

# Commuters Versus Residents: The Effects of Living Arrangement and Student Engagement on Academic Performance

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## Abstract

This study focused on the relationship between living arrangement (residential vs. commuter) and the academic performance (grade point average) of first-year, full time undergraduate students at one public, 4-year university in the Southeast. Additionally, we analyzed five educationally effective practices as described by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE): level of academic challenge active and collaborative learning, student–faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environment, to identify possible mediators to the relationship between living arrangement and academic performance. We found commuter students earned higher grade point averages than residential students; however, students in both living environments benefited from participating in high levels of academic challenge. While the results of this study challenged the perception that commuters as a group achieve academically at lower levels than residential students, our findings supported prior literature. Our results suggest the amount of time and energy students invest in the college experience relates to students' academic success, regardless of living arrangement.

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living arrangement, residential student, commuter student, academic performance, residence hall, student engagement

**Literature Review**

In his seminal study, *Commuting versus Resident Students: Overcoming the Educational Inequities of Living Off Campus*, Arthur Chickering (1974) concluded commuter students were less engaged in academic activities and were more likely to fail academic courses. However, much has changed on our campuses during the past 40 years. Particularly, the enhancements of student on-campus living environments and data-driven decisions by institutional leaders provide greater support for commuter students. As we look at today's residential and commuter students, are Chickering's findings (1974) still relevant? What mediating effect does student engagement (Kuh, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pike, Kuh, & McCormick, 2011) have on the academic performance of commuters in the 21st century?

Student engagement results from the time and energy students commit to academic and cocurricular activities. Recent research using data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) seems to support Chickering's (1974) conclusions. Kuh's (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007) analysis of aggregated NSSE data concludes commuters cannot or do not engage as readily as their peers who live on campus, "because they live on campus, they (residential students) have better access than their commuting peers to institutional resources for learning, including faculty members and other students" (p. 51). However, the current study of the commuter experience at one large, public research university located in a metropolitan area reveals a somewhat different result. In this study, commuter students earned higher grade point averages (GPAs) while engaging in similar levels of academic challenge than their residential counterparts.

***Residential and Commuter Student Characteristics***

Living arrangement is an important characteristic of student engagement because of unique opportunities that can occur within the environment (Astin, 1984; Chickering, 1974; De Araujo & Murray, 2010a; Jacoby, 2000; Mara & Mara, 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Schroeder & Mable, 1994; Shudde, 2016). Although a relatively small percentage of U.S. undergraduate students reside in on-campus housing, residence halls remain essential to "what [is] known as the collegiate way of life" (p. 5) and are rooted within the inception of U.S. higher education (Schroeder & Mable, 1994). Fewer than 15% of U.S. college students today live in institution-owned housing on campus (Horn & Nevill, 2006).

Living on campus provides a stable environment for residents while exposing them to a variety of knowledge, lifestyles, perspectives, and values. Residents can test personal attitudes and identities, learn about cultural differences, exchange personal knowledge and experiences, and develop or redevelop career plans and aspirations, all within the walls of their living space. Residential students are also more likely to engage in activities that support their academic pursuits and overall satisfaction with college life, and persist to graduation than commuter students.

On the other hand, commuter students represent 85% of U.S. college students (Horn & Nevill, 2006). Commuters typically reside at home with parents or relatives or in private housing without parents or relatives (Chickering, 1974; Hintz, 2011; Horn & Nevill, 2006; Jacoby, 2000). Four main concerns exist for commuter students as they gain entry into campus life (Jacoby, 2000; Jacoby & Garland, 2004; Wilmes & Quade, 1986): transportation issues, multiple life roles, integrating support systems, and developing a sense of belonging. Commuter students often balance multiple responsibilities, which limit the amount of time they spend interacting with campus life (Jacoby, 2000; Jacoby & Garland, 2004; Wilmes & Quade, 1986; Wolfe, 1993). As a result, commuter students have to choose how and when they participate in campus activities wisely to balance multiple obligations while overcoming challenges to complete a college education.

### *Living Arrangement and Student Engagement*

A growing body of research suggests academic performance does not result from living on campus in and of itself, but through the opportunities to engage with campus life and levels of support on-campus residential communities can provide (e.g., Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Astin, 1973; Blimling, 1989; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Shudde, 2011; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1996; Tinto, 1993; Webber, Krylow, & Zhang, 2013). The nature of these activities support Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement, which underscores the importance of active involvement in the college experience and student success. Astin names active involvement in academics, student–faculty interaction, and engaging in extracurricular activities as imperative forms of student engagement. Student engagement, especially during the early years of college, plays a role in whether students become academically and socially integrated into campus life and persist to degree completion (Berger & Milem, 1999). Pascarella, Terenzini, and Blimling (1994) concluded “residential living during college is consistently one of the most important determinants of a student’s level of involvement” (p. 25) because residential students are more likely to interact with peers and faculty, become involved in extracurricular activities, and use campus facilities; all characteristics that lead to improved academic performance.

