

## **Residential Retention at the University of Georgia: Improving Services through Assessment**

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*Retaining students in programs and services is a constant concern within any academic institution. As members of such communities, housing administrators have a responsibility to aid in the retention of students. Findings at the University of Georgia's Department of University Housing show that 50% of students leave on-campus housing after their first year. As the department prepares to open a new residential facility, understanding the cause of this phenomenon is important to the future success of the department, the institution, and the students. This article discusses the process by which UGA examined the needs and preferences of students. Results and implications will be discussed.*

Accountability has been an issue for colleges and universities since the early 1940's. Despite its long-standing importance, this responsibility often presents dilemmas for administrators. As the academy is held to increasingly high standards, all facets of the University community will also need to operate from an accountability frame. Student Affairs divisions as well as the individual units that constitute these divisions are no exception.

For most institutions, retention is one of the key components of accountability. This measure is used to reassure students, politicians, and other stakeholders that the institution is acting in good faith to meet its obligations to students. Likewise, retention can be a measure of accountability for divisions of student affairs. Retention can be defined as an individual's continued involvement at an institution (Tinto, 1993). For the purpose of this study, it will be defined as a resident's persistence in living in on-campus housing.

Student retention is often viewed as the purview of academic units. In a recent publication, *Making the Most of College*, Richard Light (2001) discusses key components to students' satisfaction, growth and retention at institutions. Many of the activities and functions he presents as critical components, however, are functions of student affairs divisions, including: mentoring and advising; connecting with academic and administrative leaders; learning from differences; exploring beliefs; providing opportunities for interaction, discussion and debate; and helping with issues of balance, choices, and life planning. Light (2001) also discusses living on campus; indeed, one student discussed her residence hall living as "one of my most valuable experiences here" (Light, 2001, p. 41). Such statements are not uncommon, and research further supports the premise that residential living is a key component to students' social and academic integration, which facilitates retention and greater academic success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1992). In fact, research shows "...there is clear evidence that living on campus exerts a net positive impact on persistence and degree attainment" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 378). Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) go on to assert that colleges and universities with residential facilities have an additional advantage in retaining and graduating students.

On a local level, studies conducted on the University of Georgia's campus further support this finding (Department of University Housing, 2002). In fact, for the past six years, studies have found students residing on-campus have higher grade point averages than their off-campus colleagues (Department of University Housing, 2002). Once again, Pascarella and Terenzini's reveals a corollary: "residence groupings provide a readily available laboratory for enhancing the academic and interpersonal quality of student life" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 389). Nevertheless, the Department of University Housing has historically had difficulty retaining undergraduate students in housing past their first year. Statistics for the 2002-2003 academic

year indicate 15% of second-year students, 7% of third-year students, and 4% of fourth-year students, reside in University Housing, totalling a nearly 50% drop in population every year after the second year (SEC Report, 2003).

These national and local research findings provide keys to understanding the issues of residential retention at the University of Georgia. Practitioners know that living on-campus facilitates the growth, development, success, satisfaction, and retention of our students; it is imperative, therefore, to understand why students choose to move off campus.

The purpose of this study was: (1) to better understand why students do not continue in campus housing past the first year, (2) to gain an understanding of how to improve residential living experiences for those students who do remain, and (3) to determine what changes could make residential living more attractive to students who do not continue in University Housing.

Surprisingly, little research focusing directly on the retention of students in residential environments exists. Major predictors of retention include diversity, affordability, desire for privacy, variety of living options, noise level, personal independence, campus participation, academics and convenience (Popelka, 1997; Ullom & Hallenbeck, 1981).

### Method

A mixed methods design was used for this survey. A locally-developed, quantitative instrument was administered via phone and participants were encouraged to offer comments that elaborated on their responses. A group of professional level staff served as the research call team. Members contacted students at various times including evening hours and read a series of 16 statements to which they responded using the five-point Likert scale previously discussed. A total of 50 interviews were conducted forming a representative sample of first-year students at the University of Georgia.

