33
Norelig	1 = no preference or not religious, 0 = otherwise	.41	.49
	Protestants served as the omitted reference category.		
<b>College Factors:</b>			
Edobj	Educational objective. 1 = BA or BS; 2 = some post-bachelors education; 3 = MA, MS, or equivalent; 4 = PhD, MD, or equivalent	2.46	1.11
Commute	A commuter was defined as any student who did not live on campus or in the adjacent student community. 1 = commuter, 0 = otherwise	.21	.40
Dorm	1 = dormitory, 0 = otherwise Students living in apartments in the student community located adjacent to the campus served as the omitted reference category.	.35	.48
Greek	1 = member of fraternity or sorority, 0 = otherwise	.11	.33
<b>Dependent Variable:</b>			
GPA	Grade point average (self-reported) measured on a 0.0 to 4.0 scale.	3.03	.49

Table 2  
Regression Results for Academic Performance

Independent Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients
(Background Factors)		
Age	.02**	.20
Male	-.03	-.03
Nonwhite	-.15*	-.10
SES	-.10	-.07
Catholic	-.12	-.10
Jewish	-.07	-.05
Norelig	-.05	-.05
(College Factors)		
Edobj	.15**	.34
Commute	.19**	.16
Dorm	.07	.07
Greek	.02	.01
Intercept	2.30**	
R-square	.27	

\*  $p < .05$  (two-tailed test)

\*\*  $p < .01$  (two-tailed test)

ment residents, holding constant relevant background characteristics. This finding is counter to what might be expected from a social integration perspective (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1975). However, it is less surprising in light of the fact that studies of residential life emphasizing social integration often fail to consider the age of students and rely instead on year of attendance (Selby and Weston, 1978). Consequently, the influence of commuting on academic performance may differ depending on age. There is a nationwide trend toward reentry education involving a substantial segment of the adult population. Traditional age students may be negatively effected by commuting because

of missed opportunities for social and academic integration available on-campus and in residence halls. On the contrary, such activities may be of less importance to reentry students and result in little or no serious problems of adjustment to hinder academic performance.

The results of this study do not provide strong evidence that dormitory and apartment residents differ in academic performance. However, the positive, albeit not statistically significant effect of dormitory residence should not be overlooked. The fact that academic performance was lower among apartment residents could be due in part to a lack of staffing, security, and common

lounging and recreational facilities equivalent to those in dormitory housing. Moreover, the nature of student life in "college town" also may contribute to a reduction in academic performance. Not unlike other "college towns," the student community in the present study is known for its preponderance of activities which run counter to academic performance (e.g., alcohol and drug use, fraternities and sororities). Further empirical research is needed to determine whether these factors mediate the effects of apartment living on academic performance.

Future investigations should address two general limitations of the current study. First, although cross-sectional data provide instructive information, longitudinal data are needed to address the questions presented here more rigorously. The adequate study of the relationship between residence and academic performance among college students requires comprehensive data sets, perhaps on the level of *High School and Beyond*. Second, multi-institutional studies of higher education are needed with improved specification and measurement of the multiple dimensions of collegiate living environments.

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that, both sets of enforcers should, therefore, be urged to see the possibilities in these change-oriented behaviors. There is a real prospect that even those who initially display defiant responses might be helped to work through a "grieving process" to where they and their families could be transformed and healed.

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