Student Housing Effect on Socialization: Does Messiah College Housing effect socialization of students?

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Signe Henkel

SOC 430 Sociology Seminar

Messiah College
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Does Messiah College Housing effect socialization of students?

Abstract

This is a descriptive study of components of student housing at Messiah College and social interactions of students at Messiah College. The Messiah College housing assignments have changed every year for the past three years. Thus, each school class had a different housing policy. Each experience was analyzed to see if housing affects socialization. Sixty-nine students of Messiah College were surveyed by questionnaire which asked about their relationships with friends and their opinions regarding perception of other members of the college, including friends and administration. General topics relating to how housing is organized on Messiah College campus were asked. These results were then compared by school class and experience of First-Year Housing. Individuals were also interviewed in group and individual sessions. These interviews focused on the perception of the First Year Experience. The results indicate a connection between Messiah College student housing and Messiah College student socialization.
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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to understand if housing policies affect the socialization of students. In order to measure student socialization, a questionnaire was given to sixty-nine current students which asked questions about those students’ interaction with their friends. Interviews were also part of the study, including six conversations with different members of the Messiah College Community who were asked their perception of housing policy change and student socialization.

Literature Review

The change in housing policy at Messiah College is part of a college wide policy change. The college wide change is part of a program called First Year Experience. The First Year Experience is an international program for Universities and Colleges. The current First Year Experience initiative was designed by John Gardner at the University of South Carolina where he began working in 1970 (Schroeder, 2003). When post-World War II expansion took place on college campuses and the need to look into the social implications of more diversity within colleges took place, discussion of the First Year Experience began (McInnis, 2001). It was an initiation taken on by many research universities (Cutright, 2002) starting in the 1970’s.

The current results of participant information from research Universities that have implemented the First Year Experience have common themes (Cutright, 2002). Marc Cutright (2002) found those themes to include new and expanded programs proliferating, initiative tied to a discipline or college, high integration of multiple strategies, and that learning communities are central to new efforts. Marc (2002) also found that teaching
and learning styles have been fundamentally reexamined and the final theme to be a strong academic and student affairs partnership. All of these themes come from research universities. Craig McInnis (2001) makes an important point; most of the research on each campus being used to evaluate the program needs to be compared with other similar campuses.

John Hayek and George Kuh (2004) recommend the use of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) as one way of nationally evaluating the First Year Experience program between similar colleges and universities. In using NSSE colleges and universities are able to measure “what [first year] students actually do, not what institutions have in terms of resources, such as facilities and faculty credentials” (Hayek and Kuh 2004). John and George (2004) offer a few suggestions, become familiar with the conceptual and empirical foundations of student engagement and use different approaches to estimate performance.

Anne Pitkethly and Michael Prosser (2001) researched the progression and effects of the First Year Experience at La Trobe University in Australia. La Trobe University was interested in increasing their student retention rates. Student retention rates at La Trobe are measured by reasoning and placed in a database where withdrawals are listed, but reasoning for not returning second year are not kept. The first step was to create faculty-based group discussion with coordinators of first year subjects, then students were regularly surveyed and in discussion groups. After three years researchers found that focus groups with faculty are more helpful then surveys and students felt that support from lecturers, tutors and other students was particularly important. Pitkethly and Prosser
(2001) concluded that ‘we will never get the first year experience right’ because student needs and expectations are continually changing. Thomas H. Benton (2006) disagrees with this logic and says ‘enabled by institutions, students repeatedly take the path of least resistance’. A middle ground, Kirk S. Kidwell (2005) provides types of needs and expectations explaining that as students enter college from high school they are dualistic thinkers and change. Also, it is widely agreed upon by researchers that the integration of students into campus activities the first year is very important (Kidwell, 2005; Pitkethly, 2001; Hunter, 2003).

