

several specific points during college. It would be of interest to know if and how these study space preferences are shaped and impacted by college. The second study would be a survey of current campus architecture to consider whether study areas on college campus actually meet the reported needs of students. Third, perhaps a study to determine how students allocate their time, and whether that affects study location preference might be beneficial to understanding this issue. Finally, considering this survey's findings of relationships between aspects of employment and GPA, the researchers would like to do a more directed study on the impact of employment on aspects of college life.

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## Student Satisfaction With the Adams Living Learning Center

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*The purpose of this study was to gather information from past residents of the Adams Living Learning Center, an African American thematic unit at a large, Research I institution in the Midwest. Qualitative methods were employed to assess satisfaction among former residents, as well as to discover where improvements might be needed. The study provides implications for how the center could be strengthened as well as suggestions for designing residence hall units conducive to the development of African American students.*

### Introduction

During the years that it was housed at its original location, the Adams Living Learning Center, an African American thematic unit situated at a large, Research I institution witnessed the highest retention rate of any residence hall facility at its campus. One of these factors can be attributed to the autonomy that the students felt from having their own independent residence facility. Currently, the Adams Living Learning Center is undergoing a relocation phase, with its residents being housed in a traditional residence hall facility. This could potentially alter the sense of autonomy and community that existed within the center prior to its relocation. With such a monumental turning point, it is important to examine both the attributes and shortcomings of the center's previous environment to understand what elements were effective as well as ineffective in maximizing a minority residential living experience.

Studies of minority campus living climates have gained some attention in recent years for a number of reasons. Findings suggest students of color at Predominately White Institutions do not feel they are a part of the institution's environment. Tinto (as cited in Turner, 1994) said that research consistently demonstrates that a student will remain in college when he or she feels connected, involved, and served. The results of Turner's (1994) survey regarding the campus climate for students of color at the University of Minnesota indicated that minority students face an unsupportive and oftentimes lonely environment while attending a Predominantly White Institution.

Success or failure reflected in retention rates is suggested in

many cases to be directly linked to the environment in which the student resides. One obstacle here, however, is that while discussion and research regarding living environments has received increased attention, most theories regarding student development are focused solely on teaching environments, mainly because environments external to the classroom are often viewed as difficult to change. While the individual's environment is recognized to be an important determinant of development, it tends nonetheless to be treated theoretically as an amorphous set of conditions (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) further concluded that, "virtually none of these theories examines in any detailed fashion the environmental conditions and processes that might lead to development of any particular kind at any particular stage" (p. 46). Therefore, most of what can be used as theoretical perspective and as reference for this study will be reflective of the researchers' findings as they relate to a concentrated living environment.

The purpose of this study was to gather information from past residents of the Adams Living Learning Center, to determine the level of satisfaction among its residents, as well as to learn where improvements might be needed. The findings could have implications in various areas of other thematic communities and for residence halls where African American students reside. Specifically, the study provides implications for how residence hall administrators design residence hall units to be conducive to the development of African American students.

### Literature Review

A number of theories are grounded in the general notion of environmental influence. Barker (as cited in Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991) developed a theory of "behavior settings" in which he theorized: "... environments select the shape and behavior of the people occupying any given setting" (p. 39).

In leading more specifically to the issue of residential environments, some information has been published discussing the correlation between living environments and the successful development of subgroups. One of the common denominators for the development of a student subculture is a common living area. Love, et al. (1993) found that living in close proximity to one another and persistent interaction are important to the emergence of a peer group or subculture. Furthermore, providing common living units for certain groups can favorably shape their cultural development (Love, et al. 1993).

Various other studies have assessed the cognitive and academic impact on students as a result of living on campus. A study conducted by Chickering (1974) indicated that students who lived on campus were generally more satisfied with college, self-confident, demonstrated personal growth and development, and were more involved in campus activities than students who lived off campus and commuted to school. Astin's (1977) study found a correlation between residence halls and liberalism, participation in campus activities, positive social relationships, and strong faculty and peer interactions. Further, Williams and Reilley's (1972) study discovered that students' positive perceptions of their residence halls translated into a positive perception of their campus environment as a whole.