Schroeder and Mable (1994) and Johnson and Cavins (1996) argued student learning has remained a concern for residence life professionals for many years

because residence halls are an ideal environment for developing community, increased student engagement, and purposeful interactions among faculty, students, and staff. In addition to the learning outcomes associated with campus activities, programs and services offered specifically within the residential community incite both academic and nonacademic learning. These opportunities are typically exclusive to on-campus residents while commuters are less likely to receive these opportunities from their off-campus living arrangements. Schudde (2011) specifically found students living on campus developed higher levels of social support, spent less time working off campus, and had more time for and access to extracurricular activities than commuter students.

### *Living Arrangement and Age, Gender, and Race/Ethnicity*

Studies related to the impact of age, gender, and race/ethnicity on the relationship between living arrangement, student engagement, and academic performance are limited. Astin (1993) asserts,

amidst debates over multiculturalism, diversity, and political correctness by academics and the news media, claims and counterclaims about the dangers and benefits of multiculturalism have abounded, but so far little hard evidence has been produced to support any of these claims. (p. 44)

Blimling (1993) stated,

except for a handful of studies concerning the attitudes of White American students about African-American and international students, the research does not reveal much about how underrepresented groups in higher education are influenced by living in a college residence hall. (p. 293)

Studies that address age, gender, and race/ethnicity within the context of academic performance and residential status examine cognitive impact, academic and social integration into the campus community, and perception of campus climate (Arboleda, Wang, Shelley, & Whalen, 2003; Hu, 2002; Sax, Bryant, & Harper, 2005; Turley & Wodtke, 2010). Current outcomes suggests African-American and female students are more likely to benefit academically from living on campus (Flowers, 2004; Hausman, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Turley & Wodtke, 2010; Wolfe, 1993), but little significant outcomes suggest influences based on age.

One important finding to note is the reliance on identity, community involvement, sense of belonging, peer interactions, and family support to assist with navigating the college experience (Kodama, 2002; Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008). Perception of campus climate affects how students, particularly students from underrepresented communities, feel belonging to the campus

community, which can influence academic performance and persistence. When students have precollege exposure to diversity, positive interactions with diverse peers, and experience less tension related to identity, they are more likely to engage in college, which could lead to a positive influence on academic performance regardless of living arrangement.

## **The Present Study**

Many studies focus on the relationship between living arrangement and academic performance. However, many of the studies were conducted 10 to 20 years ago, and the results of these investigations were mixed (e.g., Blimling, 1989; De Araujo & Murray, 2010b; Lau, Wong, Ng, Hui, Cheung, & Mok, 2013; Schudde, 2011). Some studies demonstrate benefits in terms of higher GPA, retention, and academic skills for residential students compared with commuter students (Cambridge-Williams, Winsler, Kitsantas, & Bernard, 2013; De Araujo & Murray, 2010a; Flowers, 2004; Lopez Turley & Wodtke, 2010). Other research implies there are either similar or no differences in academic performance between residential and commuter students (DeAngelo, 2014; De Araujo & Murray, 2010a; Zheng, Saunders, Shelly, & Whalen, 2002). We hypothesized living arrangement may have an indirect, positive influence on academic performance. Only a limited number of studies have addressed this hypothesis (e.g., Blimling, 1989; De Araujo & Murray, 2010a; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pike et al., 2011; Terenzini et al., 1996). Therefore, we conducted this study to update our understanding of how living arrangement influences academic outcomes, namely GPA, for contemporary college students.

This study further explored whether levels of student engagement influence the relationship between living arrangement and academic performance. Our results will provide institutional leaders with new considerations of Chickering's (1974) and Kuh's (2009) conclusions relating to the question of the relationship of living arrangement and success in college. These results are especially significant for those who provide challenge and support for commuter and residential students. Specifically, is living arrangement an independent variable, which correlates with success in college? Or does student engagement make the difference, how engaged a resident or commuter student is in the collegiate experience?

