



Benchworks
by Elentra

Coming Back Together Matters

Program Attendance and Diverse Interactions After the COVID-19 Pandemic

Benchworks Research Note
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Introduction

Coming back together matters! The social isolation of COVID shutdowns may have meant fewer opportunities to interact with individuals outside students' immediate circle of friends and family. Coming back together can offer many students a chance to interact with people outside of their traditional social circles. This can expose students to new and different ways of perceiving the world and – in the best of circumstances – helping them to develop empathy for others' perspectives. Intentional programming in on-campus residential living can make a strong contribution to the development of empathy, a crucial component in living in any community.

Using a national dataset constructed from the ACUHO-I/Benchworks Resident Assessment of over 150,000 undergraduate and graduate college students from nearly 200 colleges and universities in the United States, findings show that higher levels of program participation were associated with greater perceived gains in four key skills needed to survive and thrive in a community setting. While limiting in-person interactions, living in single bedrooms, or even living off-campus during COVID may have satisfied immediate needs, participation in intentional residential programming post-COVID offered unique skill development benefits.

This research note explores the degree to which participating in on-campus housing programs helped students develop six areas of skill needed in a community setting, particularly skills related to interacting with diverse others as well as respecting and trusting others and feeling accepted by them. These skills are important to develop for use not only in on-campus housing, but also for future success beyond on-campus housing.

Key Questions:

1. How often do residents attend programs and activities?
2. How does attending programs and activities relate to the following diverse interactions outcomes?
 - Interacting with others who are different from you
 - Benefit from interacting with those who are different from you
 - Understanding others by putting yourself in their place
 - Respecting other students
 - Trusting other students
 - Feeling accepted by other students



How Often Do Residents Attend Programs and Activities?

Figure 1 displays the responses to a survey question asking, “During the current academic year, how many times have you attended a program or activity in your residence hall?”

Key findings from figure 1:

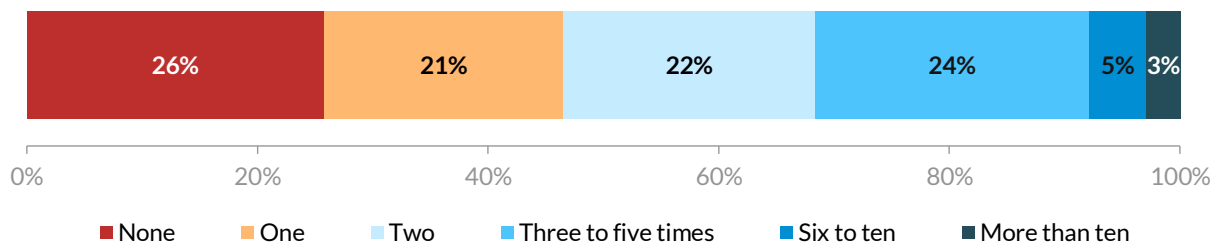
- Nearly three-quarters of residents reported attending at least one program or activity in their residence hall.
- More than a quarter of students indicated they had not attended any programs in their residence hall.
- Similar percentages of students had attended one program (21%), two programs (22%), and three to five programs (24%).
- A small number of on-campus residents—5% and 3%—reported attending six to ten or more than ten programs, respectively.

These interactions may be between the person (student) and the environment (housing environment) as suggested below.

FIGURE 1.

Number of Programs or Activities Attended in Current Year

Distribution of responses to the survey question “During the current academic year, how many times have you attended a program or activity in your residence hall?”



How Does Attending Programs and Activities Relate to Diverse Interactions Outcomes?

When students interact with people who are different from them, they reap benefits including the ability not only to understand but also to empathize with differing perspectives. Students who attended greater numbers of programs also reported that they respected, trusted, and felt accepted by others to a greater degree than those who attended fewer numbers of programs. The following analysis looks at each of those skills when program attendance is considered.



Interacting with Difference

Data from the ACUHO-I/Benchworks Resident Assessment indicate that students who attended more on-campus programs were more likely to report their housing experience helped them interact with students who were different from themselves.

