


Allison Block is a first-year graduate student pursuing dual master's degrees in the Schools of Education and Journalism. After earning a B.A. in English from the University of California, Berkeley in 1986, she split six years between the East and West coast, working as a public relations executive in Hollywood and Boston and as a writer and editor at Harvard University and the University of California, Berkeley. Allison hopes to complete her degrees by the turn of the century, at which time she will pursue a career in university publications or public relations. She is co-editor of the 1992-93 IUSPA Journal.

Meeting Institutional Goals Through Coeducational Living

Cherie Blankenbuehler
Michael Covert
Michael Dean
Patricia Wolfe

A considerable amount of research has been conducted on the impact of college living environments on student development. Students who live in residence halls are more satisfied with their institution, more involved in campus activities, and earn better grades than their off-campus counterparts (Kuh, 1981). On-campus living fosters increased social interaction, enhanced self-concept, and a broadened political viewpoint; it also encourages higher academic goals (Moos & Otto, 1975). It is perhaps surprising, therefore, that relatively few studies have dealt specifically with the effects of coeducational living within the residence halls (Corbett & Sommer, 1972; Moos & Otto, 1975).

The purpose of this study was to compare the Indiana University Department of Residence Life and the Halls of Residence's goals for the coeducational living unit, Teter-Thompson-Four, with the behaviors and perceptions of the students who live there.

This paper will first provide a brief background of the coeducational living unit in Teter Quadrangle. Second, a review of the literature concerning coeducational arrangements will be presented. Third, the methods for gathering and analyzing the data are described. Finally, a discussion of results and a series of recommendations will be provided.

At the time of this study, coeducational floors were in their second year of existence on the Indiana University-Bloomington campus. It was also the second year for the coeducational floor in Teter Quadrangle. Only three other coeducational floors in the undergraduate halls existed and, like Teter Quadrangle, all housed upperclass students. The research team believed this was an appropriate time to conduct a comparison study between the institutional goals and the student behaviors and perceptions of this pilot environment. The group hypothesized there would be a very close match as a result of the influence of the environment on behavior and perceptions.

The Department of Residence Life and Halls of Residence determine the policies and procedures to be followed in housing units which students occupy. The Department of Residence Life deals mainly with student life issues, while Halls of Residence handles facilities management and maintenance of the buildings. Their combined goals, described in this paper, were designed to facilitate the development of communities which complement and support the academic mission of the institution. The goals were campus-wide and enforcement of policies was expected in all residence halls. Students may influence policies through unit agreements, community councils, and hall
government bodies. Briefly, the goals focused on creating learning environments which foster acceptance and understanding of differences among people; providing programs and interventions based on student needs; and providing a clean, safe, healthy living environment (Indiana University, Department of Residence Life Staff Manual, 1992).

Review of Literature

Coeducational living units were introduced to college and university residence halls in the early 1960's. The general goals for such environments were to facilitate more informed male-female relationships (MacInnis, Byrne, & Fraser, 1980; Moos & Otto, 1975; Reid, 1976) and to encourage sex role exploitation (Buckner, 1981). The staffs of residence life, as well as housing and operations, hoped that the coeducational setting would "lead to more mature behavior with less horseplay than is found in dorms of all one sex" (Corbett & Sommer, 1972, p. 215).

Overall, most research measuring impact on these areas is very positive. Buckner (1981) reported a strong sense of community on coeducational floors, with frequent, lively discussions about gender roles. A study by MacInnis, Byrne, and Fraser (1980) found that the students, their parents, faculty and staff, as well as the community in general, all approved of the coeducational living unit and its effects.

Research has also focused specifically on the effects of coeducational living on women. Compared with single-sex floors, coeducational living is significantly more enjoyable and satisfying for females (Reid, 1976; Moos and Otto, 1975). Specifically, women in coeducational units perceived a greater emphasis on involvement, independence, and innovation, and less emphasis on traditional social interaction (Moos & Otto, 1975). Not all of the research, however, indicated positive effects on women. According to Berg (1988) and Moos and Otto (1975) the coeducational environment may be more stressful for some individuals, especially women.

A multiple perspectives approach provided a theoretical framework for assessing the environment. Specifically, the perceptual model, the human aggregate approach, and the campus ecology perspective helped describe and analyze the coeducational floor and the students who lived there.