In order to look at specific programs of First Year Experience, Janis Webb (2001) has broken down the entire idea into subgroups that are directly affected by the First Year Experience initiative. These subgroups include orientation programs, academic skills, peer support, student assessment, and staff development (Webb 2001). Another subgroup to consider is living communities, as Martha Stassen (2003) linked learning with living directly in her look at different living and learning models. Stassen (2003) researched living communities and evaluated those living communities provided at her own university. The university she studied was a Research I University that had an option of being in a living and learning community of which the school provides three different kinds (Stassen 2003). The results of Stassen’s (2003) research describe any intentional learning community with higher academic performance and higher retention rates from students. Stassen (2003) did also clarify that the significance of this data could be because more motivated students participate in learning communities. Messiah College’s new policy of first year housing is not an option and does hope to promote higher
retention rates (interview notes from April 20, 2006). Paula Wilcox, Sandra Winn, and Marylynn Fyvie-Gauld (2005) in looking at retention rates, directly linked the importance of socialization for students during their first year at college. One example, Northwest Indian College, has taken an initiative to integrate First Year Experience into their curriculum and reports (2005). Messiah College has also taken an initiative to integrate First Year Experience into the college community.

**Study Design and Execution**

The design of this study was to find student and staff opinions of the Messiah College policy change in regards to First Year Experience. A collaboration of questions of interest held by Messiah College researchers was formed into a questionnaire. Interview questions were specific to three different categories of people, Resident staff, upperclassmen, and freshmen. A questionnaire was handed out to anyone that was willing to participate when contacted by door-to-door solicitation and given to students that would be later interviewed about their own personal experience. Individual and group interviews were conducted.

**Methodology**

Questions for the questionnaire were developed by collaborating ideas with professors, Residential Life staff, and amongst researchers. Questionnaires formulated asked specific questions of individuals, including their interactions with friends, and their opinion on specific topics. Participants were asked to answer opinion questions from points of view other than their own, including their friends, parents, professors, and Messiah College Administration in order to understand each respondent’s perception.
The reason for a questionnaire was to hear from a larger pool of people than our time restrictions allowed for interviews. The questionnaires were also functional in assessing general trends between students that experienced different Messiah College policies. Questions that asked opinions of friends, parents, etc., function as a way of measuring how often students discuss the changes in policy and how relevant those changes are to their personal lives. In order to find out if Messiah College policy affects students it was assumed that they would have a stronger knowledge of what others are thinking about the policy changes.

Questions developed for the interviews were based on a specific group of people that this researcher was able to interview: Residence Life staff. While more interviews and groups of personnel would be helpful for further research, time and focus restraints kept focus on Residence Life staff only. Residence Life staff members included Resident Directors, Resident Assistants, and Directors of the Residence Life Department. Each interviewed residence life staff member was asked perception questions based on their own experiences of student housing and student socialization at Messiah College. Interviews were used to assess personal knowledge of Messiah College policy changes and the affects staff members saw as a result of the policy change.

Data Set

The Data Set used for this project was collected from a questionnaire and interviews constructed through dialogue with fellow researchers, professors, and instruction from Research Methods and Data Analysis classes. This data set focuses on opinions and social decisions. Social decisions category was constructed from a question
that listed possible ways of meeting friends on Messiah College campus and asked “How did you meet?” five different friends. This data was recoded from numerical eight possible answers, to account the mode answers into “FYS” (First Year Seminar), “Major”, “Floor”, “Dorm”, and “Other” categories respectively. The Opinions category was formed from questions that asked opinions regarding seven different topics including majors, student interests, living styles, and importance of considering all view points on each topic. This data was formulated from a six step interval/ratio scale into a two step interval/ratio scale and understood as “important” or “not important”.

Sample

The sample of people that participated in the survey included sixty-nine students of Messiah College who were available in their rooms when the questionnaires were passed out door-to-door. Students who currently live in Witmer, Mellinger, Sollenberger, Grantham, and Mountain View were asked during visitation hours to participate. This sample represents students from four different years with three different housing policies. Students that participated did so willingly and with conscious thought of not receiving any reward for participation. Thus this sample expands the social constructs of Messiah College in order to represent different housing and socialization experiences of Messiah College students.

Analysis and Interpretation

The questionnaire was analyzed using SPSS which allowed for opinions of different student classes to be grouped together. In order to find out if there is a difference in socialization of students that have been in first year housing and students
that have not experienced first year housing, upper-class students were compared to first year students on the way they made friendships and how they answered opinion questions that referred to same class dormitory floors and mixed class dormitory floors. The opinion section was recoded from 1-not important at all to 6-very important, to 1-important and 2-not important in order to interpret the data more distinctively. What year students marked as their first year at Messiah College was used to determine their student class membership. With these analyses and interpretations in mind the statistical results were made.