Upon completing all the interviews, team members met to discuss the various responses received. Peer debriefing was used with team members to ensure responses were recorded properly, and accurately. Team members also reviewed the qualitative data and provided an interpretation of meaning. This information was then discussed among team members. Lastly, this information was then coded and summarized by the lead researcher.

Qualitative methods “permit the evaluator to study selected issues in depth and detail...” (Patton, 1990, p.12). A second portion of the study entailed interviewers asking participants to clarify and expand on their quantitative responses. Content analysis, “the process of identifying, coding, and categorizing the primary patterns in the data” (Patton, 1990), was used to analyze the qualitative data; thus, a three-stage approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used. Peer debriefing and member checks were used to ensure rigor, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of analyzed data (Upcraft & Schuh, 1997).

### *Sample*

Using a randomizer in the resident assignments database, a list of 200 names was generated which fit three specific criteria. Each student (1) was a first-year student for the 2002-2003 academic year, (2) lived in housing for the 2002-2003 academic year, and (3) chose not to live in housing for the 2003-2004 academic year.

### *Instrument Design*

Based on the research of Popelka (1997), and Ullom and Hallenback (1981), a locally designed instrument was created to address the nine predictors found in the research as well as several additional issues specific to the University of Georgia. The instrument contains 16 statements that were answered using a five point Likert scale adopted from Popelka (1997) where 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, and 5=Strongly Agree.

Participants were then asked two final questions about personal preference. All data was collected at the University of Georgia.

The instrument was designed to be short in length to ensure the interviewer's ability to conduct a sufficient number of interviews (Schuh & Upcraft, 2001). Prior to conducting the study, the instrument was distributed to housing professionals and reviewed for content validity (Upcraft & Schuh, 1997). Changes were then made for clarity and understanding. The final instrument was entered into a Microsoft Excel database to allow individual interviewers to record responses of interviewed students. Data then fed into a master database that automatically computed results for each question.

## Results

### *Analysis*

For the purposes of this study, descriptive statistics were the most practical and requested type of data from Housing staff who initiated the study. The researchers chose not to use other types of statistical analysis because the staff utilizing this information requested the data be descriptive in nature. The information has been shared with multiple levels of staff, custodial, maintenance, student, and professional staff. As such, descriptive and summative information was most practical and applicable.

After all interviews were conducted, responses to the quantitative survey were analyzed primarily using descriptive statistics. Demographic data was also examined. The final step involved an in-depth analysis of each item in the instrument. As stated, descriptive statistics were the primary focus of analysis. A representative mean was found for each item and each item grouped by gender. It is important to note that one item, question fourteen, was discarded as it was deemed misleading and misunderstood by participants.

## Results

Respondents of this study were representative of the demographics of UGA Students. The gender of the sample was such that 70% of were female, and 30% were male. Additionally, respondents resided in 10 of the seventeen residential facilities. Lastly, all participants were entering their second year at UGA. It is important to note that ethnicity was not a question that was asked of study participants. The breakdown by gender is an important consideration in that gender was a major factor in student responses. Of the fifteen items used in the final analysis, female respondents answered higher than male respondents on eight items. It is interesting to note that while this is the case, male respondents were still found to be more satisfied with their overall experience (male = 4.01, female = 3.93).

Because all items are set in a positive frame, any item with an overall mean of 4.0 (agree on the five-point scale) is considered a favorable response. Of the fifteen items on the instrument, eleven are items that are in direct control of the Department of University Housing, while four items are personal preferences of the respondents. Five of the eleven items for which the department is in control achieved an overall mean of 4.0 or higher. These items are convenience (4.02), cost vs. benefit of living on campus (4.64), independence (4.16), reasonable rules (4.08), and ability to study in rooms (4.02). Six of the eleven items for which the department is in control achieved an overall mean of less than 4.0. The lowest mean was 3.14 for the ability to choose from a variety of living options. Other items listed in order of increasing overall mean are privacy (3.30), control of living environment (3.52), security system (3.7), noise level (3.72), and condition of living facilities (3.88). A comprehensive summary of each question mean, as well as the mean by gender can be found in Table 1.1.