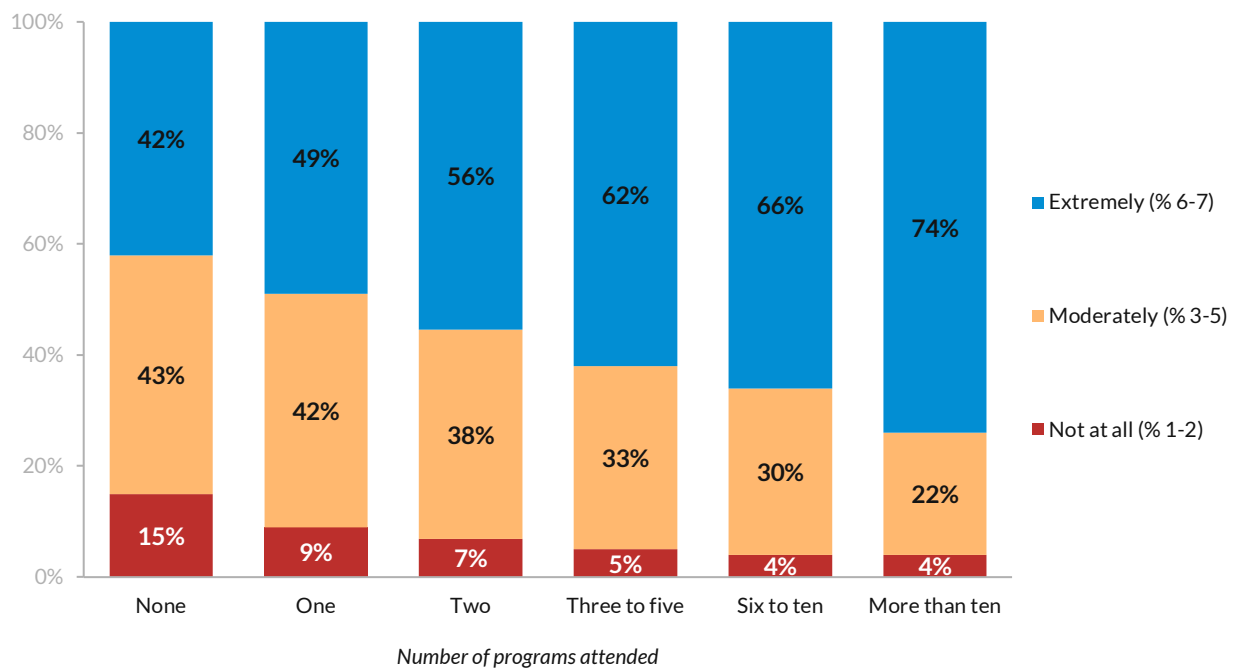
Key findings from figure 2:

- Fifteen percent of students who did not attend any programs reported that on-campus housing did not help them interact with residents different from themselves. This suggests that without programming, some students may continue to cluster with those similar to themselves.
- Even attending just one program seemed to help. Nearly half (49%) of those who attended just one program reported their housing experience helped them to interact with residents who were different.

FIGURE 2.

Interacting with Residents Who Are Different From You by Programs Attended

Differences in responses to the question “To what degree has your on-campus housing experience helped you interact with residents who are different from you (i.e., race, gender, beliefs)?” by the number of programs attended in the current academic year



For further thought: In what other environments beyond on-campus housing do students have an intentional opportunity to interact with – and learn from – students who are different from themselves? How can we leverage learning from on-campus housing to support learning in other environments?



Benefit from Interacting with Diverse Others

Interaction with diverse others is an important goal but if students do not see a benefit, the goal may lose its luster. Fortunately, even students who did not attend any programs felt that being in a diverse environment was of benefit to them. Data from the ACUHO-I/Benchworks Resident Assessment indicate that students who attended more on-campus programs were more likely to report that they benefitted from interactions with diverse others.

