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Title: Freshmen's First Impressions: Racial Divisions in University Housing

About the Author:

Keywords:

Abstract: In an attempt to reveal how students, specifically freshmen, view racial divisions in university housing, I surveyed, observed, and interviewed students who live in different buildings. Although many similar observations were made by students in regards to the racial patterns themselves, their theories of why they exist greatly varied.

Initial Exercises:

Question:

Plan:

Data:

Discuss: When a high school student takes his first tour of the campus, there is just so much to take in. From the enormity of the buildings, to the ridiculous size of the campus, to the half naked bodies soaking in the sun in the middle of the quad, the university just can't help but to distract the students from observing all important aspects of the campus. Questions in regards to class size and dormitory size are never forgotten. The I-guide is of course informative and knows the answer to every single generic question he has been prepared well for, and can even answer them while walking backwards and projecting his voice so that the twenty something number of students and parents can hear. Throughout the tour each student is attempting to imagine him or herself as a part of the campus. Thoughts such as, "That could be me sun tanning in the middle of the quad," while walking along it, or "I could see myself living in that dorm," while touring Illinois Street Residency (ISR) fill the minds of these students. For the high school students, the purpose of this tour is to gain an idea of what the school is like, what kinds of people attend, and most importantly--whether or not they could picture themselves being one of those people. In all of the frenzy of figuring this out, the question of diversity within the university is sometimes asked, but the seemingly

confident answer of “It is pretty diverse,” given by the I-Guide is not always further questioned. Throughout the tour do minority parents observe that the University of Illinois minority students are limited, and that the few that there are appear to be walking around in groups? Every family is different, but I know that my mother did make these observations, and that my father was the parent in our tour group who asked that question about diversity. Keeping my parents’ observations in mind, I still decided to attend the University of Illinois, knowing that being a minority in a school was nothing new to me. Having attended a predominantly white high school, there was nothing to fear.

However, figuring out exactly where race does play a significant role within the university is something that is eventually done by each student. For freshmen that come into their first year expecting there to be a Caucasian majority, it takes some time to realize that each space within the university is racially defined, and that although Caucasian majorities exist in most places, they do not exist everywhere. The specialty restaurants at different dining halls such as “The Soul Ingredient,” and “Fat Don’s” are clear indicators of assumptions made not only of the students’ races, but of their food preferences as a result of their race, within university housing. Students should ask themselves why “soul food” is served at Florida Avenue Residency (FAR) while steak is served at Peabody (located within what is being attempted to be renamed as Ikenberry Commons, but is still referred to with the more colloquial term of the Six Pack). These assumptions do not, unfortunately, appear out of thin air, and if students were to take a second glance at their surroundings while in different dormitories, they would realize where they come from. For Rebekah Nathan, the author of *My Freshman Year, What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student*, a place where these implied racial divisions are apparent is in the dining hall. Nathan reports that there are enormous differences in the diversity experiences of dominant and non dominant groups. She found that minorities are ten times more likely than Caucasians to be the only person of a different race at the table. Thus, although diversity is claimed to exist at the university, the word is obviously defined under loose conditions. For me, the racial divisions within university housing became apparent once I began visiting friends in other dorms, only to realize how different the make up of each one really was. This quickly brought to light to me, a place where race definitely played a role. For most students, visiting different dormitories is a very direct way of realizing where racial segregation does in fact exist

within the university. The real question at hand, is how does this realization affect a freshman's impression of this allegedly great institution?

In order to answer this question, I decided to use three methodologies: interviews, observations, and surveys.

Observations allow the onlooker to gain an insight regarding routine interactions that would otherwise go unnoticed by the naked eye. For, at times seemingly unimportant interactions take place around us that are actually incredibly significant, and with close observation, great knowledge can be gained by the observer. Interviews on the other hand, allow for a first person account of different topics and for unique anecdotes that reveal so much more than statistics ever would. Also, with the right questions, interviews are a perfect way to get a good idea not only of the views of different people, but of how their views are developed. Although surveys do not reveal such detailed information, with enough of them, the reader can gain an understanding of what the general opinions of others are and how many people share similar ones. Unfortunately, exactly why people feel a certain way is not revealed through this methodology.