Description of Sample

The sample included 9 first year students, twenty-six sophomores, twenty juniors, and thirteen seniors. Most participants currently live on Messiah College campus and are between the ages of 18 and 24. Some students were transfers, some participated in first year housing, and some have experienced mixed housing. Both male and female students participated and are currently living in either dormitories or apartments.

Results of statistical tests

Students were asked how they met five friends, for the purposes of this study a sample of three friends seemed large enough and so only the first three friends are used in these results. Students that started school at Messiah College in the 2003 school year were exposed to First Year Seminar (FYS), and mixed floor housing. Students that started school at Messiah College in the 2005 school year were exposed to First Year Seminar (FYS) and First Year housing. The following table shows the percent of student
friendships formed from FYS, or having the same major, or living on the same floor or living in the same dormitory.

TABLE 1
Percentages of friends made through First Year Seminar, school major, dormitory floor, dormitory, and other of students in 2003 Messiah College class and 2005 Messiah College class.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FYS</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Floor</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorm</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table shows a significant increase in friendships formed on First Year housing only floors. It also shows that students of mixed housing met more of their friends in other settings than students who started at Messiah College in 2005. With this information it is important to keep in mind that these questionnaires were distributed this year and are not being compared with questionnaires distributed in 2003, therefore it might be explained that students who entered Messiah College in 2003 have become closer friends with people outside of their floor over the past two years. It is also possible that because this question had specific answers and was not open-ended that students picked which friends to use based on the list given of possible ways to meet friends. Regardless, just looking at the answers given by students who answered a questionnaire, a significant amount of more students that entered Messiah College in 2005 decided to write about a friend that they made from their floor, than students that entered Messiah College in 2003.

Students were also asked to rate different situations from their own perspective, the Messiah College Administrative perspective and Messiah College in general.
Messiah College was given as an open-ended category to see where these categories answered aligned with the other possible categories (i.e. According to an individual’s questionnaire answers do the answers under the category of Messiah College more agree with the answers of Messiah College Administration or faculty or friends?) The following table shows a range of opinions from students. They were asked if in their opinion, administrations opinion, and Messiah College’s opinion it is important to live on a floor with people in your own year at Messiah College.

**TABLE 2**
The percentages of opinions from students who began Messiah College in 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005, when asked if it is important to live on a floor with people in your own year. What their opinion is, what they think Messiah College Administrations opinion is, and what they think Messiah College’s opinion is.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Administration Important</th>
<th>Messiah College Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
<td>69.2%</td>
<td>61.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>34.6%</td>
<td>69.2%</td>
<td>80.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the table shows all students were close in agreement about living on a floor with people in your own year. The important point to make about this table is that it shows that students are more definite on it being important to Messiah College Administration. Upper-class students that answered this survey overall agree that Administration believe it is important to live on a floor with people in your own year at Messiah College (i.e. if you are a sophomore you live with other sophomores, junior with other juniors, etc.)

This next table shows the exact opposite reaction from the student body when asked if they felt that it was important for students to live on a floor with people in different years at Messiah College.
TABLE 3
Percentages of opinion in importance of students who began Messiah College in 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005, when asked if it is important for students to live on a floor with people in different years at Messiah College. Their own opinion was asked and their opinion of what they thought Messiah College Administration thinks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Administration Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>84.6%</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>76.2%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>80.8%</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table shows that a much higher percentage of upper-class students believe it is important to live on a floor with people of different years than First Year students and that they all agree that Messiah College Administration does not think it is very important for students to live on mixed floors. It is interesting to note the answer given by students who entered Messiah College in 2005, perhaps they do not know who Messiah College Administration is or they have not thought about the question in regards to Administrative perspective.

A hypothesis can be formed from Table 3. If upper-class students do believe that mixed housing is important then when asked if they think living on a floor with people in the same year at Messiah College is important they will disagree. The following table depicts this hypothesis to be accurate.

TABLE 4
Percentages of opinion that students who began Messiah College in 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005 had when asked if it is important to live on a floor with people in the same year. Students answered from their own opinion and what they believed Administrations opinion is.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Administration Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>61.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This question is highly ambiguous as can be seen in the results. Due to politics, it was important not to be specific in what housing system questions were referring to and so in light of the results shown in this table, many different things can be said. It could be said that students who entered Messiah College in 2005 agree with students who entered Messiah College in 2002. That data would not correlate with previous data that shows a strong connection between upper-class opinions and students of 2005. Another important point to note is the statistical representation within these percentiles; there are many more 2003 and 2004 student representation, so perhaps these numbers a very close statistically speaking. It needs to be noted that there is a high possibility that this question was misunderstood by students who answered this questionnaire.

