

How Much Do Students Learn in Campus Housing?

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Abstract. This study examined student learning outcomes in college by using data from a national benchmarking study. The study found that students improved most in college in their academic fields of study, their ability to understand international perspectives, and interpersonal/social skills. They improved least in foreign language skills and ability to speak clearly and effectively in English. Gender and racial differences exist in how much students learn in college.

Introduction

Student learning outcomes, i.e. how much students learn and what students learn in college are becoming more and more important for higher education today. Extensive research concluded that campus housing positively impacts student intellectual and personal development in college [1] [2] [3]. In addition, Living Learning Communities (LLCs), i.e. communities where students in same academic programs or with same interests live together, were found to enhance student academic performance, academic and social integration, and learning outcomes [4] [5]. This current study was conducted to examine student learning outcomes in college for on campus students. Specifically this study aims to answer the following questions:

- How much have students improved in learning outcomes in college?
- Is there a gender difference in learning outcomes for students in campus housing?
- Do racial/ethnic differences exist in learning outcomes for students in campus housing?
- Do Living Learning Communities (LLCs) enhance student learning outcomes?

Research Method

Student Experience in Research Universities Survey (SERU) is a national benchmarking study that examines student experience and student learning outcomes in Research Universities. This study used SERU data from a large research university in the United States to examine how much students learn in certain learning outcomes for students who live in campus housing.

Among about 7,500 students who lived on campus at the time of data collection, 4,672 students participated in the survey, yielding a 62% response rate. Participants included: 39% male students, 61% female students; 63% White, 35% non-White students, i.e. Asian, African American, Hispanic, multi-racial, and others. About 2% didn't report their race/ethnicity.

Survey items measuring student learning outcomes were selected for analysis. The learning outcomes questions asked participants to rate their skill levels when they started college, and their current levels in 20 areas on a scale of 1-6 (1=very poor, 2=poor, 3=fair, 4=good, 5=very good, 6=excellent).

Learning Outcomes Questions

- a. Analytical and critical thinking skills
- b. Ability to be clear and effective when writing
- c. Ability to read and comprehend academic material
- d. Foreign language skills
- e. Understanding of a specific field of study
- f. Quantitative (mathematical and statistical) skills

- g. Ability to speak clearly and effectively in English
- h. Ability to understand international perspectives (economic, political, social, cultural)
- i. Leadership skills
- j. Computer skills
- k. Internet skills
- l. Library research skills
- m. Other research skills
- n. Ability to prepare and make a presentation
- o. Interpersonal (social) skills
- p. Ability to appreciate, tolerate, and understand racial and ethnic diversity
- q. Ability to appreciate the fine arts (e.g., painting, music, drama, dance, etc.)
- r. Ability to appreciate cultural and global diversity
- s. Understanding the importance of personal social responsibility
- t. Self-awareness and understanding

Data was analyzed using SPSS. A new variable was created to measure student learning outcomes, i.e. how much students have improved in college, by calculating the differences between current level scores and scores when students started college. Descriptive statistics were examined for demographic items and overall student learning outcomes in college. Significance test was conducted to compare: male vs. Female; students in Living Learning Communities (LLCs) vs. in standard residence halls; and White students vs. non-White students.

Findings

Overall, students reported the highest learning in “Understanding a specific field of study”, with a .80 increase for mean score, which suggests that students improved their understanding of specific field of study by 21% since they started college. Other high learning outcomes were: Ability to understand international perspectives, with a 14% increase; self-awareness, with a 13% increase; and interpersonal/social skills, with about 12% increase.

Students reported the lowest learning in “Foreign languages skills”, which suggests that students improved about 3% on average in foreign language skills since they started college. Please refer to Figure 1 and Figure 2 for how much students improved in college by comparing self-reported levels when they started at college and their current levels.

Gender differences exist in learning outcomes for students in college. Male students reported significantly higher learning in:

- f. Quantitative (mathematical and statistical skills)
- g. Ability to speak clearly and effectively in English

Female students improved more in:

- h. Understand international perspectives (economic, political, social, cultural)
- p. Ability to appreciate, tolerate and understand racial and ethnic diversity
- r. Ability to appreciate cultural and global diversity
- t. Self-awareness and understanding

Learning outcomes, i.e. mean differences between current levels and levels when students started at college, for students who had lived or were currently living in Living Learning Communities (LLCs) were significantly higher than students in standard residence halls in 11 items out of 20. These include:

- a. Analytical and critical thinking skills (.79 for LLC vs. .52 for standard residence halls)
- b. Ability to be clear and effective when writing (.72 vs. .42)
- c. Ability to read and comprehend academic material (.77 vs. .47)
- f. Quantitative (mathematical and statistical) skills (.55 vs. .29)
- g. Ability to speak clearly and effectively in English .41 vs. .21)
- i. Leadership skills (.67 vs. .44)

- k. Internet skills (.64 vs. .32)
- n. Ability to prepare and make a presentation (.69 vs. .40)
- p. Ability to appreciate, tolerate and understand racial and ethnic diversity (.79 vs. .36)
- r. Ability to appreciate cultural and global diversity (.58 vs. .37)
- s. Understanding the importance of personal social responsibility (.73 vs. .45)

Racial differences exist in how much students learned since they started college. White students reported significantly higher learning outcomes than non-White students in all items except for internet skills. There is no difference in how much students learned in college in internet skills for White and non-white students.