However, combining these three methodologies produces a plethora of information as well as great insight regarding the topic.

The first methodology I employed was that of observation. I wanted to be better informed of the make up of different dormitories and of their social structuring prior to conducting interviews. I first decided to observe the racial separation within social places in different dormitories. This took me to the front lawn of Ikenberry Commons on the first warm Friday of the spring. There were students playing Frisbee, tanning on the grass, and sipping smoothies on picnic tables. All of these students shared one thing in common, their Caucasian race. The group of people tanning were all female, the Frisbee game had four males and two females, and the two individuals enjoying smoothies were male and female. After observing the Frisbee game for fifteen minutes, a group of twelve students and a very young African American instructor came out to gather in a circle underneath a tree. What appeared to be a class taking advantage of the pleasant weather, had the only non Caucasian students in sight at Ikenberry Commons. In addition to Caucasians, there were Asian-American, African-American, Latino/Latina, and Middle Eastern students all sitting together in this circle, and the diversity of this group was very apparent in this setting. The class stayed for fifteen minutes and was dismissed, only to reveal that only two of the students

walked off together, two Asian students. The rest of the students went in their own direction, and very few of them even said good-bye to each other. It was clear that the extent of these interracial interactions ended the moment class was dismissed and that even though these students must have at least lived in the same building since they were assumed to be taking a class at Weston, a living learning community within Ikenberry Commons, they were little more than strangers.

From there I traveled to the main lobby of FAR, one of dorms that is furthest away from the quad, located on the corner of Lincoln and Florida Avenues. The only other person sitting alone was an African American male who was on the phone at the time and the only other person that was doing work was a Caucasian female who approached me and asked me to fill out a diversity survey for a class of her own, saying that she doesn't like approaching people in groups, and was happy to see me sitting alone. During the next half hour I realized that all were in groups, which was why she had a few friends with her to approach those allegedly intimidating individuals in groups she had referred to. Ironically, she had put herself in a group to avoid facing other groups alone. The groups of people that did inhabit the lobby could be very obviously categorized by race. There were mixtures of gender, but mostly within the same race. There were however, many different races within the lobby. The desk clerk was an African-American male, there were groups of Asian-Americans, Latinos, Caucasians, and African-Americans both loitering and exiting/entering the lobby. The largest apparent group of people was a group of seven Asian-American students who were exiting the building, stopping in front of the doors to chat with each other. The diversity of races within this university space were in vain since there was only one interracial social interaction within my forty five minute observation--one. The fact that such an array of individuals share this one lobby, enter and exit through the same doors, and live on the same premises does not appear to be influencing any kind of interracial social interactions at FAR. At least the make up of this dormitory gives the illusion of diversity. However, my observations appeared to reveal quite the opposite. I decided to further my investigation by conducting a survey at Lincoln Avenue Residency (LAR), Allen Hall, and ISR. The survey asked the students to identify their race, dormitory, to rank each racial group in order of their presence within their own dormitory, and what, if any racial patterns they have noticed within university housing. The ladies living at LAR reported a Caucasian and Asian

majority, then African Americans, and last were Latino/Latinas. At Allen Hall a Caucasian majority was reported, out of which many wrote on their surveys that they were mostly of Jewish descent, followed by Asian Americans, African Americans, and finally Latino/Latinas. At ISR Asian Americans were reported as the majority, followed by Caucasians, African Americans, and as last yet again, Latino/Latinas. Although the residents of each dormitory reported slightly different orders, the pattern of Latino/Latinas being least represented was evident throughout. Another consistent revelation within the survey was through a more open ended question:

“Do you feel that there is a majority of certain races in certain dormitories? If so, where?” To this, many responded by stating that minorities usually reside in Florida Avenue Residency (FAR) and Pennsylvania Avenue Residency (PAR). Students also stated that Asian American students live at ISR, and that Caucasians live at Ikenberry Commons. Although the answers to this question left out many of the other dormitories, at least one of these patterns was always recorded by those surveyed. The survey allowed me to gather information about the views of the residents living in other dormitories. The fact that similar patterns were observed by these different residents clearly displays the very apparent racial divisions within university housing. Now that I had learned that students had in fact noticed these division, I wanted to investigate why they thought these division existed.