It is undeniable that the peer group influence, close proximity to campus, and social bonds that are generated within residence halls provide social support and a closer connection to the institution. These outcomes could also be linked to the notion that students find more support in living groups with whom they share the dominant group interests or personality. Furthermore, by living with those of similar racial or ethnic backgrounds students can develop stable relationships with one another and a better understanding of their environment (Schroeder, 1987). The aforementioned might best explain how a racially homogenous living learning center might impact its students.

Research has also suggested that a positive relationship exists between being a part of a living learning center and institutional satisfaction, and cognitive and intellectual development. In Pascarella and Terenzini's (1980) investigation, students living in learning centers indicated higher gains in cognitive development and rated their institution's environments higher than students living in traditional residential facilities. As a result, there is a greater potential for intellectual development and overall campus satisfaction from living in certain communities (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

It is also important that living learning centers provide intercultural programming. Intercultural programming acts as a tool for enhancing the learning and communication skills of a particular group (Cox, 1985). Suggested intercultural programs might encompass the observance of cultural/spiritual holidays, such as Kwanzaa, that directly reflect the culture of the students inhabiting the center.

In spite of the research on college students and residence halls, few studies have assessed the impact of living learning centers on African American students in particular. Research regarding the correlation between African American students and the impact of

attending college vaguely alludes to the residential component and places heavier emphasis on the collegiate experience as a whole. Studies have determined that many White institutions provide inadequate support for Black students (Fleming, 1988). Further, Farver, Sedlacek, and Brooks (1975) suggested that Black students face challenges in adjusting to traditionally White campuses (as cited in Shingles, 1979).

Difficulties in adjusting to college may be attributed to an upsurge in African American students on predominantly White campuses in the last three decades. Blacks experienced a thirty-year shift from attending all-Black schools (90 %) to one of minority attendance in largely White institutions (Fleming, 1988). Also, Fleming cited Bowles and Decosta (1971) in stating that contact between Black students and major colleges was tremendously limited in the past, as well as institutions' experience with serving them.

What has resulted is a lack of responsiveness in meeting African American students' needs. Fleming (1988) determined that very few institutions have made efforts to promote interracial harmony and positive campus interactions. In spite of these setbacks, however, African American students continue to thrive under difficult and sometimes inhospitable circumstances. Asante and Al-Deen (1984) determined that while there are challenges to endure, Blacks continually strive to make a place for themselves within inhospitable and often tumultuous climates.

Regarding solutions to the problem, Shingles (1979) recommended that racial and cultural considerations be given attention when approaching the development of students. Neglecting this important component could undermine attempts to strengthen the quality of higher education. A study by Bennett (1984) at Indiana University recommended developing educational, culturally based programs that cater to the best determined learning styles of racially diverse students and creating a living learning center where positive interaction and learning could occur.

### **Methodology**

#### *Participants*

The residence life department at the institution provided the researchers with a list of students who had lived in the Adams Living Learning Center during the two years prior to when the study was conducted. Participants were sixteen African American traditionally aged male and female sophomores, juniors, and seniors attending a

large mid-western university. The participants' ages ranged between 18 and 21.

#### *Procedure*

The students were notified of the study by telephone and e-mail and asked to participate. The researchers were aware of the potential for receiving more responses from females, because of the relatively few African American males that resided in the residence hall and who attend the institution. Each student who agreed to take part in the study was contacted by phone and scheduled for an interview at a location chosen by the researcher.

The researchers originally deemed 30 participants to be a sufficient sample size considering the time constraints of the study. However, only 16 participants agreed to be interviewed. The researchers later discovered that not all individuals listed as former residents of the living learning unit had, in fact, resided there.