We also examined age, gender, and race/ethnicity to see if any of these variables moderate the relationship between academic performance and living arrangement. Limited research focuses exclusively on how demographic characteristics, specifically age, gender, and race/ethnicity, influence the residential experience (Blimling, 1989; Flowers, 2004; Newman-Ford, Lloyd, & Thomas, 2009; Turley & Wodtke, 2010; Wood, 2014). Most of the participants in studies regarding the influence of living on campus are White, and most studies that compare students based on race/ethnicity solely examine differences between

African-American and White students. Few studies exclusively address the experiences of non-White and international students. A vast amount of literature exists on the differences between male and female college students as it relates to academic performance and more research is needed to address gender differences specifically within living arrangement. Age has also been addressed in the literature with respect to exploring differences in academic performance between traditional and nontraditional students, but little research has investigated differences in age groups between residential and commuter students.

### **Research Questions**

The intent of this study was to explore how living arrangement influences the academic performance of first-year students and to provide university leaders with tools to engage students within their living environments, regardless of whether students live on or commute to campus. In doing so, we believe academic performance and retention rates can improve.

Our hypotheses were as follows:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): There will be a positive effect of living arrangement on academic performance for residential students. Living off campus will lead to lower GPAs.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Each of the five educationally effective practices described by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) will have a moderator effect on the relationship between living arrangement and academic performance.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): There will be no difference in the moderator effect of age, gender, and race/ethnicity.

## **Methodology**

### **Overview**

We conducted this study employing a nonexperimental, comparative design using archival data. Participants consisted of first-year, full time students enrolled at a 4-year, public, research university located in the southeastern United States who had completed the 2010 NSSE and indicated their living arrangement. We analyzed the records of 870 students who submitted useable NSSE responses, out of a possible 3,138 total first-year students enrolled at the institution during the 2009 to 2010 academic year. Academic performance equated to GPA after the first semester. Living arrangement was divided

into two types, residential students (dormitory and other campus housing) and commuter students (residence within walking and driving distance to campus).

The data analyses corresponded to each of the study's research questions using simple regression analyses. We first collected descriptive statistics to describe the data. Next, we compared GPA results for each living arrangement group to determine differences between the two groups. We then explored potential moderator effects of age, gender, race/ethnicity, and each of the five key characteristics of student engagement within the relationship between living arrangement and academic performance.

### Participants

The number of participants in this study reflected 27% of the total first-year students enrolled at the institution during the 2009 to 2010 academic year. Table 1 documents participant demographics. The average participant age was 19 years old.

In comparison to 2010 NSSE data, the national institutional response rate to the survey was 32.8%, with 8% from institutions similar to the institution used for this study; 46% (181,070) of the entire NSSE cohort were first-year students. Table 2 documents participant demographics from the 2010 NSSE cohort; 66% of the participants were less than 24 years old, and 88% were enrolled full time at their respective institutions.

**Table 1.** Participant Demographics.

Demographics	%
Gender	
Female	56.9
Male	43.1
Race/Ethnicity	
White (non-Hispanic)	57.8
Other (American Indian/Native American, Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islander, Mexican/Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Other Hispanic/Latino, Multiracial, Other, and I prefer not to respond)	21.1
African American/Black	21
Living arrangement	
Residential	68
Commuter	32

**Table 2.** NSSE 2010 National Participant Demographics.

Demographics	%
Gender	
Female	64
Male	36
Race/Ethnicity	
White (non-Hispanic)	73
Other (American Indian/Native American, Asian/ Asian, American/Pacific Islander, Mexican/ Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Other Hispanic/Latino, Multiracial, Other, and I prefer not to respond)	16
African American/Black	11
Living arrangement	
Residential	37
Commuter	63

## Measures

Living arrangement served as the independent variable and was divided into residential (dormitory or other campus housing) and commuter (residence within walking or driving distance to campus). Academic performance, as measured by GPA, served as the dependent variable.

Age was recorded in birth years. Gender was indicated as either male or female. Race/ethnicity referred to whether participants noted themselves as American Indian/Native American, Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islander, African American/Black, White (non-Hispanic), Mexican/Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Other Hispanic/Latino, Multiracial, Other, or preferred not to specify. The aforementioned moderator variables were derived from the NSSE College Student Report.

The NSSE assists administrators and faculty in improving learning aspects of the college experience, thereby enhancing how students learn and encouraging a collaborative strategy to improve the learning process (e.g., Kuh, 2009; Kuh, Gonyea, & Palmer, 2001; NSSE, 2011a, 2011b, 2012; Webber et al., 2013). Experts in the field have ensured validity, reliability, internal consistency, and temporal stability of the survey (NSSE, 2012). Five educationally effective NSSE practices: level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student–faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environment were also used to identify potential moderator effects on the relationship between living arrangement and academic performance.