Isaly Zuniga, a freshman resident of FAR, born in Cuba and raised in Chicago, guided me through the true social dynamics of FAR student life through an interview. Zuniga came to live at FAR because she had heard from the sibling of a friend that there was a program for women in Math, Science, and Engineering, WIMSE, within this dormitory. As a soon to be engineering major, such a dormitory seemed like a good fit for her. She heard these students were housed in a certain section and were provided with tutors and the opportunity to have easy access to other female students in their same field of study to do homework with, for classes they may share. Prepared to live with a close friend from high school who had a major in the sciences, Zuniga decided to put FAR down as her third choice, keeping in mind the long walk it would be from FAR to the quad but not forgetting the perk of air conditioning it came with either. Her first choice of ISR was due to its short distance from the quad in addition to the fact that it was air conditioned, and her second choice of LAR was because she had been told that it had the biggest rooms. Zuniga does not know

why she was assigned to live at FAR, but does not feel that the university intentionally placed her with other minority students at FAR either. However, she feels that the university isn't trying to do anything about racial divisions, or that they should for that matter. She feels that on the contrary the university tried to the best of its ability to encourage students to meet new and different people through the many activities it hosted during welcome week. For not only did she attend those events, but she also attended the many events hosted by WIMSE as well. Unfortunately, these events did not help her during the first month's adaptation period.

"My first month was horrible. I cried every night that first month and my roommate probably cried every night of the entire first semester. We just weren't used to being away from our homes, and the new people we had met at those events were just acquaintances, it wasn't like we had even been able to make any real connections with new people."

The only person Zuniga met during her first month that she developed a relationship with was through a friend of her roommate. This one person she met introduced her to an array of diverse people from this person's floor. This is the main place where her social interactions came from other than academically based interactions. As an engineering major a large amount of her time is devoted to school work, leaving her social interactions very limited. Even with such limits, it didn't take long for Zuniga to realize the existence of racial divisions even within her own building within the first few weeks.

"I noticed that cliques were already formed: the black clique, the Asian clique, the Middle Eastern clique I guess, and the Latinos were just kind of non existent. They are really rare everywhere on campus. I don't really know any other Hispanics here other than my friends from high school. It might be because FAR is considered predominantly Black and Asian that they live there. At PAR there's more of a mix, its not like the six pack at all. When I go to Fat Don's I am completely surrounded by white people. I think they stick together, probably because it is the party dorm. White people, when they think of college, they think of partying and stuff. It's not that they don't take school seriously, it's just that they like to party, and know more people that have already been to college, maybe even U of I, and know where to live if looking for a good time. I only knew one girl who went here when I was applying, and even she wasn't even someone I knew well at all."

Zuniga appears to have an elaborate theory on the housing

selection process, and although much of it appears to be based on stereotypes and generalizations, the fact that she has been a UIUC student for less than one year and has already noticed racial divisions is a clear indication of the fact that they not only exist, but are extremely apparent. Even though she has in fact noticed divisions and is aware of the fact that nothing is being done about these divisions, she does not seem in any way motivated to object. She instead accepts this matter as one in which little can or should be done.

“You are attracted to people who you share interests with. People have friends of other races, but at the end of the day people are just from different cultures and have different experiences. Bonds are formed based on whatever common ground people have, and sometimes because people are of the same race there is just more common ground that exists.”

A neighboring student, Marco Aguilar, makes similar observations. Aguilar, a Mexican born freshman raised on the North side of Chicago, has also noted racial divisions throughout his first year. Aguilar came to live at Pennsylvania Avenue Residency (PAR) through no choice of his own. Aguilar had accepted the offer to attend UIUC, but had not applied for university housing.

“My parents didn’t push me to do anything college related. I had to take initiative and get all of my applications together. I don’t know why exactly I didn’t apply for housing, I guess I really do procrastinate a lot. In comparison to the applications themselves, it just didn’t seem that important.”