Methods

Twenty-one men and nineteen women living on Teter-Thompson-Four during the Fall 1992 semester participated in the study. At the time, Teter-Thompson-Four was the only coeducational unit in Teter Quadrangle. While the majority of residents in Teter Quadrangle were first-year students, all students on the coeducational floor were required to be upper-class undergraduates. Most students who lived on the floor requested the coeducational environment. The floor was coeducational by room, with men and women from varying academic majors living next door to each other in alternating rooms. The average age was 19.8 years.

1992-93 Edition

The Housing Director, Director of Residence Life, and the Residence Life Coordinator of Teter Quadrangle participated in interview sessions to gather information about the goals and objectives for the coeducational floor. An interview was also conducted with the Resident Assistant (RA) to obtain her observations as both a staff member and a member of the floor.

Participation in the study was voluntary. A floor meeting was held in early October enabling students to meet the research team and learn about the purpose and logistics of the study. All 40 students on the floor agreed to participate and said they felt comfortable having their behaviors observed throughout the semester. In late October, 31 students (77% of the floor) signed consent forms and completed a written questionnaire. Twenty students (50%) participated in a group interview session in early November.

Weekly observations were conducted in two-hour time spans throughout October and November. The researchers focused on the social interaction between floor members, the dominant behaviors of the students, and the sense of community on the floor.

Items generated for the written questionnaire were based on the aforementioned literature review, two of the authors' prior experiences as residents of coeducational floors, and the interviews conducted with the Director of Residence Life, the Residence Life Coordinator, and the Housing Director of Teter Quadrangle. Participants responded to 30 items and an open-ended question: "The most important reason I chose to live on the co-ed floor is..."

To assess the possible relationship between the students' individual personality types and their perceptions of the coeducational environment and its effects on their development, a modified form of the 1985 Holland Self-Directed Search was administered as part of the written questionnaire. This inventory offers insight into personality type.

The data from the written questionnaires was analyzed by tallying the most frequent responses by the men and the women separately. Answers to questions were then grouped into one of six areas: (a) interpersonal relations and social life, (b) programming, (c) gender issues, (d) academics, (e) maintenance, and (f) safety issues. These six areas corresponded with the goals and objectives of the Department of Residence Life and Halls of Residence. Items most frequently eliciting responses of "agree" or "strongly agree" were considered a match with the departments' goals. Items prompting the most frequent response of "undecided" were addressed during the group interview session for clarification. Items with responses of "disagree" or "strongly disagree" were not considered a match.

Content areas included perceptions of (a) interpersonal relations and social life, (b) satisfaction with programs or activities designed to meet the needs of the floor, (c) gender issues, (d) academic performance and achievement, (e) concern and care for the physical environment of the floor, and (f) safety and security of the residents. Response choices to such items were presented on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" (5) to "strongly disagree" (1).

The group interview was conducted in an open forum session between the four researchers and the students. Since some interview questions involved the enforcement of policies, and the researchers believed that an RA's presence
might influence their responses, the resident assistant did not participate in this meeting.

Obvious limitations to this study should be noted. The researchers were given a three-month time period to complete the entire study, therefore limiting the number of interviews and observations that could be conducted. In addition, the team did not have adequate time to include an assessment of all four coeducational units at Indiana University.

Results

Holland Self-Directed Search

The Holland Self-Directed Search describes personality profiles in terms of the types of activities people enjoy. The six profiles are Realistic (R), Investigative (I), Artistic (A), Social (S), Enterprising (E), and Conventional (C). When ranking categories, participants often indicated a "tie" among their top choices. For some, this resulted in skewed percentages (over 100%).

Realistic activities, which include mechanical and technical tasks, were the top choice for 3%, within the top two choices for 10%, and in the top three choices for 29% of the participants. Investigative activities, which include doing research and solving math problems, were considered the most enjoyable for 6%, within the top two choices for 13%, and in the top three choices for 26% of the participants. Artistic activities, which include drama and painting, were the favorite of 13%, within the top two choices for 45%, and within the top three choices for 68% of the participants. Social activities, which include helping others, were the top choice for 74%, in the top two for 95%, and in the top three choices for 97% of the participants. Conventional activities, which include giving talks and supervising others, were rated most enjoyable by 42%, in the top two choices of 58%, and in the top three choices of 81% of the participants. Conventional activities, which include bookkeeping and filing reports, were the top choice of 6%, in the top two choices for 13%, and within the top three choices for 23% of the participants. There were no significant differences in rankings between men and women. The dominant Holland personality type of the participants was Social, Enterprising, and Artistic (SEA).