Participants received the NSSE College Student Report questionnaire via email at the end of the spring semester.

### Procedures

This study utilized a simple regression statistical model to examine the predictive relationship between living arrangement and academic performance. We compared GPA results for each living arrangement group using regression analysis to determine differences between the two groups. Living arrangement served as the independent variable and academic performance, as measured by GPA, served as the dependent variable. We then analyzed the potential moderator effects on the relationship between living arrangement and academic performance. If we found an effect from any of the moderator variables, we explored the level of change in academic performance across the corresponding moderator variable. We used dummy coding to code living arrangement, gender, and race/ethnicity.

### Results

Research Question 1 provided the most surprising answer, with commuter students earning higher GPAs ( $M = 2.89$ ) than residential students ( $M = 2.74$ ),  $F(1, 868) = 5.846$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .007$ . The results also revealed a moderator effect of level of academic challenge on the relationship between living arrangement and academic performance,  $F(1, 866) = 4.439$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .005$ . At 1 *SD* below the mean level of academic challenge score, 38.75, the predicted GPA for residential students was 2.57 and for commuter students was 2.84. At the mean level of academic challenge score, 51.78, the predicted GPA for residential students was 2.74 and for commuter students 2.87. Interestingly, at 1 *SD* above the mean score, 64.81, the predicted GPA for both residential and commuter students was 2.91.

The moderator effects of the remaining educationally effective practices—active and collaborative learning, student–faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environment, as well as gender, race/ethnicity, and age, did not produce significant results. Table 3 documents the analysis of the moderator effects on the relationships between living arrangement and academic performance.

### Discussion

The results of this study suggest a predictive relationship between living arrangement and academic performance. Residing off campus had a stronger correlation with positive academic performance than residing on campus, as commuter students demonstrated higher predicted GPAs than their peers who resided on

**Table 3.** Analysis of the Moderator Effects on the Relationship Between Living Arrangement and Academic Performance of First-Year Undergraduate Students.

Moderator variables	$\Delta R^2$	<i>p</i>
Age	.001	.585
Gender	.001	.344
Race/Ethnicity	.001	.682
Level of academic challenge	.005	.035
Active and collaborative learning	.001	.546
Student–faculty interactions	.001	.388
Enriching educational experiences	.003	.110
Supportive campus environment	.001	.964

campus. The percent of variation in academic performance related to the variation in living arrangement, as measured by the square of the correlation coefficient ( $\Delta R^2$ ), was .007, which means 0.70% of the variance related to the interaction between living arrangement and academic performance. The statistical significance could be the result of the number of participants in the study (Field, 2009). Although, the difference in academic performance attributed to living arrangement was significant, it is not of practical significance. Therefore, based on these results, one cannot reasonably conclude an advantage or a disadvantage to living on versus commuting to campus as it relates to the academic performance of first-year, full time undergraduate students.

### *Commuter Students and Academic Performance*

Despite the small effect size of this finding, there are several explanations for how commuter students academically outperformed residential students, or at least are not at an educational disadvantage. As mentioned by Jacoby (2000), commuter students are no less committed to their education; their educational goals are just as significant as those of residential students. This commitment, as demonstrated by the results of this study, reflected in academic performance. The results of this investigation challenge the assumption that commuter students are unable to achieve the same academic success as residential students.

Commuter students are more likely to have additional responsibilities, such as career, family, or other obligations, in addition to the task of attaining excellence in the classroom, which may force commuter students to manage their time differently and more carefully than residential students (Astin, 1993; Chickering, 1974; Jacoby, 2000; Jacoby & Garland, 2004; Kuh et al., 2001). We can conclude this essential need to develop time management skills

influences commuter students to become more intentionally involved in the learning process.

One popularly held belief related to traditional-aged commuter students who live at home with their parents, as described by Turley (2006), Jacoby and Garland (2004), and Kuh et al. (2001), is the notion they are subject to the continuation of strict parental rules. If this is even partially true, the structure provided by parents, even at a lower level than what existed in high school, may actually have a positive influence on academic performance. Many parents may continue to advocate high expectations, require designated time spent on academic activities, and monitor the academic performance of traditional-aged college students who live at home. Consequently, this more regimented schedule for commuters could increase their academic performance.

