Coming Back Together Matters

Program Attendance and Personal Interactions After the COVID-19 Pandemic

Benchworks Research Note
March 2023

Introduction

Coming back together matters! The social isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic meant fewer interactions with peers and as a result, fewer opportunities to learn important social interaction skills essential to living in a community. These skills are among those realized through intentional programming in on-campus residential living.

Using a national dataset constructed from the 2021-2022 administration of Skyfactor's 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 the COVID-19 pandemic may have satisfied immediate needs, participation in intentional residential programming post-COVID offered unique skill development benefits.

This research note explores the relationship between attending programs and activities in on-campus housing and the degree to which students said their on-campus housing experience contributed to learning outcomes related to personal interactions. 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 personal interactions outcomes?
   - Meeting other people
   - Improving relationships
   - Living cooperatively
   - Resolving conflicts

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?"
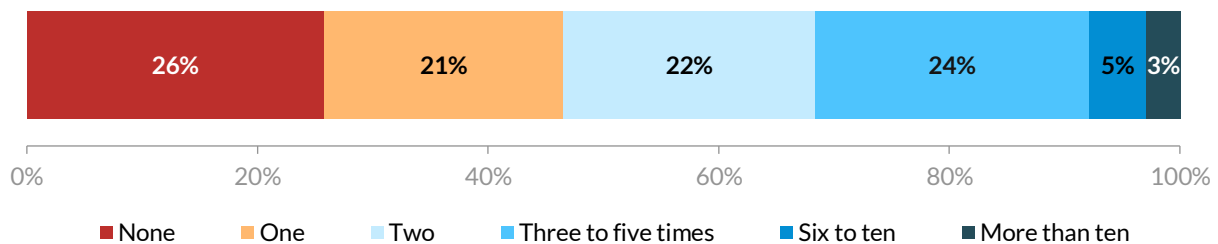
How Does Attending Programs and Activities Relate to Personal Interactions Outcomes?

Attending programs can lead to skill development in several areas, including the ability to resolve conflicts, meet other people, improve interpersonal relationships, and live cooperatively. The remainder of this note highlights findings examining the relationship between how frequently on-campus residents reported attending on-campus programs or activities and the degree to which their housing experience contributed to outcomes related to personal interactions.

Meeting Other People

Social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic may have substantially limited opportunities to meet new people. Results from the ACUHO-I/Benchworks Resident Assessment showed that attending more programs was associated with higher percentages of those who reported their ability to meet other people was enhanced extremely.

Key findings from figure 2:

- Even modest program attendance helped. More than half (56%) of the students who attended at least two programs reported substantial gains in this area of skill.
- Students attending more than 10 programs reported more than double (80%) the percentage of substantial skill improvement in meeting new people as those students who did not attend any programs (38%).

FIGURE 2.

Meeting Other People by Programs Attended

Differences in responses to the question "To what degree has living in on-campus housing enhanced your ability to meet other people?" by the number of programs attended in the current academic year