All interviews were conducted over a period of two weeks. Each interview lasted approximately one hour in length and some interviews were audio taped at the researchers' discretion. With the participant's permission, before beginning the interview each researcher informed the participant of the study's purpose and the steps the researcher employed to ensure the confidentiality of the participants' identities.

Semi-structured questions were asked about the participants' satisfaction with the services that the Adams Center offered, their decision to live in the center, their perceptions of the residence hall climate, their relationships with other students residing in the center, and their use of the Adams Center's services. These questions were asked because they could provide the researchers with explanations of how beneficial the center's services were for students; how, if at all the climate facilitated the development of peer relationships; and how best the center served the students' needs. A general outline of questions was utilized while additional questions were asked that were not on the list. Each interviewer took notes as well as audiotaped participants' responses during the interview.

Based on the participants' responses, implications for improving the overall climate and services of the center were listed, as well as implications for providing services in all residence halls that are most beneficial for and most favorable to African American students living on campus. Pseudonyms were used for the participants during a discussion of the results.

### Limitations

There are some limitations to this study. The first pertains to the small sample size. The Adams Center has been in existence for approximately five years. However, the residence life department only provided the researchers with the names of individuals who lived there from two of the five years previous to when the study was initiated. It was further discovered, upon contacting persons, that not all individuals on the list had, in fact, resided in the center, but rather had resided in the quadrangle where the center was housed.

Second, as indicated before, sixteen participants were interviewed. This small sample was due to some individuals declining to be interviewed, not returning telephone and e-mail messages, and the investigators having incorrect contact information for potential participants. Some individuals may have been reluctant to be interviewed because they were not comfortable giving negative feedback about the living learning center.

Third, there was limited time in which to perform the study. This hindered the researchers' ability to perform a more in depth investigation of the center and a more thorough analysis of the participants' experiences. Therefore, the results and implications that could be drawn were minimized although certain themes could still be extrapolated.

A final limitation was the period in which the interviews were conducted. The participants were asked to recall events, situations, and conversations that happened between one and two years ago. What may have been lost were the details and the feelings behind such events, situations, and conversations. Participants may have forgotten some of their experiences altogether.

### Results

Salient themes emerged while conducting the interviews with the participants, such as 1) the students' reasons for choosing to live at Adams; 2) perceived benefits from interacting with other residents at the center; 3) students' perceptions of the center's professional staff; 4) students' feelings of the center's freshman seminar course; and 5) suggested improvements for the center.

#### *Reasons For Choosing Adams*

Upon being asked what the primary factors were that influenced the participants' decision to live in the Adams Living Learning Center, two themes emerged: 1) the idea of living among African

American residents; and 2) the attractiveness of the center's Afro-centric theme.

*Living among African American students.* Many of the participants were concerned about being the minority at a Predominately White Institution and thus desired to live within a concentrated environment where African American students were the majority. It was important for many of the participants to live within an environment where other residents shared the same racial background:

*Flora: I wanted to live with Black people. I saw a brochure for the center and I realized that Black people were going to be there and that's where I wanted to be...I wanted to be around people whom I most identified with.*

*Caroline: I knew that I was coming to a majority White school, therefore I wanted to remain close to my own.... I liked the idea of having a family type setting to learn about my culture.*

*The attractiveness of the center's Afro-centric theme.* A second sub-theme that emerged in response to students' motivations for living at the center was the attractiveness of its Afro-centric theme. The living unit, named after the university's first African American student government president, is promoted as having a heavily infused, cultural component. Many of the participants indicated that this deeply influenced their desire to live within the center:

*Sally: In coming to [the institution], I knew the African American population would be a small section of the population. I thought that I might want to live somewhere I could study under an Afro-centric theme.*

*Kris: I wanted to live in the center because it sounded like a place with a goal and purpose of teaching African American history and providing cultural activities.*

Overall, the participants' motivations for choosing an African American living learning center were self imposed yet diverse. Participants believed they would be content living at Adams either because they would be living among members of their affinity group or because the center's theme encompassed the teaching of their culture.