The last quantitative portion of the study asked participants about their preferences in two areas: (1) parking and (2) bathroom/bedroom. The question regarding parking asked, “If I was considering an off campus residence and an on-campus residence that offered similar features at similar prices, the availability of convenient parking would influence my decision where to live.” Participants responded with an average of 3.82 demonstrating a response between neutral and agree. Participants were also asked to choose which feature they preferred most: a private bedroom they have to themselves, or a private bathroom they share with up to three other people. While the majority of students (66%) preferred a private bedroom over a private bathroom, there was a **significant difference** in preferences when data was examined by gender. Among males, 87% preferred a private bedroom and only 13% preferred the semi-private bathroom. Females however **differed significantly** with only 57% preferring a private bedroom and 43% preferring a semi-private bathroom.

It is also important to note that there were four items where the difference in mean of gender was greater than .40. These questions are 3, 4, 13, and 16. Of these, the greatest difference was question 16 regarding temperature regulation with a difference of .64. Although both groups, men (4.66) and women (4.02), agreed that ability to control temperature was a significant factor in living environment choice, it was clearly a more important factor for men.

An interesting finding emerged regarding participants’ hesitance in giving negative information. Peer debriefing revealed that participants were more critical in the qualitative portion, but would give a more “satisfied” response on questions. Therefore, responses closer to the “neutral” range are in all probability a sign that students were unhappier with their experiences than indicated.

Table 1.1

## Summary Statistics

<b>Question</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Overall</b>
1. The benefits I received by living on campus were worth the rent I paid to live on campus.	4.53	4.68	4.64
2. I had enough privacy while living on campus.	3.26	3.31	3.3
3. The rules I had to follow in order to live on campus allowed me to live my life in a manner I found acceptable.	3.80	4.20	4.08
4. I was able to choose from a variety of on-campus living options (e.g. suite style, co-ed).	3.8	2.85	3.14
5. I find that living with or near people from different ethnic backgrounds to be stimulating.	4.26	4.11	4.16
6. I like being able to share experiences with different types of people.	4.2	4.45	4.38
7. I was able to have control over my living environment free from outside interference	3.46	3.54	3.52
8. I felt the noise level surrounding my living area was acceptable most of the time.	3.86	3.65	3.72
9. I was able to study in my room at times I felt were convenient.	4.0	4.03	4.02
10. I believe living on campus was convenient for me as a student.	4.66	4.66	4.66
11. I felt my living facilities were in adequate condition.	4.0	3.82	3.88
12. I felt living on campus allowed me to be independent.	4.33	4.08	4.16
13. I felt the security system in my residence hall helped to keep me safe and secure.	3.4	3.82	3.7
14. I felt the security system in my residence hall was too cumbersome for the effect it achieved.	2.86	2.65	2.72
15. If I was considering an off campus residence and an on-campus residence that offered similar features at similar prices, the availability of convenient parking would influence my decision where to live.	4.0	3.8	3.86
16. Being able to control the temperature in my living environment is a significant factor in my choice of living environment.	4.66	4.02	4.22

## Qualitative Summary

Data from the qualitative portion can be summarized in three major themes: space, privacy and independence. Each theme is discussed below.

*Theme 1: Space*

Nearly 25% of students stated they moved off campus to have more personal space. Some wanted bigger bedrooms, bathrooms, a place to cook, or simply a private area they could lounge around in and call their own. Respondents simply felt the residence halls did not offer them enough space to live comfortably. Participants stated they (and their parents) were willing to spend significantly more money on an off-campus apartment as long as the apartment had considerably more space than they had while living in the residence halls. Students wanted a space they could feel comfortable in, and modify to their taste. They felt the residence halls were too sterile, and the accommodations provided by off-campus accommodations allowed them to modify their living quarters in a manner they found acceptable. One participant responded by saying, "I did not like sharing a bathroom with so many people. I didn't like that. Also, I moved off so I could have a kitchen and be able to cook."

### *Theme 2: Privacy*

"It was just really hard to have time for myself. It was like I went to class, and I was around so many people, and then I came back to the dorm, and there were still a ton of people. It was like if I wanted to get away, I had to go back to my house [parent's residence]. There was just nowhere in the dorms to be by myself."