Number of programs attended
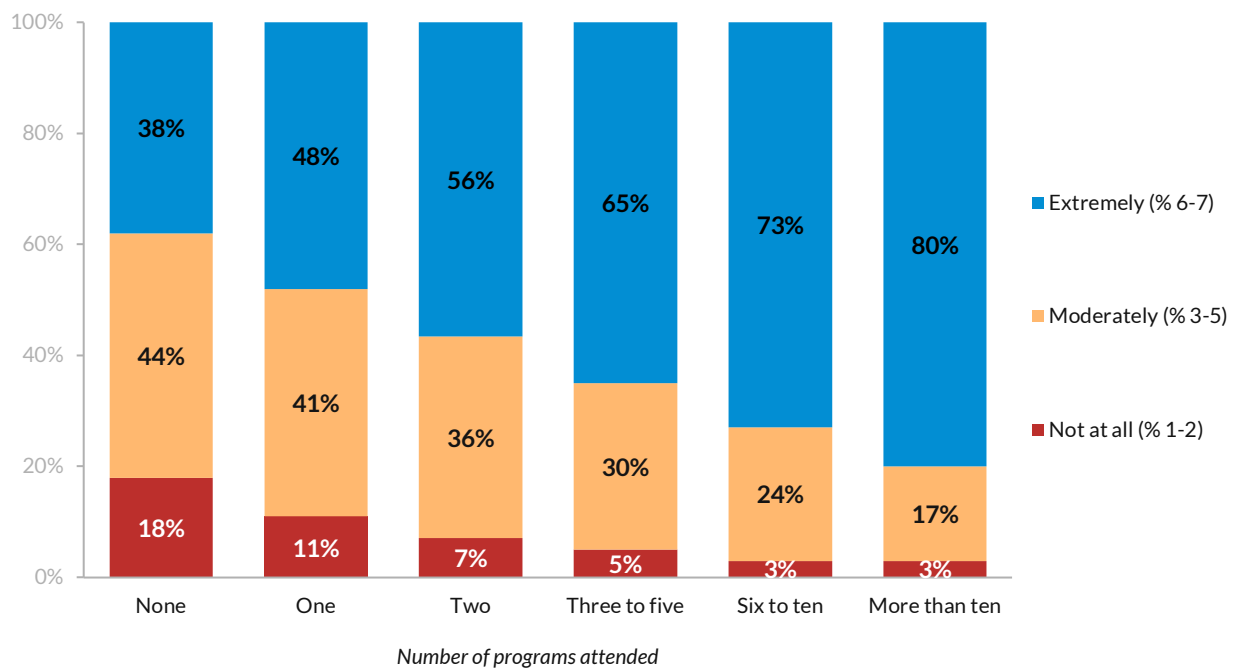
For further thought: Do students who are already comfortable meeting other people naturally attend more programs? Or do students who attend more programs become more comfortable meeting other people through program attendance? What role does difference play in both meeting and attending?

Improving Interpersonal Relationships

The enhanced ability to meet other people can be a hollow gain if not accompanied by improved relationship skills. Data from the ACUHO-I/Benchworks Resident Assessment indicated that students who attended more on-campus programs were more likely to report their housing experience contributed to their ability to improve interpersonal relationships.

Key findings from figure 3:

- Three-quarters of students who attended more than ten programs reported that their housing experience contributed to their ability to improve interpersonal relationships. In contrast, just 39% of those who did not attend programs said their housing experience contributed to the development of this skill.
- For those who attended 10 or more programs, only 21% reported a modest gain in their ability to improve interpersonal relationships.

FIGURE 3.

Improving Interpersonal Relationships by Programs Attended

Differences in responses to the question "To what degree has living in on-campus housing enhanced your ability to improve interpersonal relationships?" by the number of programs attended in the current academic year
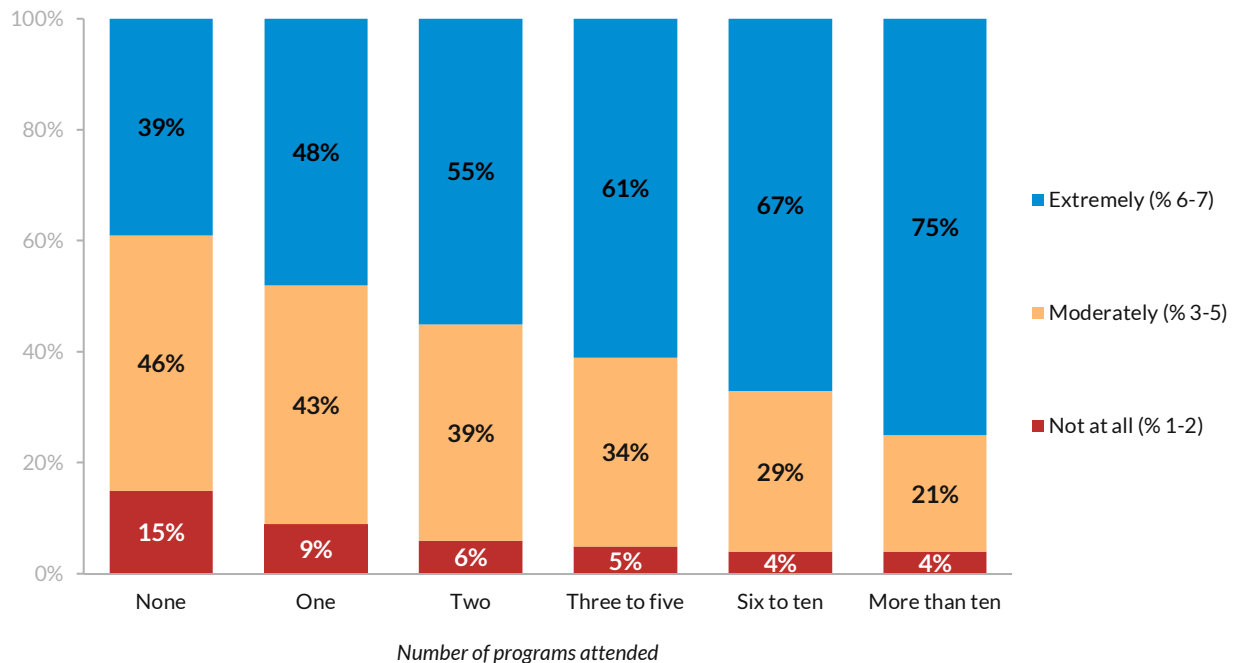
For further thought: Students may have different goals in living on campus. Some may want greater campus involvement, while others may want the convenient proximity to campus services such as the library and other facilities. To what extent do our initiatives as residence hall staff acknowledge and support differences in student goals for on-campus living?