### *Living Arrangement and Student Engagement*

Prior research suggests living on campus encourages high academic performance through the unique opportunities to engage with campus life and levels of support provided by residential communities (e.g., Astin, 1973; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Webber et al., 2013). Students who live on campus are more likely to interact with peers and faculty, utilize campus resources, and become involved with extracurricular activities; all characteristics that encourage high academic performance. However, as suggested by Astin (1984, 1993), it is the responsibility of faculty and administrators to create opportunities within the residential environments for these experiences to occur. If these opportunities do not occur, one can reasonably conclude residential students are at an *educational disadvantage* and may not academically outperform or equal their commuter counterparts. Moreover, Lau et al. (2013) suggest not only the types of activities but also the times in which these activities occur can have an impact on success and quality of life. It is determined more research is necessary to understand the impact of residential arrangement on student learning.

Another possibility for the findings is in relation to the campus environment where this study took place. Until recently, the profile of the students who attended this university was predominantly commuter, first generation. The preponderance of undergraduate students lived at home and worked, many in excess of 20 hours per week.

Banning and Hughes (1986) advise “the fit between the commuting students and the institution can be managed in a way that may call for institutional change” (p. 20). In this case, student support programs and activities were and are still designed to accommodate a large commuter population. For example:

- The institutional class schedule maintains two 1-hour periods each week in the middle of the day when no classes occur. These two 1-hour sessions allow

student organizations to meet, provide time for students to visit student services offices, or encourage students to socialize over lunch with their peers, faculty, or staff before they leave campus

- Student support services provide activities and support for families
- Parking is provided and conveniently located near classrooms
- Weekend and evening classes are scheduled to accommodate working students

Nevertheless, within the past decade the residential population has increased dramatically. During the time when this research occurred, 23% of full time undergraduates lived on campus. This dramatic increase in the residential student population occurred with no change in support for commuters. In fact, student engagement in student activities has increased to the benefit of all students.

### *Living Arrangement, Academic Performance, and Level of Academic Challenge*

Although commuter students demonstrated higher predicted GPAs than residential students with level of academic challenge as a moderator variable, students in both living environments benefited from level of academic challenge. Our conclusion is the primary determining variable for predicting academic success may not be living arrangement but rather level of academic challenge. Results suggest when institutions promote high student achievement, academic effort, and academic expectations, students will demonstrate higher levels of academic performance regardless of living arrangement.

### **Limitations**

We must address three limitations in this study. First, the findings from the study were limited to students who participated in the NSSE in 2010 at one institution and are not generalizable to other student populations. Furthermore, we did not have access to the most recent NSSE data collected by the institution at the time of the study and could only use the NSSE data available to us, which was from the 2009 to 2010 academic year. Second, the instrument used to measure student engagement does not include all characteristics of student engagement, nor is the NSSE the only measurement tool available to assess student engagement. Finally, although the researchers included age, gender, race/ethnicity, and characteristics of student engagement as moderator variables in the study, the researchers did not control for or explore other confounding variables that could have influenced the results of the study. For example, Shudde (2016) proposes factors like family income and differences in cultural values have more implications on the positive effects of living on campus

than initially believed. As such, this study cannot be used to describe a causal relationship between living arrangement and academic performance.

## Suggestions for Future Research

The approach used in this study to understand the relationship between living arrangement, academic performance, and student engagement was quantitative. We encourage a replication of the study with the most current NSSE data and suggest a mixed methods or qualitative study to explore how students actually experience their living environments within the context of how living environments influence academic performance and student engagement. Phenomenology could also serve as the design strategy for a future study, as this tradition best allows the researcher to understand the direct experiences of students within their own worlds (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Although no significance regarding student engagement existed in this study, prior research suggests more studies are needed to fully understand the relationship between living arrangement, academic performance, and student engagement (e.g., Arboleda et al., 2003; Blimling, 1993; Flowers, 2004; Hu, 2002; Kuh, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Although characteristics of student engagement served as moderator variables in this study, student engagement could serve as a focal point for a future study. As student engagement continues to evolve, as with the updates of more recent NSSE outcomes and findings, it is important to continue to understand how student engagement, whether in and of itself or as a moderator of living arrangement, influences academic performance. Likewise, a future study could use student engagement as an independent variable, living arrangement as a moderator variable, and academic performance as a dependent variable.