#### *Development of Relationships*

A predominant theme was perceived benefits from the interactions that resulted from living in the Adams Center. Three sub-themes emerged in a majority of the participants' responses, which consisted

of 1) socialization due to similarity in cultural experience or background; 2) continuing friendships/interaction; and 3) the perception of the Adams Center as a "family" unit.

*Socialization from cultural affinity.* Students discussed their experiences of successfully being socialized to the campus from living in the center and meeting others who shared similar cultural experiences. Sharing ranged from discovering commonalities, to the shared feeling of isolation students encountered as minorities within a Predominately White Institution:

*Sam: It would have been more difficult to adjust to the college and the climate [without the center]. [Living in the center] helped me adjust [to the university] better because we met people that had the same background or did the same things.*

Students also expressed the benefit of socialization through events that took place throughout the center, and moreover because the center was seen as a "hub" for African American students living inside and outside of the center:

*Will: [The Adams Center and another hall]...as a whole was the center of campus life here for the Black community. The [African American] fraternities were tied in and threw parties regularly.*

*Continuing friendships/interaction.* Among those interviewed, participants indicated that they developed long-standing friendships with former residents. Friendships grew beyond the physical boundaries of the center, with many participants either maintaining relationships or relocating to their current location because of those they met in the center.

*Angela: That was the best thing about the center. I'm still friends with the people that used to live there. We're great friends now. There's not one person who lived in the center who doesn't communicate with someone else who lived there. We were just hanging out or going to parties together in packs eight deep.*

*Jeff: As a matter of fact, I met my first group of friends here and we still kick it to this day.*

*Sam: People who lived in the center are still friends now. We still hang around as we did in the center before.*

Group interaction was seen as a benefit, as was the opportunity to develop personal, one-on-one meaningful relationships.

Friendships have created a close-knit group of people that have taken these relationships beyond the physical boundaries of Adams. The perception, in some cases, is that these friendships will be more difficult to find outside of the center:

*Sally: You have to go out to other places to meet friends. My dorm now [not at Adams] feels like a hotel. It's depressing. I hate my dorm—I don't even know my next-door neighbors. The only reason I moved there was because a friend from Adams was moving there.*

*The center as a "family" unit.* The final sub-theme under socialization deals with the students' perceptions of the center operating as a "home away from home," or as "one, big, happy family." This was mentioned in several of the interviews and was viewed as an important part of life in the center:

*Caroline: Overall, I enjoyed it. I felt like I had big brothers and sisters...I got along with everyone...I liked the idea of being able to return "home" after being on a [predominately White campus].*

*Don: I liked it. It was great. Overall, there was no fighting among us. It was a big family and we had much fun together.*

The notion of feeling "at home" helped in easing some of the discomforts of transitioning to the institution not only from the position of being a campus minority, but also as a diversion from the feeling of separation most students face resulting from detachment from family and home life in their first year.

#### *The Adam's Center Staff*

A predominant theme that emerged involved residents' perceptions of the Adams center's staff. Two types of staff were identified: 1) the "ally," and 2) the resident assistant. The ally is a residence life staff person that serves as a mentor to the center.

*The "Adams Ally."* Several comments were made regarding the "Adams Ally." The ally provided what students deemed as "an escape from campus." The ally would invite residents of the center to [his/her] home for "home cooked" meals. The relaxed home environment gave the residents of the center the opportunity to interact in different surroundings:

*Sally: [The ally] was like a house mom. She made sure we stayed involved in different activities. We went to [the ally's]*

house once a month for chili dinners.

*Kris: Going to [the ally's] house was just something to do to get away from campus. It was nice to have someone who was open to inviting us to their house and a good number of people went — former and current residents.*

The ally served as an advocate for the students of the Adams Center by focusing on students' needs within the scope of the university. In total, the ally proved to be a positive element of the program's success.