Living Cooperatively

The skill of living cooperatively may be developed merely by living together, regardless of program attendance. Frequent minor interactions paired with occasional deeper interactions may all help to develop this skill.

Key findings from figure 4:

- Attending even just one program was associated with most students reporting at least modest gains, with 93% of those who attended one program reporting moderate (41%) or extreme (52%) gains in their ability to live cooperatively as a result of their housing experience.
- As the number of programs attended rose, the percentage of students indicating modest or extreme gains (combined) continued to be above 90%.

FIGURE 4.

Living Cooperatively by Programs Attended

Differences in responses to the question "To what degree has living in on-campus housing enhanced your ability to live cooperatively?" by the number of programs attended in the current academic year

Number of programs attended
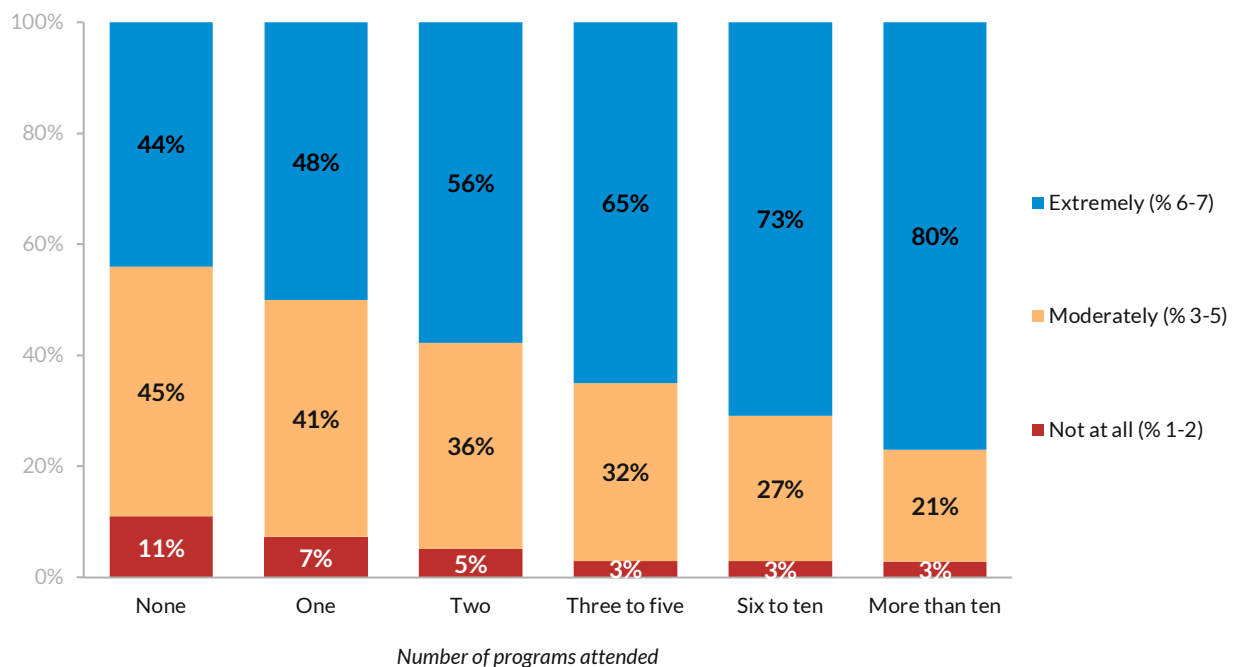
For further thought: Learning to live cooperatively may be enhanced not only by program attendance but also by informal interactions. Fostering those informal face-to-face interactions may be valuable as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. Residence hall staff can model these informal interactions by stopping to talk with residents, inviting residents who may not know each other to go to the dining hall with you, or starting conversations about recent campus events.