Tinto (1993) described characteristics of student engagement as a positive influence on degree completion. Student engagement also plays a role in whether students persist to degree completion. Not enough attention focuses on how student engagement influences how students become academically and socially successful, develop a sense of belonging within the campus community, and persist to degree completion (Berger & Milem, 1999). A future study could examine how living arrangement and student engagement not only influence academic performance but also influence how students develop within and connect to their campus environment and persist to degree completion. Other factors, such as ACT/SAT scores, academic performance during high school, intrinsic motivation, and other characteristics, could also influence participants' academic performance; however, these variables were not included in the study.

Most importantly, additional research is still needed to address how age, gender, and race/ethnicity moderate the relationship between academic performance and living arrangement (Astin, 1993; Blimling, 1989; Flowers, 2004; Flowers & Pascarella, 1999; Johnson, 2014; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Wood, 2014).

Although the outcomes of this study did not conclude an advantage or a disadvantage to age, gender, or race/ethnicity related to living arrangement and academic performance, the topic is still important in order to understand the influences of academic performance and living arrangement for underrepresented student populations. Specifically related to gender and race/ethnicity, implications from future studies on this topic could be used to further examine the sense of belonging and retention rates for such students.

## **Conclusion and Implications**

We discovered student learning is not simply derived from the bricks and mortar in which students live and learn; it is rather how intensely students, regardless of place of residence, choose to engage in the learning process. One of the most important findings of this study is although commuter students earned higher GPAs than residential students, when the level of academic challenge was added as a moderator variable, students in both living environments benefited. The results of the questionnaire used in this study indicated participants spent on average “Quite a bit” of time on activities related to academic performance, such as analyzing ideas, organizing information, and applying theories, and 6 to 10 hours a week preparing for class through reading, writing, completing homework, and other activities related to academic performance (NSSE, 2011b). Participants also reported the institution emphasized the importance of spending “Quite a bit” of time on activities related to academic performance, such as studying and engagement in academic work (NSSE, 2011b). We can conclude from this study when students feel challenged by their academic rigor and institutional leaders emphasize high student achievement, it is more probable most students will demonstrate higher levels of academic performance, regardless of living arrangement.

Commuter students strategically utilize on-campus academic support services when compared with residential students because their time spent on campus is limited (Laskey & Hetzel, 2011). This supports Astin’s notion that students’ success in college is determined by how much time and energy they put into the experience (Astin, 1984). However, because institutions are also responsible for how students engage within the college environment, it is important for faculty and administrators to consider how commuter students can engage with academic support when off campus. Offering academic and student support services online and during nontraditional business hours is one way to help commuter students stay connected to their college experience even when they are not within the boundaries of the campus.

An example of the role student affairs staff can play in level of academic challenge is through the development of learning communities (e.g., Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pike et al., 2011). Learning communities can become more accessible to commuter students by offering flexibility within linked course offerings, including offering courses at night, online,

and on the weekends, and opportunities to engage with peers outside of the classroom around academic content. Both residential, particularly with the addition of a living-learning component, and commuter students can benefit from these programs. Student affairs administrators can take primary responsibility for organizing small group participation and facilitating opportunities for cocurricular learning.

A final way institutions can encourage high levels of academic challenge for first-year students is to connect them to upper-class mentors with similar majors and academic interests (Jacoby, 2000; NSSE, 2011a). First-year students can learn from their upper-class peers about student issues, such as time management, effective study habits, and transitioning from high school to college while commuting to or living on campus. At the same time, serving as mentors for their first-year counterparts provide upper-class students with an opportunity to engage in and connect to the college environment.

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**Denise Balfour Simpson**, PhD, currently serves as the Dean of Students at Johnson and Wales University – Charlotte Campus in Charlotte, North Carolina, where she oversees athletics, residential life, student involvement and leadership, health services, counseling services, and student conduct. Previously, she served as the Director for Student Conduct at the University of Kentucky and has additional experiences in residence life, campus recreation, and student involvement. Simpson received her PhD from Old Dominion University in higher education, her MEd in educational leadership from the University of Nevada Las Vegas, and her BA in psychology and

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**Dana Burnett**, PhD, currently serves as a professor of Practice Emeritus in the Darden College of Education at Old Dominion University. He started his student affairs career at Old Dominion University (ODU) in 1972 as the Director of Financial Aid and Placement. He then led ODU's student body for over 30 years from being named Dean of Student Affairs in 1974, to when he became Vice President for Student Affairs 1984, to when he eventually transitioned to the higher education program faculty in 2006. It was in his latest role at ODU where he served as both department chair (2006–2011) and faculty member (2006–present). Dana Burnett retired from ODU in 2016. He has a bachelor's degree from Allegheny College and his master's and PhD in education from Indiana University.