*The resident assistant.* Responses regarding the performance of the resident assistant were varied, but on the whole were positive. All of the respondents were generally satisfied with the performance of the resident assistant. The resident assistant seemed to have a positive influence on the residents, and was responsive to their needs:

*Caroline: She was like a big sister or like a mother. You could sit down and talk to her. She was just really good. She made you feel at home. She was like a mentor or a role model.*

*Don: Yes [my resident assistant was responsive] if we had a problem. I never went to them for problems though. The women mostly went to the resident assistant or some of the guys did. They [resident assistants] weren't overbearing. They were on the same level as we were. They were understanding.*

The students viewed the resident assistant as an understanding role model. The resident assistant is a supportive, integral part of the environment who also aids in the tremendous adjustment that occurs during the transition to college life.

#### *Impact of Freshman Seminar*

Residents were required to take the freshmen seminar course entitled, "Community Living in the Adams Center," which is a one-credit hour, eight week course that allows new residents to get acquainted with one another, encourages academic success, introduces the student to university resources, and focuses on Afro-centric themes. Participants' responses centered on three main components they perceived as beneficial. These sub-themes were 1) the opportunity to interact with one another and develop friendships; 2) the discussion of African American history and issues, with activities that complimented the curriculum; and 3) the introduction of campus resources and tips on how to adjust to campus life in general.

#### *Classroom Interaction*

The class provided an opportunity for everyone to get better acquainted. From this interaction, friendships developed. Students perceived this to be a primary asset of the class:

*Sally: The class helped us to get to know each other because we took it the first eight weeks, and it helped me to develop friendships — long lasting friendships.*

*Caroline: We all got along pretty well, and...everyone was like a big brother and sister — that's why I miss it...*

Friendships from this interaction have persisted, in some cases throughout the student's first three years of college and beyond.

*Curriculum and activities.* The class also provided a means for students to learn about African American history and current issues affecting the African American community, both on campus and across the nation. According to a former resident assistant, the class made them "take a step back and say, 'Hey, let's look at our culture.'"

*Sam: It was the course that let you know a lot about African American culture.*

*Will: The instructors made an impact with presentations and an assignment on how the media views African Americans. I viewed that as a learning experience.*

In addition, students noted that the instructors not only gave lectures and led discussions in class, but also organized outside activities such as a Black Trivia Competition. Some residents viewed this activity as a positive outside learning activity.

*Adjustment to campus life.* In addition, the class provided information about university resources and taught students standards on how to live on campus. Some students discussed how these topics benefited them:

*Caroline: The class taught us about important issues on campus so it would not be such a shock once I hit [the campus].*

*Jeff: It just really helped me to adjust and learn more about the overall community here at [the university] and surrounding area as a whole.*

Overall, students viewed the class as a tremendously worthwhile experience.

### *Suggested Improvements*

The points that consistently stood out in the theme of suggested improvements for Adams can be divided into two categories: overall programming and better supervision. The participants were very concerned with having some type of structure when it came time for planning trips and programs. Most of them described the supervision in the Adams Center as being very little if any at all.

*Overall programming.* Probably the most echoed factors dealing with the improvement of the Adams Center had to do with the overall programming of events. The students wanted more scheduled events and community services:

*Kris: Adams needs to have more scheduled events, more residents, and have more people participate in its programs. Having a professional person there would help a lot because at times it could have been more quiet.*

Students living in the Adams Center were also concerned about the center being labeled as "a place where African American students lived." It was implied that the center needed to market itself and its events to the entire campus and not just to the minority students.