If students were confused by the question, their knowledge of Administrative opinion was clear. As Table 4 shows, first year students did not know Administrations opinion on this point, but upper-class students strongly believe that Administration thinks that living on a floor with people in the same year is important. This would support the current system that Administration has put into place, of having First Year Housing, first year students all on floors together without any upper-class students except for the Resident Assistant and Life Group Coordinator.

Theoretical Analysis

I talked to five employees of Messiah College’s Student Development Office to understand their perception of the change in housing policy as it relates to student socialization and interaction within the dormitories. Two of these employees are
Resident Directors (RD), one is a Resident Assistant (RA), and the other two employees are directors of departments within the student development office. The following will compare their answers with each other and explain reasoning for some of the answers they provide using sociological theories.

Two people I interviewed expressed that ‘in four years no one’s going to know the difference.’ An RD expressed this statement within the context of practical rationality. Max Weber (Ritzer 2003) refers to practical rationality as daily we deal with difficulties and we find the most expedient way of attaining our goals on a day to day basis. The other person that used this phrase was the RA and added ‘I think that’s sad.’ For both of these people to rationalize the current debate on campus about whether First Year Housing is the right way to go for Messiah College, they have concluded that any propositions do not matter in light of the future experience. They feel that they could not change the policy if they wanted change. They have acknowledged that there is no changing the policy as a director within the student development office mentioned ‘we are moving forward with this’, and so now it is a matter of rationalizing the changes.

When I asked individuals the impact of the First Year Experience as defined by Messiah College’s application of the program they explained it through stories, as one director of student development said:

I think it’s like if you had a sandwich, I feel like [First Year Experience] is the top of the bun and you still need the bottom. Then your sophomore year is [the] in between piece and its great because it’s really working but unless you have the full experience it’s not going to be complete.

A Resident Director explained it like this:
Imagine you’re at a hunting lodge and its up in the hills in the Pocono’s or a ski lodge, a ski lodge is better. You just came in from skiing and you’re on the first floor they got these great big bay windows over looks the slopes that you’ve just been skiing on and you’re sitting by the fire and you’re just enjoying the view. Now there’s another couple upstairs in one of the rooms in which their staying and there’s another smaller window that faces the other direction and their really enjoying the view and their sitting up in the bed sipping their tea. That’s how I like this building experience we’re having first year housing and mixed housing, both views are incredible and breathe taking and both parties are really enjoying them. There’s a tradeoff, the people upstairs are seeing a different picture than the people downstairs, not that one view is better than the other, but that they’re a different view.

This story says that there is a different view from mixed housing and First Year housing. I heard from many interviews, ‘Change is not bad, it’s just different.’ Since I heard the repetition of such a phrase, I could tell that a rational choice had been made. Rational choice theory from James S. Coleman (Ritzer 2003) has two components, an actor and resources. As actors interact with other actors of the same interest in resources a social system is formed. Similar ideas are then shared and become replicated. As this is a sign of rational choice theory, it also strongly represents a Goffman impression management, the technique used to maintain a certain impression in the face of problems or a method of coping with problems (Ritzer 2003). As questions were answered, there was a clear sense of what could and would be said and what would not be shared with me in a first time interview. This back stage, front stage angle is understandable considering the student housing policy is changing and in a time of change those being interviewed felt a strong sense of need to defend the policy changes.

With replication and change, I encountered a strong idealism of McDonaldization between different interviews. According to Ritzer (2003) McDonaldization includes the simplistic dimensions of efficiency, calculability, predictability, control through the
substitution of technology for people and the irrationality of rationality. Programs are efficient in calculating predictability of growth by individuals being affected by the program. Most people that were interviewed said that new programs help improve the new housing policy. McDonaldization in this context can be seen as a way of efficiently seeing to calculated needs that each student has depending on their stage of development within college. I was told that students go through predictable patterns from their first semester of their freshman year until their spring semester of their senior year. Examples of specific patterns were not given. Interviewees were excited about the efficiency of every student reading a ‘common text’. The second bible course requirement was removed and a new course called ‘Created and Called for Community’ was added to the curriculum for all first year students. An irrational rationality was made in the ideas of creating programs for first year students to meet upper-class students now that they do not live on the same floor. There are also programs created to meet the needs of upper-class students since these needs are different from first year students. Sophomore students were not aware of potential problems in rooming with friends when they signed up to live with their friends after living in all first year dorms their freshman year. The McDonaldization of this new policy is clear and goes along so well with the national interest in creating a First Year Experience at major Universities and Colleges across the United Sates.