During summer registration someone who worked at the university assigned him to live at PAR and he had no other option than to accept. Having never heard of any of the dorms, Aguilar had no reason to object either. Aguilar likes living at PAR, and other than the long distance from the quad, finds no faults with the dormitory. On the contrary, he has really enjoyed his experiences at PAR, especially liking the exposure he has gotten to diverse people. His roommate, an international student, has contributed greatly to this. He feels that PAR is a lot more diverse than other dorms like Ikenberry Commons, and that it could be due to the fact that PAR intentionally concentrates on promoting diversity, while other dormitories do not.

“I don’t think that minorities are placed in PAR/FAR on purpose, it just works out that way. Especially at PAR because they focus so much on promoting diversity through Intersections, but I don’t really know why FAR is so diverse too. I go to the six pack to eat sometimes and it is really white there. There are white people at

PAR too, and most of the friends that I have made are white and Asian. I make friends with people who have similar interests as me. I met a lot of Asian students through my roommate, and we have things in common. We go play soccer together and race doesn't play any kind of role at all."

Aguilar says that Latinos have a very small presence with the university, and that when they are seen they travel in groups, like most other races do too. He says that people of the same race feel more comfortable with each other sometimes than they do with other people. He states that his own sense of personal security leave him as an exception to this generalization however. Aguilar doesn't feel that the minorities were placed in certain dorms intentionally, but does feel that something should be done to bring more diversity in other dormitories.

"Although programs like Intersections seem like a good idea, it is counterproductive when you think about it. By putting all of the international students together, not only are you taking away from their abilities to get a better sense of American culture, but you aren't allowing less cultured students in other dorms to get to know them either. I don't know what should be done exactly, but something should be done by the university."

Aguilar's short time in university housing has allowed him to not only make observations, but to gain enough experience necessary to formulate an opinion. This tells us that the division is extremely evident and hard to miss by the average student.

A different perspective is given by another Latino student, Carlos Rivas who lives in Snyder Hall, a substance free residency at Ikenberry Commons. Rivas, from Chicago, came to live at Snyder because he was drawn to the fact that is substance free. To avoid a "party" dorm, Rivas selected one in which he would be surrounded by others who shared similar alcoholic tendencies, or a lack there of. Rivas is a second generation Puerto Rican American who feels out of touch with his alleged culture.

"My family is more white American than anything else. We don't have any Puerto Rican culture in our household really--no Spanish language, no Puerto Rican food, no customs at all."

Rivas was first attracted to the university's elite engineering program and was soon recruited to the organization, SHPE, Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers. SHPE is the first Latino organization Rivas has ever been a part of. Rivas attended a predominantly white high school, and even there was only a member of sports teams, never of ethnically based organizations. "SHPE allowed for me to have interactions with other Hispanics for

the first time. However, they only became acquaintances and people I just see at SHPE meetings. I don't know why really but the friends I made that I consider real friends live in my dorm, Snyder, and are predominantly Asian and White. I don't think my floor is only white people. I'd like to think of it as being diverse, but I guess it really only is White and Asian."

Rivas's social interactions during welcome week were limited due to the fact that he already felt socially secure, attending all of the festivities with his girlfriend of one year. Rivas really was here mainly because of the highly esteemed engineering program and to establish the networking needed to ensure job security at the end of his college career. It is obvious that Rivas, living at Ikenberry Commons, considering his family "white," and with such a time consuming major, would have little time to become aware of racial divisions. However, these time consuming obligations were not enough to keep Rivas oblivious of anything.

"I like the Six Pack, but I do go to other places to eat. It is just more convenient sometimes, especially when I want to spend time with my girlfriend. She lives at LAR and it is a lot different there. It is really diverse and there are all kinds of people there. When we eat at ISR I feel like there are many Asian American students, and when we eat at PAR we are surrounded by many different minorities. The Six Pack's dining halls have the most white students. I guess people of the same race just flock together."

Having played sports in high school and not finding the opportunity to join any sport at the University of Illinois, Rivas turned to the Activities and Recreation Center (ARC) to play sports at. This is where he observed similar racial divisions to those that exist within University housing.