*Closer supervision.* The most surprising concerns that were articulated had to do with the overall supervision of the center, or lack thereof. While the participants were generally pleased with their resident assistant, they still wanted more supervision and structure within the center. It was also suggested that the center have some type of adult supervision or full-time coordinator to help plan and carry out the activities for the center:

*Angela: Adams needs to have an adult to oversee the programs and ensure that things get done [trips, community service activities, campus leadership opportunities, etc.]. They [the Adams ally] took it upon themselves to do some things but the responsibility was [primarily] on us.*

The participants believed that there was definitely room for improvement toward the center itself. They believed they would have been more satisfied if the center had improved its programming/structure and supervision.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to assess the overall satisfaction with the environment and services/programs in the Adams Living

Learning Center and to examine both its attributes and shortcomings. The study indicates two outcomes: 1) that the participants in the center were generally satisfied with the environment; and 2) that the services/programs needed to have more structure. The conclusion can also be drawn that, according to the study, the Adams Center directly impacted their decision to return to the university.

Of the emerging themes, one that was consistent among most of the participants was the desire to live among other African American students. The Adams Center provided an atmosphere that was hospitable and communal during the "transition" from high school to the university (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Other students were attracted by the center's Afro-centric theme, citing events and classes devoted to learning about African traditions about which they previously lacked knowledge. From the researchers' findings, it is still important to note that the Adams Center may not be the ideal living environment for all African American students, but it is a viable option. It provides one way of supporting minority students as they move toward graduation, and whatever the reasons that students chose to live there it provided a positive environment for them.

The respondents expressed three outcomes from living in the center. First, the center helped the participants to develop strong "family" ties among its residents. This helped alleviate the fact that African American students in Predominantly White Institutions are often confronted with an environment that does not adequately support their needs (Fleming, 1988). Second, the center created a safe, supportive environment in which the participants felt less restricted to being outgoing, outspoken, and assertive. By creating this safe environment, the level of psychological distress was lessened (Hurtado et al., 1996). Third, adjusting to the university environment became easier because the center provided opportunities for peers to "share knowledge" and to "scale down" the campus (Attinasi, 1989). By living in the scaled down, accepting environment of the Adams Center, the participants felt increased liberty to take risks, ask questions, and develop new behavior patterns.

According to Winston and Anchors (1993), the resident assistant is an "institutionally designed role model." All of the respondents were generally satisfied with the performance of the resident assistant. The resident assistant influenced the center through programming, creating community (family), and teaching the class, "Community Living." Respondents believed the resident assistant was accessible, attentive to their needs, and served as a mentor (Attinasi, 1989).

Also, the "Adams Ally," who is a residence life staff member who works with the center, provided a "home away from home." This ability to get away from the campus environment was very important to the participants. The ally on several occasions had the participants visit [his/her] home for dinner and other activities. However, since this particular staff person was of a different race, the aspect of a "reference group" (Hurtado et al., 1999) may not apply.

The class, "Community Living in the Adams Center" allowed participants the opportunity to bond more closely through in-class interaction. Icebreakers and group projects helped students to begin developing long lasting friendships. The participants also enjoyed learning about African American culture and history. Being able to personalize the history to African Americans at the university was an advantage as well. The ability to have the participants get first hand knowledge about other African Americans who have successfully negotiated the university was beneficial from the standpoint of a reference group (Hurtado et al., 1999). The class allowed students to become more familiar with the university through such activities as developing study skills and utilizing library resources.

The Adams Center plays a valuable role in the development of African American students. It provides a safe supportive environment that allows for better adjustment to the greater campus community. The center also provides opportunities to develop long-lasting relationships with other African American students. In spite of all of the positive influences and data, the participants did express concerns about having increased structure and consistency in the areas of programming/services, tighter supervision, and a consistent adult presence in the center.

What is needed to increase the effectiveness of the center and satisfaction of those who benefit from its existence is a change in the staffing structure. It is recommended that a graduate student be added to the staff in order to supervise the resident assistant, provide leadership and consistency in programming/services, and to serve as the contact person and chief coordinator of the center. The graduate supervisor would be able to implement a stronger academic component to the Community Learning class by adding such components as time management, note taking, and test taking strategies. The planning of field trips and community service projects should also become a staff responsibility as well. In this manner, the graduate supervisor along with the resident assistant and ally would develop a strong, cohesive support system for the residents.

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