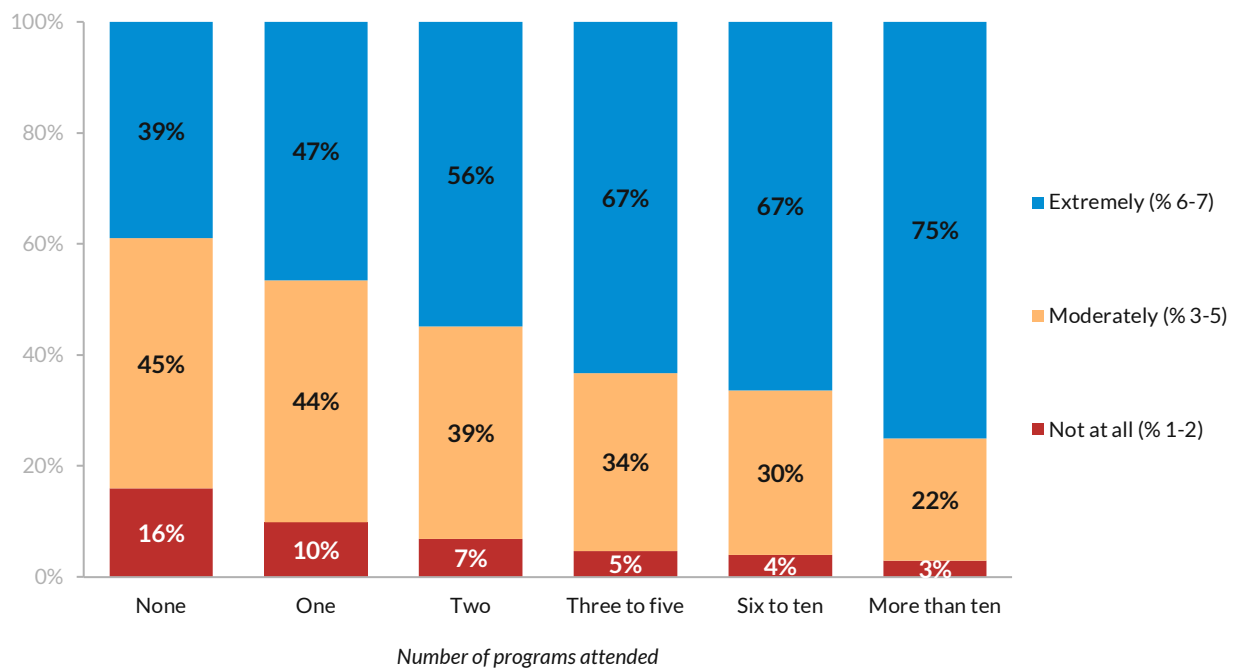
Key findings from figure 3:

- Eighty-four percent (39% plus 45%) of students who did not attend any programs reported that they benefitted from interactions with diverse others.
- The amount of that benefit increased when students attended more programs. Three out of four students who attended 10 or more programs reported their housing experience helped them benefit from interacting with diverse others.

FIGURE 3.

Benefit from Interacting with Residents Who Are Different From You by Programs Attended

Differences in responses to the question “To what degree has your on-campus housing experience helped you benefit from interactions with residents who are different from you?” by the number of programs attended in the current academic year



For further thought: Interpersonal interactions with other residents may provide benefits without additional programming. How might staff help residents identify the interactions of particular benefit so those interactions can be fostered outside the residential environment as well?



Greater Understanding Through Empathy

Interacting with diverse others and benefitting from that can be precursors to an even deeper goal: developing a sense of empathy based on a more informed sense of others' perspectives. Understanding the "why" of different perspectives can go beyond merely knowing that different viewpoints exist. Data from the ACUHO-I/Benchworks Resident Assessment indicate that students who attended more on-campus programs were more likely to report their housing experience helped them understand other residents by putting themselves in their place.