"Whenever I go to the gym I notice that the guys that play basketball are either all Black or all Asian. Also, people of different races seem to travel together, even the couples. I think that people of the same race come together because people like what they are used to, and they are the most used to themselves."

Rivas's familiarization with the different dorms within university housing has allowed him to make observations in regards to racial divisions that he would otherwise not have been able to make.

"I think that races are all in certain dorms for different reasons. For example, really far dorms like PAR are filled with minorities probably because minorities are usually the last ones to turn in things like housing forms and so they end up in a bad dorm. Probably mostly white people live at the six pack because it is the fun dorm and it attracts more party people."

Despite Rivas's claim of a lack of a "cultured" upbringing, he is still confident enough in his information regarding racial customs to draw generalizations and make conclusions on the logic behind racial divisions. Although living at Ikenberry Commons has not aided his familiarization with living in a diverse place, his exploration of the campus has to the point where he speaks his mind boldly and has confident views regarding the concept of racial divisions.

"People of the same race just share more things in common too. I don't think it is necessarily a bad thing. People should be with whoever they want to be, as long as they aren't intentionally excluding anybody. I don't think that the university can undo the racial division and they probably shouldn't anyways. It isn't having any kind of negative effect anyways. As long as no one is directly discriminated against then there isn't anything actually wrong anyways."

Another Latino inhabitant of Ikenberry Commons, but from the Bensenville area, shares no such confidence in her views regarding racial divisions. Carmen Cruz, a Mexican American student, knew about twenty five individuals from her high school graduating class who were also incoming freshmen this year. Most of them had heard about the "Six Pack" and encouraged her to live there as well. Despite the many people she was at least acquaintances with already, she still didn't enjoy first month, due to feelings of homesickness. As a result, she went home every weekend until she grew accustomed to her new environment. She didn't feel as though she had the necessary intimate friends to successfully become accustomed to everything quickly. Cruz's two roommates and their already established friends quickly became her main sources of social interactions and the open door policy on her floor led her to not only befriend but become close friends with the girl next door.

Cruz does not feel that the university had anything to do with her inability to quickly form bonds with other people. According to Cruz:

"It isn't really up to the university to help me establish lasting friendships. They did successfully welcome all of the freshmen to the university, they just didn't provide real opportunities for students to establish lasting friendships, but I don't know how they really would."

Cruz eventually became familiar with the girls in her specific hallway and knows them well, but is unfamiliar with the rest of the inhabitants of the dorm. Despite this, she doesn't explore other

dormitories much and only knows that the university itself has a majority of Caucasian people, but is unaware of any kind of overwhelming majority of Caucasians specifically at Ikenberry Commons.

“The only pattern at the six pack that I have noticed is the fact that people are looking to go out to party every night. When asked to go out and I reply with a school related excuse, people seem shocked. Its like they don’t really care about school.”

The fact that Cruz is unfamiliar with racial divisions is unsurprising when people take into consideration the fact that she has had no interactions within any other dormitory. The fact that she has never even heard any students discuss this issue does however bring to light the fact that these kinds of issues are not being discussed enough outside of the classroom. Although it seems as though most are at least aware of issues like these, Cruz’s example makes it clearly evident that this is not in fact the case.

From my observations, interviews, and surveys, it is clear that racial division within university housing does exist and that it influences not only the experiences of a freshman, but their impressions of the university itself as well. Even though students have different opinions of the reasons behind racial divisions, common generalizations are at the root of some theories. These generalized theories, in combination with examples such as Cruz’s in which the student is completely unaware of any kind of division, just proves that these issues have to be brought up more both in and out of the classroom. For, something has to get students thinking about these issues, and usually it is different classes that do this. However, if they are only forced to really think about these topics and reflect on them within the class, then they still won’t be applying their knowledge to their every day lives. It is not my intent to prompt the students to protest for more diversity within university housing, for it is unclear if that would be a potentially successfully plan. However, it is imperative for students to at least be aware of the specific racial divisions in the university life they live and from there to decide for themselves whether or not they have a problem with them. For, the question of whether or not these divisions should exist can never be answered if students continue to live in ignorance.

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