Teter-Thompson-Four Quality of Floor Life Survey (TTFQFLS)

The responses to the TTFQFLS were analyzed by determining the most frequent response to each question by men, women, and the total population.

Social Life. Men and women strongly agree that the coeducational floor was a "friendly and supportive place to live," and either agreed or strongly agreed that it was a "very close community" and a place "where I have made many friends of the opposite sex." Overall, both agreed they spent most of their social time on the floor. Men disagreed that it was where most of their friends live, while women were undecided.

The participants were very satisfied with the social life on the floor, thus matching the Department of Residence Life's goals for social interaction. This was evident in the amount of noise that could be heard on the floor during the observations, the number of residents' doors open during the day, the number of activities occurring, and the students' comments during the interviews. For example, one resident stated, "This is the most social floor that I have ever lived on." The level of activity on the floor varied little between weekdays and weekends. Men did not feel like most of their friends lived on the floor, while most of the women did. While the researchers were unable to conclude why this occurred, they noticed that it did not damage the overall social aspect of the floor.

The interactions of residents from opposite ends of the hall were another indicator of the floor's social nature. Traditionally, the restrooms form a barrier to communication and interaction by separating one side of the floor from the other. The observations showed that there was no such "bathroom barrier" on Teter-Thompson-Four. Many residents developed relationships at both ends of the floor.

It was unclear if the strong social aspect of the floor was due to the student composition or the fact that they had bonded together as a result of being isolated from the rest of Teter Quadrangle. They could not find another floor to pair with them at Homecoming and were joked about by residents who lived on other floors. Another factor that may have brought the residents together in a social manner was a resident who lived on another floor but spent most of his time on Teter-Thompson-Four. He constantly moved from room to room talking with residents. This behavior often encouraged others to join the conversation.

Programming. According to participants' responses, the coeducational floor did not meet the programming goals of the Department of Residence Life. Men and women disagreed that they had attended Teter-Thompson-Four sponsored activities or programs, and were undecided about whether the floor had an "active floor government." Men were undecided about whether Teter-Thompson-Four was "currently planning activities they would be interested in attending." Finally, although men and women disagreed about their level of involvement in planning educational programs, both agreed that residents were involved in planning social activities for the floor.

The results showed that very little planned programming occurred on the floor. The residents believed that there were lots of social activities, but not many educational programs. It was not known whether this was influenced by the residents (all upperclass students who felt that they did not need planned programming), or due to an influence of the coeducational environment. Whatever the case, the results showed that more programming needs to be done to meet the departmental goals.

Gender Issues. Women strongly agreed that living on Teter-Thompson-Four helped them feel more comfortable around men. Men, however, were undecided about feeling more comfortable around women. Both men and women agreed that the coeducational floor had helped them learn more about the opinions of the opposite sex, and that gender issues were discussed on Teter-Thompson-Four. Men were undecided as to how a coeducational floor had influenced their attitudes about dating, and disagreed that their dating behaviors were influenced. Women, however, agreed that living on Teter-Thompson-Four influenced both their attitudes and behaviors about dating.
Research results showed a strong match in the area of gender issues. While there were no departmental goals for the floor in this area, the researchers had several assumptions prior to the assessment. It was thought that the students would learn more about the opposite gender and as a result, feel more comfortable in relationships with them. The survey results and researchers' observations confirmed this to be true. Men and women were frequently found in the halls or each other's rooms talking about different issues. One student noted, "I think freshman guys have a lot of preconceived ideas about women that I think some women on our floor could really help change." One observation, however, was that during meal times, men generally ate with men and women ate with women. Occasionally, there would be a mixed group, but during most of the scheduled meal time observations, there was little interaction. Men often gathered to play video games before meals and then went to the dining hall together.

Academics. Men and women agreed that Teter-Thompson-Four was a "supportive environment for studying" and "open to forming study groups." Overall, both men and women disagreed that the coeducational floor adhered to the quiet hours policy, though the men were more likely to feel that the rule was followed. Likewise, men were unsure whether the floor was "competitive when it comes to grades," while the women most frequently disagreed with the statement.