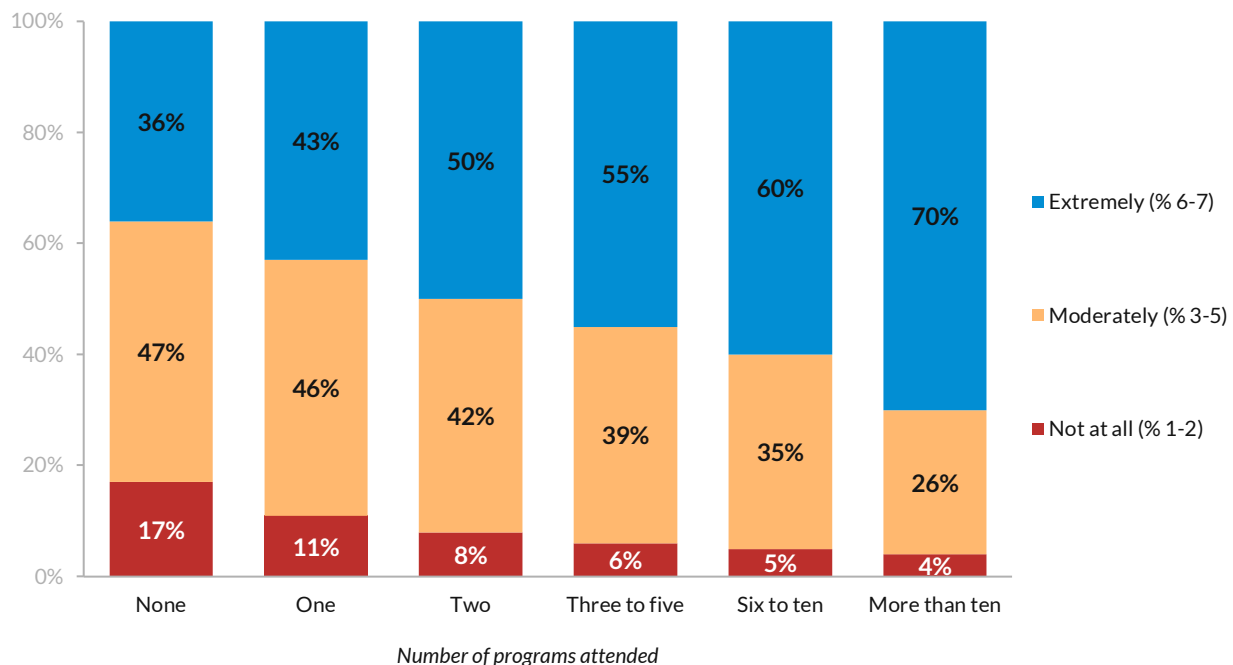
Key findings from figure 4:

- Fifty percent of students who attended just two programs reported that living in on-campus housing extremely helped them understand other residents by putting themselves in their place.
- The percentage of those reporting extreme gains in being able to understand other residents reached 70% for those who attended 10 or more programs.

FIGURE 4.

Understand Other Residents by Putting Yourself in their Place by Programs Attended

Differences in responses to the question "To what degree has your on-campus housing experience enhanced your ability to understand other residents by putting yourself in their place?" by the number of programs attended in the current academic year



For further thought: Benefitting from interacting with diverse others (previous figure) may not require intentional programming. In contrast, developing empathy – a deeper skill – may require the greater intentionality of programming.



Respecting Others

Interacting with diverse others, benefitting from that, and being able to understand other residents' perspectives can be thought of as benefits of living in on-campus housing. But what about contributions residents may make to the on-campus housing environment? There may be a relationship between benefits and contributions such as respecting, trusting, and feeling accepted by others. Data from the ACUHO-I/Benchworks Resident Assessment indicate that students who attended more on-campus programs were more likely to report that they respected other students in their living area.