Another 25% of students felt they were unable to gain the degree of privacy they needed in order to have balance, and achieve successfully as a student. They were unable to have their own bedroom or didn't enjoy sharing a bathroom with scores of other residents. Many respondents stated they simply wanted a space like a living room where they could just sit and watch TV without having other people around. Respondents felt the residence halls did not offer the privacy they needed in order to have balance and achieve successfully as a student.

### *Theme 3: Independence*

“In general, I like living in the dorms, but I also felt like I wasn’t very independent while I lived there. If I wanted to eat I had to do it when Bolton was open. If I wanted to have a friend over, I had to follow the visitation policy. I think I’m old enough to decide what is best for me. The dorms were good, but it’s important for me to be able to make my own decisions.”

Over 35% of respondents felt they did not have independence while living in the residence halls. Although the mean on item 12 (“I felt living on campus allowed me to be independent”) was 4.16, students apparently did not have the level of independence they truly desired. Some students seemed to feel that the rules required to live in the residence halls were a transition from parents. They still were not totally free from people telling them what to do. Students sought to escape this “transitional parenthood” and live in an environment where they have more control over their decisions and their life.

#### Limitations

There are several limitations to consider when reading the results of this study. Inherent in qualitative research is the concern for researcher bias due to the researcher serving as the instrument for analysis. An additional limitation is that the study was conducted on the University of Georgia’s campus. Findings are generalizable only to that population and institution type. One final limitation is the number of participants. While the sample was representative of the UGA residential population, a larger sample size would have been ideal.

#### Implications

Research states living on campus contributes to the overall success and retention of students. As such, housing administrators are an integral part of institutional efforts to retain students. As departments prepare for the next wave of construction to accommodate the increased number of students attending college, findings like these can greatly impact the architectural, staffing, and

programmatic design. The opening of new facilities may result in older facilities being perceived as less attractive and less desirable, in turn impacting fiscal stability. Housing departments must find a way to construct new facilities while maintaining occupancy in older buildings.

Findings from this study demonstrate that alterations can be made without a great investment of revenue to retain students. Providing quiet environments, more private living options and intentional opportunities for involvement can greatly increase retention and satisfaction of students in housing beyond their first year. Other points of consideration for retaining students include:

- Create a culture of success where the environment is conducive to academic and personal success.
- Increase students' ability to control their living environment. This includes temperature regulation, security, and ability to study.
- Modify staffing in residential facilities to meet the desires of students for independence and less "intrusive" governance. Considerations may include the development of community assistants and community mentors in lieu of traditional resident assistants who are viewed as "policy enforcers."
- Create environments that allow for greater independence, and privacy while still providing opportunities for interaction. This recommendation is counter to some research, but it seems evident in this survey that students desire both personal privacy and opportunities for interaction.
- Modify facilities to allow for more gender-specific preferences. For example, men overwhelmingly preferred a private bedroom over a semi-private bath. Consider

alternative living designs by modifying older facilities that may be “traditional” in nature (e.g., communal bathrooms and double rooms). Creating private bedrooms for males may be a new way to increase satisfaction and retention.

Survey findings have been shared with various levels of University Housing staff – custodial, maintenance, student, and professional. Staff members have also been challenged to work on areas that directly affect their area. For example, undergraduate student staff has been challenged to be more intentional about confronting problems of noise, custodial and maintenance staff has been challenged to better maintain facilities, and the Management Team staff has examined the data to see how they can address some of the issues such as privacy, control of living environment, noise level, when planning new and remodeling existing facilities. The data has also been used from a programmatic perspective with the residence life staff.

### Conclusion

At the University of Georgia, data has been used to effect change, to inform practice, and to enhance the educational environment. While change does not happen quickly, attention to the details of what matters to students has the potential to increase retention, and academic performance. Staying on the cutting edge of students’ needs is the only way to ensure we are meeting our mission to “Provide comfortable, affordable, and secure on campus housing options in residential communities where the academic success and personal growth of residents are encouraged and supported” (Department of University Housing, 2002). Findings from this study present excellent opportunities for guiding today’s student and providing for their changing needs.

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