The results showed that the floor matched the goals of the department. Recognizing the importance of grades, the students cooperated with each other when others needed the floor to be quiet for studying and fostered a non-competitive attitude that allowed them to form study groups and help each other. One area not directly related to academics but affecting residents nonetheless was quiet hours. In this area, the results showed that there was not a match between the behavior and the goals. Quiet hours were not thought to be enforced by most of the floor, except by the men who were responsible for the noise. This issue of noise could have posed a problem with academics, but the students seemed to cope with it.

Maintenance. Men and women agreed that Teter-Thompson-Four was "clean," "kept neat by residents," "has a comfortable lounge," "has few damages caused by residents," and was "an attractive living environment." This was also seen in observations of people keeping the bathrooms and lounge clean. According to the Housing Manager, the other four floors in Teter-Thompson had assessed a total of $2000 in damages during the fall semester, but the coeducational floor had not been responsible for any (C. Graber, personal communication, November 18, 1992). The students seemed to have a positive effect on each other in the area of damages and damage control. These results reveal a strong match in the area of maintenance.

Safety. Men and women both felt that Teter-Thompson-Four was a safe environment, and that they looked out for each other's personal safety; however, both disagreed, (men strongly), that the escort policy was enforced, and were undecided or disagreed that they confronted strangers on their floor. Men were more compelled to lock their room doors when leaving the floor, while women were undecided on the issue. The coeducational floor met the goals of the

Implications and Recommendations

Overall the goals of the Department of Residence Life for the coeducational living unit were met and residents were satisfied with the environment and, in particular, social life, gender issues, academics, maintenance, and safety. Programming goals, however, were not met on Teter-Thompson-Four. There were no significant differences in overall satisfaction with the floor based on personality type, gender, or age.

In order to continue to meet the goals and improve the quality of life on coeducational floors, the following recommendations should be considered.

1. The results of our study indicate that the students were largely satisfied with the coeducational living environment in Teter Quadrangle. Increasing the number of coeducational units in Teter Quadrangle, as well as in other residence centers, would help eliminate some of the feelings of "being set apart."

2. The Department of Residence Life should be proactive in the establishment and maintenance of coeducational living units. Specifically, time should be given to establishing goals, training staff, and planning educational interventions on the floor.

3. More training with staff members, especially the resident assistant, could be conducted so that they can better address issues such as gender in the unit.

4. The escort policy needs to be examined to determine how it should be implemented and enforced on a coeducational unit.

5. The Department of Residence Life should not rely on the coeducational setting to facilitate growth and development by itself. The Department should provide educational interventions for residents before and after they move onto the floor.

6. An assessment and evaluation of the types of students and their motivations for living on a coeducational unit could be done so that a better match between the environment and the individual can be made.

Conclusion

Research results reflected the need for further research on college coeducational living environments in order to best implement the coeducational floors at Indiana University. This research should be designed to find better ways to prepare the residents, the RA, and other members of the building for life
on a coeducational unit. The results showed that the environment was having a positive effect on the residents, but could be improved, especially in the area of planned programming. Overall, the residents of the floor had a very positive effect on each other and, as a result, most all of the goals of the Department of Residence Life and Halls of Residence were successfully realized.

References


Cherie Blankenbuehler is a second-year master's student in CSPA. She completed her B.A. in English Composition with a minor in Education at DePauw University in 1991. She has served as a Graduate Resident Assistant in Forest Quadrangle and an Assistant Coordinator in Read Center. She plans to continue her work in student affairs.

Michael Covert is a second-year master's student in CSPA. He completed his B.A. in Psychology with a minor in Business Administration at Transylvania University in 1991. He has served as an Assistant Coordinator in Read Center for the past two years. He plans to pursue a career in student affairs.

Michael Dean is a second year master's student in CSPA. He completed his B.A. in Social Science at California State University at Chico in 1990. He has served as an Assistant Coordinator in Read Center for the past two years. He plans to continue his work in student affairs.

1992-93 Edition

as an Assistant Coordinator in Teter Quadrangle for the past two years. He plans to continue his work in student affairs.

Patricia Wolfe is a second-year master's student in CSPA. She completed her B.A. in Elementary and Special Education at Providence College in 1991. She has served as a Graduate Resident Assistant in Forest Quadrangle and an Assistant Coordinator in Teter Quadrangle. She plans to pursue a career in student affairs.