Another extremely relevant theory that was clearly represented in interviews was ethnomethodology. Ethnomethodology is found when every person that was interviewed and every person that answered the questionnaire perceived the questions from their own
standpoint. There were questions that some people could not answer or answered in a very different way then I intended the question, because each was answering from their own experience. It is very important to understand each person’s perceived role in the changes that occurred and how they understand their role in the changes. Some people thought that their opinion was significant in the process making and others were sure that their opinion did not matter at all. I think it was very helpful to read Rebekah Nathan’s book (2005) who was a professor that returned to undergraduate as a freshman to better understand the point of view and experience that her students were having. She was surprised at the experience, keeping in mind that she was not able to see the experience from the student’s standpoint because there was a significant age gap between herself and most of the freshman. I believe a general sense of application can be found from ethnomethodology, McDonaldization theory, impression management, and Weber’s rationality theories.

Presentation and Interpretation

Students make friends with the people that they live by and students live by the students that they are friends with. Students were most likely to make friendships with people on their floor or in their building. One interview revealed that when students have a choice of where to live, they live near or with friends and people that they spend a lot of time with, whether in the same major, same sport, etc. The First Year Experience was created at Messiah College for curriculum purposes and enhancement of student experience with one of many goals being increased retention rates. It is my understanding in light of research at other Universities and Colleges that the purpose at
each institution has been a success for whatever each individual University's goals are for
their specific First Year Experience, which ranges from special groups on campus to
curriculum and housing efforts.

The interviews that I conducted lead me in many different directions of
understanding and reasoning for policy change at Messiah College including both
curricular and housing. It is my understanding that everyone understands the process and
language to best describe the First Year Experience differently. There is no one reason
for the First Year Experience and there is not one specific goal for the program or new
policies. Those who responded to questionnaires were also just as varied in opinions of
same class dormitory floors and mixed class dormitory floors. Students did not agree on
opinions amongst themselves or administration. There were clear patterns of student
answers in reflection of their own personal experiences.

I believe every person that was part of this study understands the policy changes
at Messiah College from their own specific view point. Each perception brings new
understanding and reasoning for change. The Resident Assistant expressed thoughts of
concern but feelings of insignificance to effect change. A Resident Director believed the
policy to be a direct order from higher authority. The directors of the student
development office believed they could change the policy, but they were sure that it did
not need to be changed or where hoping for the best. There was one director of the
student development office that said if it is a 'flop' there is no problem with returning to
the previous housing policy.
Findings

Students are people, all in different places at different points in their development with different understandings of Messiah College. Students that have not been in first year housing believe it is important to have mixed floors, while students that have experienced first year floors do not think it is important to have mixed floors. When asked what the policy will look like in the future, no one is really sure. There is hope, ideas and understanding that the policy is going to take place.

Students make their friends freshman year. The change in housing policy is different and there is high hope for the future. First Year Experience is taking the country by storm, everyone is jumping on board and Messiah College will not be left behind.

Summary and Conclusions

There is a lot more research that needs to be done in this area. This overview of a very large project will take much more time and effort to evaluate its affect on the students of Messiah College developmentally, socially, educationally, and in resident life. While I have only skimmed the surface of this project, I do believe that a general sense of hope for the best was felt by all interviewees and that also there is conflicting understandings of what the implications are of policy changes within the academic and social realm of student life at Messiah College.
Glossary

Core Course  a required General Education requirement course for first year students fall semester that is titled ‘Created and Called for Community’

First Year Experience a program designed to varying degrees for undergraduate first year students by John Gardner

First Year Dormitories/Halls dormitory floors and buildings that house students of the same gender and same class together

Mixed Dormitories/Halls dormitory floors and buildings that house students of the same gender in all classes, freshman, sophomore, junior and senior together

Res Ed Residence Education is a department on Messiah College campus that oversees Residence Hall Directors and Residence Hall Assistants who live in the dormitories on campus
Bibliography


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Resident Director Interview. April 19, 2006.