Resolving Conflicts

Conflict resolution skills are an important tool in community living, whether on campus or beyond. In our polarized political environment, the ability to resolve conflict is an important tool in civic engagement as well. 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 contributed to learning conflict resolution skills.

Key findings from figure 5:

- Sixty-eight percent of those who attended more than 10 programs said their housing experience substantially enhanced their ability to resolve conflicts. Only 35% of those who did not attend any programs said their housing experience substantially contributed to learning these skills.

FIGURE 5.
Resolving Conflicts by Programs Attended

Differences in responses to the question "To what degree has living in on-campus housing enhanced your ability to resolve conflicts by the number of programs attended in the current academic year
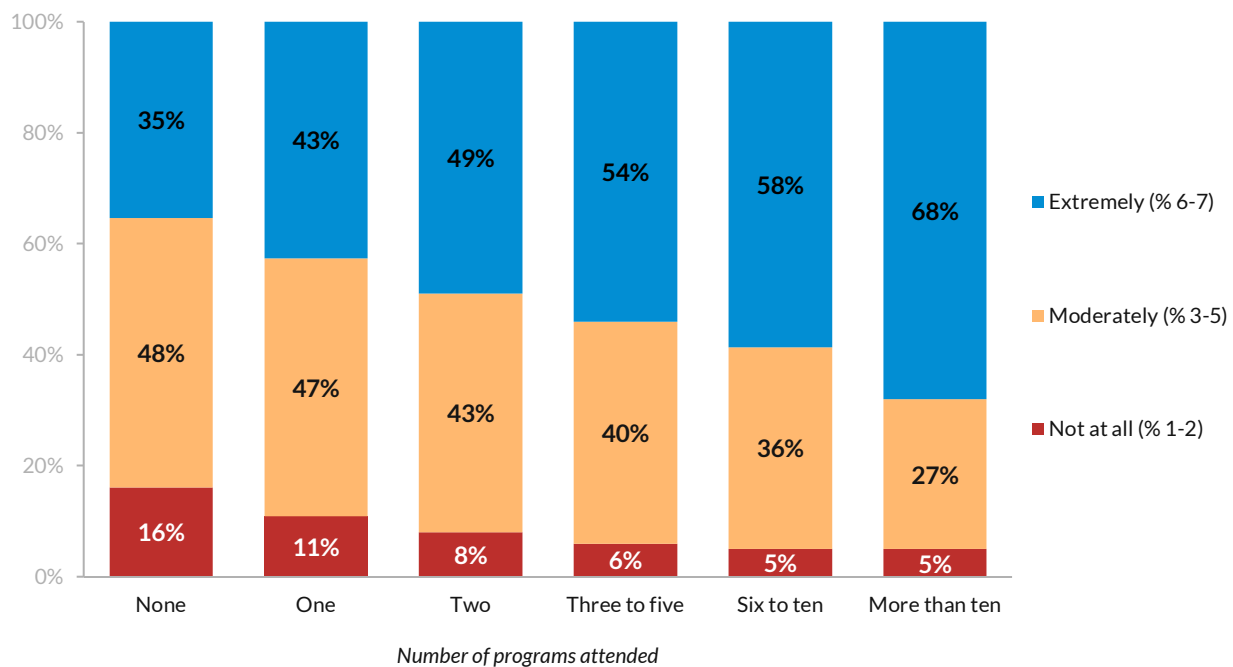
For further thought: Differences in opinions, values, and life experiences can be unsettling and lead to avoiding situations in which those differences may come up. Focusing on the *why* (the sources of those differences) rather than the *what* (the difference itself) may trigger curiosity rather than avoidance, leading to higher program attendance and more substantial gains in their ability to resolve conflicts.

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 learning related to personal interactions.

- 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 resolving conflict, improving interpersonal relationships, and other community living skills.

As residence life staff continue to transition back following the COVID-19 pandemic, 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 periods of social isolation brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 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.
- Learning to resolve conflict may be supported by focusing on the *why* of differences in opinions and other attributes rather than focusing on the *what*: the difference itself.
- Learning to live cooperatively may not require formal programming but rather fostering frequent face-to-face interactions among residents.

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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