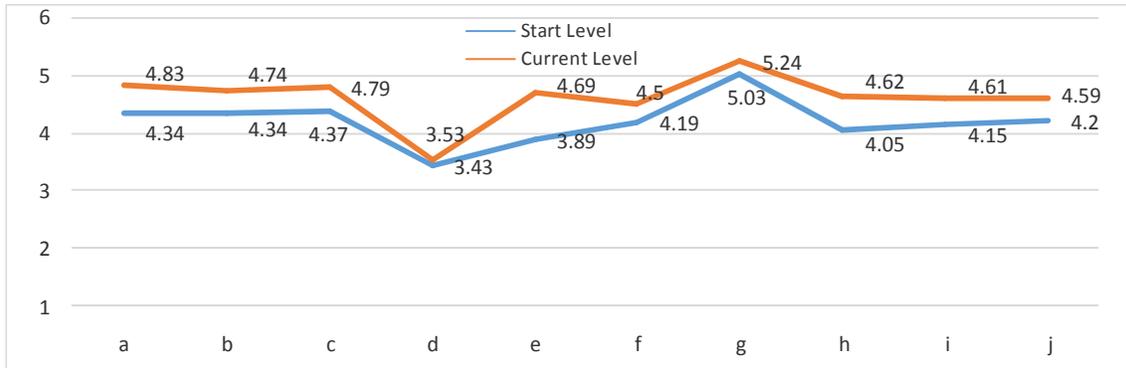


Figure 1. Mean scores for student learning outcomes in college.

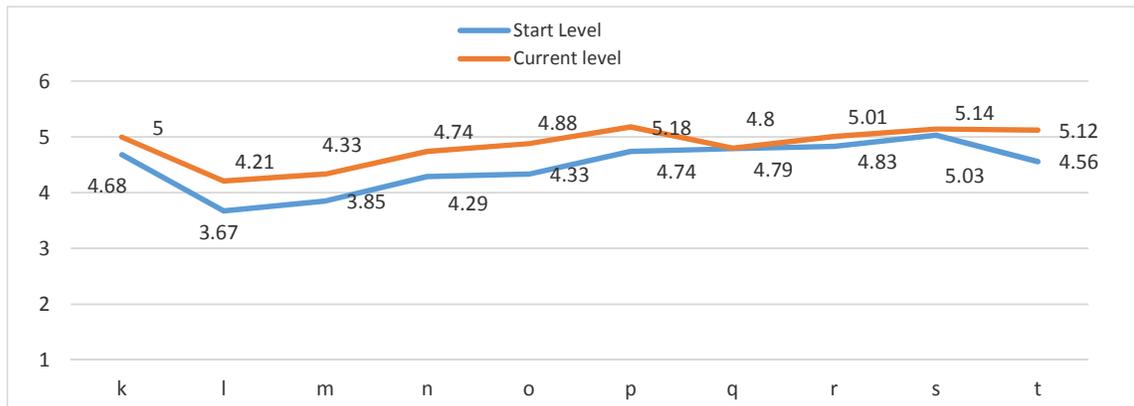


Figure 2. Mean scores for student learning outcomes in college (continued).

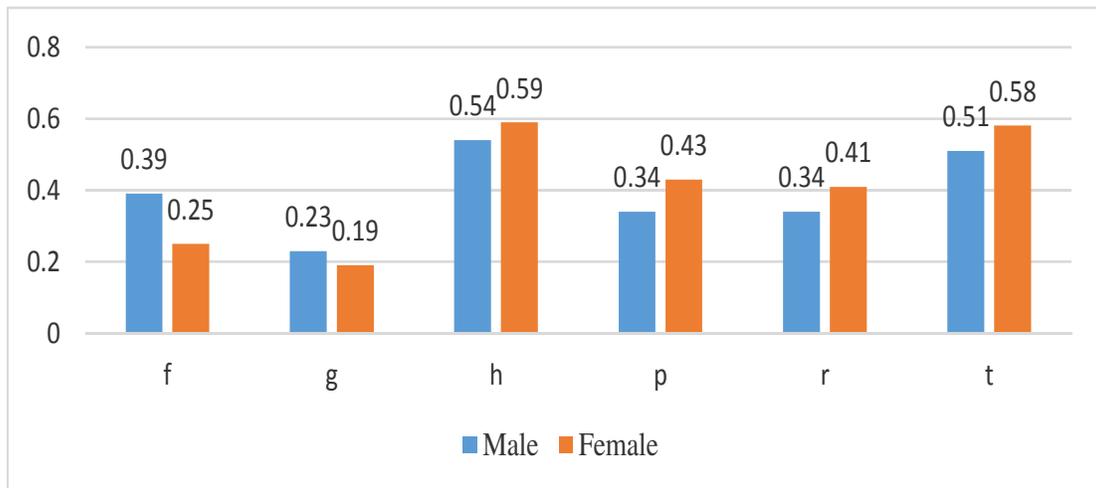


Figure 3. Gender differences in student learning outcomes.

Conclusions and Implications

This study raises questions for future research as well as for higher education and student affairs practices. Are male students learning less in college in international/global perspectives, diversity, and social responsibilities and why? How can the university develop programs to enhance student learning in these areas?

Learning Living Communities (LLCs) were found to positively affect student learning in college. What LLC programs may enhance student learning outcomes? Shall we extend LLC programming to all students in campus housing? Can we establish more LLCs to enhance student learning? What can we do to better help minority students to improve their learning experience and learning outcomes on campus?

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