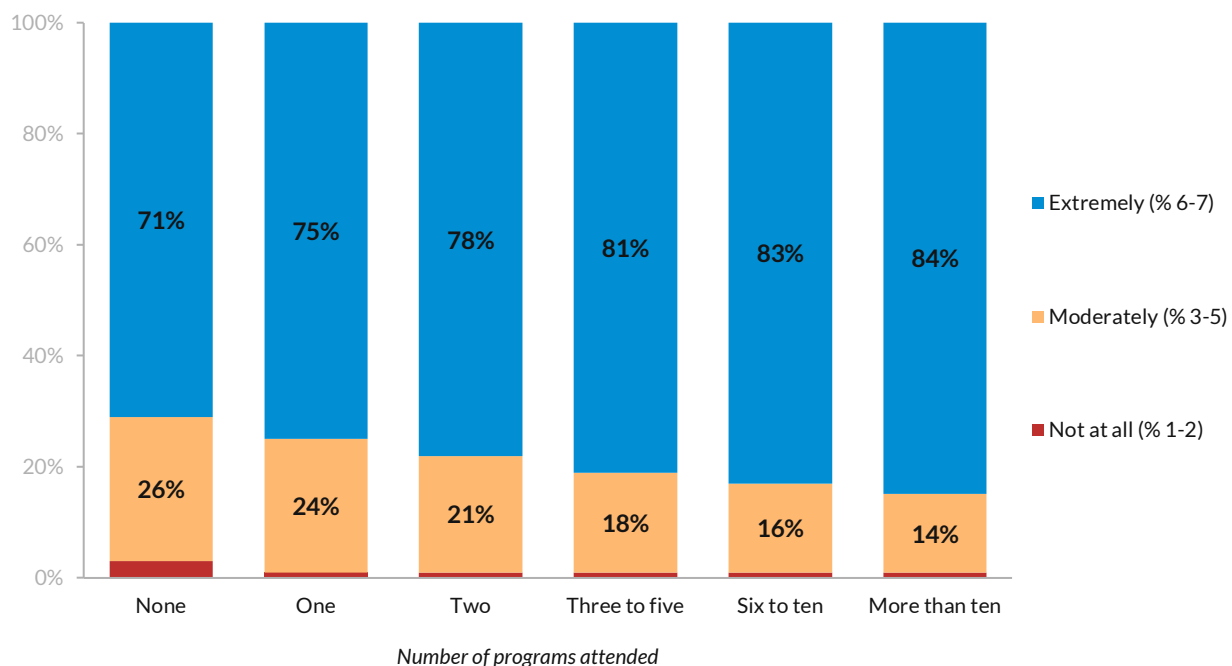
Key findings from figure 5:

- There was little variation in the percentage of residents who reported they respect other students to an extreme degree. Seventy-one percent of those who attended no programs reported this extreme respect; 74% of those who attended more than 10 programs reported this same extreme respect.

FIGURE 5.

Respect Other Students by Programs Attended

Differences in responses to the question "In your living area (i.e. floor, apartment, section, community, house) to what degree do you respect other students?" by the number of programs attended in the current academic year



For further thought: Intentional dialogue between students may be needed to better understand how "respect" is perceived by different groups. Actions perceived by one group to be respectful may feel quite different to members of a different group.



Trust Others

More frequent interaction with others may help build trust as well as general friendship. As students emerge from COVID isolation, learning to trust others outside their family or friend groups can be a significant contribution to overall community living skills. Data from the ACUHO-I/ Benchworks Resident Assessment indicate that students who attended more on-campus programs were more likely to report that they trusted other students in their living area.

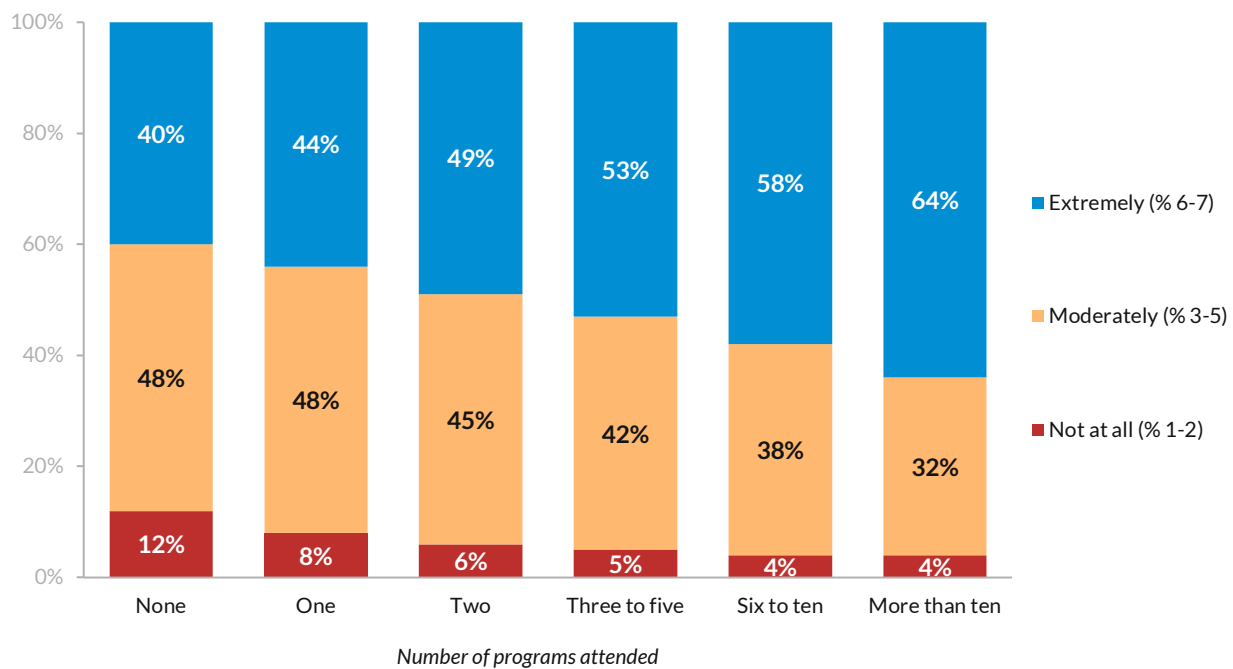
Key findings from figure 6:

- Sixty-four percent of students who attended more than 10 programs reported that they trusted other students in their living area.
- By comparison, only 40% of those who did not attend any programs reported that they trusted other students in their living area.

FIGURE 6.

Trust Other Students by Programs Attended

Differences in responses to the question “In your living area (i.e. floor, apartment, section, community, house) to what degree do you trust other students?” by the number of programs attended in the current academic year



For further thought: Though cause and effect cannot be determined from this data, it’s intriguing to consider “which came first”: Do students who attend lots of programs already trust others and that’s part of their willingness to attend? Do students who do not trust other students participate less in programs as one expression of less trust?



Feel Accepted by Others

Being a member of a community means feeling accepted by others, among other feelings. This is true regardless of the type of community, whether campus-based or society at large after graduation. Data from the ACUHO-I/Benchworks Resident Assessment indicate that students who attended more on-campus programs were more likely to report that they felt accepted by others in their living area.

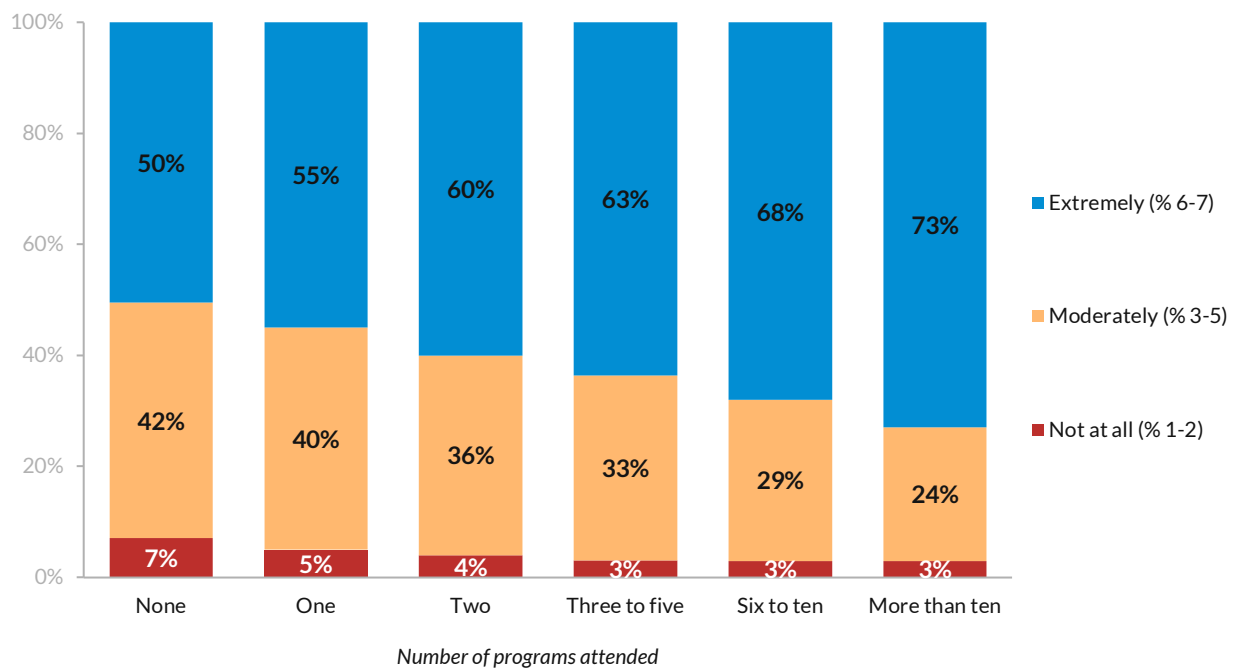
Key findings from figure 7:

- Half (50%) of the students who did not attend any programs reported feeling extremely accepted by others.
- By comparison, almost 3 out of 4 students (73%) of students who attended more than 10 programs reported feeling extremely accepted.

FIGURE 7.

Feel Accepted by Other Students by Programs Attended

Differences in responses to the question “In your living area (i.e. floor, apartment, section, community, house) to what degree do you feel accepted by other students?” by the number of programs attended in the current academic year



For further thought: Though cause and effect cannot be determined from this data, it's intriguing to consider “which came first”: Do students who attend lots of programs already trust others and that's part of their willingness to attend? Do students who do not trust other students participate less in programs as one expression of less trust?



Conclusion

Overall, findings from the 2021-2022 ACUHO-I/Benchworks Resident Assessment indicate a positive relationship between the number of programs and activities a student attended and the degree to which their housing experience contributed to developing skills for a diverse environment.

- Most students attended at least one program. The percentage of students who reported not attending any programs was greatest for those who also reported fewer gains in the ability to meet other people.
- Attending more programs was associated with greater gains in interacting with those who are different, benefiting from those interactions, developing empathy, respecting, trusting, and feeling accepted by others.

As residence life staff continue to transition back to a post-COVID world, formal programming efforts might focus on face-to-face interactions and leveraging those to enhance skill development:

- Intentional residential programming may help students recover interaction skills that were dormant during COVID lockdowns.
- Becoming comfortable with others who are different may be an essential skill on the way to the deeper skill of developing empathy for others.
- Developing empathy may require formal programming beyond frequent face-to-face interactions among residents.
- Passive programming such as brief “food for thought” processing questions posted or communicated electronically in the residence halls may help students process what they are already learning, experientially.
- As the transition continues, it may be fruitful to offer programs that focus on smaller groups or programs that focus on roommate/suitemate dialogues. This would allow students to build personal interaction skills in situations they may view as a safer health alternative.



Methods

Survey

The ACUHO-I/Benchworks Resident Assessment enables institutions to evaluate the experiences of on-campus residents. The survey focuses on satisfaction with the housing experience, facilities, staff, dining, and roommates; as well as the degree to which students indicate their housing experience contributed to learning related to community interactions, programs, diverse interactions, academic initiatives, sustainability, and practical competencies. The assessment is mapped to both the ACUHO-I Standards and Ethical Principles for College and University Housing Professionals and the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) student learning and development outcomes.

Dataset

The findings in this research note are based on aggregate analysis from the 2021-2022 academic year administration of the ACUHO-I/Benchworks Resident Assessment. In total, 156,401 students from 196 institutions in the United States and Canada completed the assessment. Institutions could choose whether to administer online or via paper; 176 institutions administered online using the Benchworks survey system and 20 administered via paper surveys. The average online response rate was 30%.

Analysis

The insights shared in this research note were developed based on a wide range of statistical analyses, including descriptive analysis (frequencies, means, standard deviations), correlational analysis and cross-tabulations with chi-square analysis, and regression models. The findings in this report are presented as descriptive analysis, specifically percentages. Results do not indicate whether differences between groups are statistically significant. All figures reflect the number of responses to a question and do not include missing data. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole percent; therefore, some totals may not exactly equal 100.



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