Research article

The Role of Student Housing in Student Success: An Ethnographic Account[1]

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Abstract

The role of university student housing in the lives of undergraduate students has changed. While student housing used to be understood only as a space to accommodate students who primarily come from out of town, now universities have started using student housing strategically to advance the success of the students. Student housing is now used to build sustainable living and learning student environments in the interests of promotion of student access and success. Through an ethnographic account, where the researcher spent two consecutive semesters living in an undergraduate university residence which accommodates 577 students, the article provides an 'insider-outsider' interpretation of students' context for success from one of the South African university student residences. This article uses Tinto's theory of student integration model to frame an understanding of students' experiences and perceptions of success. It further highlights socioeconomic hardships as well as stories of caring and partnerships that students experience in their journeys towards success. These student experiences are very relevant to their integration into the university culture and systems and are critically important to the success of the student. This article concludes that the role of student housing is key to student success as it provides various opportunities for support from fellow students and staff.

Keywords

ethnography; student experiences; student housing; student success; university residence

Introduction

This research has been conducted in response to the dearth of research in the field of student accommodation in South Africa, as noted by the Ministerial Report (DHET, 2011). It is also part of the Siyaphumelela ("we succeed") research project, titled *Who are our students? Investigating access and success of undergraduate students* (Xulu-Gama, Nhari, Alcock & Cavanagh, 2018). It is in line with one of the Durban University of Technology's four strategic focus areas as documented in the Strategic Plan, 2015–2019 (DUT, 2015). This

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strategic plan addresses how the university should actively work on building sustainable student communities of living and learning so that students can succeed. Conducting ethnographic research attempts to bridge the gap in institutional data by presenting a qualitative context of the students who are living in the university student housing/residence.[1] Methodologically, the researcher lived for one academic year with the students in one particular residence in order to observe their day-to-day experiences and activities. Ethnographic methodology allowed access to the 'inside', hence providing a specific vantage point from which to understand points of success and challenges for the students towards their stories of success or failure.

The main argument of this article is that student housing plays a key role as a conditioning context for student success. The article argues that as a result of being based in a residence, the students benefit from an extra set of people (staff members and senior students or peers) who look out for their academic and social needs. Moreover, it argues that students at university residences have more chances of succeeding socially and academically because of the additional resources and conducive environment which are offered by the Department of Student Housing and Residence Life working in collaboration with various departments of the university, as a way of building a living and learning environment for students' success.

Over the past two decades, student housing has experienced rapid growth which has been driven predominantly by increased student enrolments across the globe (Najib, Yusof & Tabassi, 2015; McCubbin, 2003). Student Housing Departments broadly have been under enormous pressure to respond to the massification of higher education in South Africa. This, in turn, has resulted in changing demographic trends (Jones Lang LaSalle, 2016). In line with most previously black South African university residences, race and gender demographics show that black females are in the majority in student housing (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2012; DHET, 2011).

Amongst many other things, the quality of student life as well as housing still need improvement (CHE, 2016). Although the number of previously disadvantaged students registering at universities has increased drastically in post-apartheid South Africa, Jaffer and Garraway (2016) and Tinto (2014) argue that the throughput rate remains low. Van Zyl (2016) concurs that students in South African higher education find it hard to succeed. Jama (2016) found that access with success has not been achieved in the South African universities. Xulu-Gama, Nhari, Alcock and Cavanagh (2018) document the experiences of access and success of students, although excluding university residence experiences. Research on university residences has found a shortage of at least 207 800 beds nationally (DHET, 2011). Living at university on-campus accommodation is a privilege of the few (Tinto, 2014). Research points to the importance of the interaction between students and further shows that student satisfaction with student housing is a critical factor in success and retention in the campus environment (Clemons, Banning & McKelfresh, 2004).

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1   'Student housing' and 'student residence' will be used interchangeably in this article.

There are many positive educational and social ways in which students benefit from living in a university residence. Najib, Yusof and Abidin (2011) and Godshall (2000) draw our attention towards the importance of the role played by student residences in expanding intellectual capacities and achieving educational objectives. Scholars argue that student housing plays a vital role in the social and academic success of the students (Clemons et al., 2004; Christie, Munro & Rettig, 2002). Najib, Yusof and Tabassi (2015) argue that student housing providing high-quality services has a positive influence on students' behavioural intentions as well as their personal attainments.

Student housing policies can impact student success in academic programmes (Sebokedi, 2009). Case (2015) argues that the traditionalist view focuses on student difficulties in isolation from the broader conditioning context. Pansiri and Sinkamba (2017) and Tinto (2014) accordingly advocate for the programmes aimed at student success to be extended beyond the classroom. They further argue that this should be done as part of the university's goal of improving student experience.

There is an acknowledgement of the importance of knowing who our students are and this is indicated by the growing literature in this area (Xulu-Gama, et al., 2018; Taylor & Sobel, 2011; Kangas, Budros & Yoshika, 2000). Dixon and Durrheim (2000, p. 27) discuss questions of 'who we are' and how that is often intertwined with 'where we are'. This knowledge is seen as important as it then informs educational practices, university systems and processes as well as academic development initiatives (Kangas et al., 2000; Taylor & Sobel, 2011).

Tinto (2014) argues that providing student access without support does not constitute an opportunity (Jama, 2016). Durban University of Technology has a Residence Educational Programme (REP) which is driven by the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT) and the Department of Student Housing and Residence Life. The REP forms part of the process of building sustainable student communities of living and learning so that students can succeed. It is an intervention aimed at increasing and enhancing holistic student success. The contribution of Tutors, Mentors and Advisors (TMAs) is designed to complement formal lectures where meaningful interaction between lecturer and students is often limited. This programme is rolled out to all university residences, taking different forms and activities, according to the needs of the residence as identified by the RA (Residence Advisor) working in collaboration with the Department of Student Housing and Residence Life.

Tinto's theory of student integration is based on the idea that a student has to have a reasonable level of integration both socially and academically at the university. He argues that a lack of proper integration in either can result in the student dropping out of the university. He also maintains that too much integration on either the social aspect or the academic aspect can also result in an unbalanced university life, leading to the student dropping out. The student needs to be able to maintain a balance between these two aspects (Tinto, 1975). The major criticism of this theory is its failure to recognise the individual psychological features that could expose the student to giving up (McCubbin, 2003).

According to Tinto (1975), academic integration directly influences the student's goal commitment while social integration directly influences his (or her) commitment to the specific institution (see also McCubbin, 2003). McCubbin (2003) further claims that Tinto's student integration model is too ambitious in trying to explain a full range of student attrition behaviour.

This article, through ethnographic research, documents the context and experiences of students which are part of their journey to success at university. It focuses on the key issues of student housing in relation to their conditions for success, survival strategies and family relationships. The researcher's epistemic and cultural access provides vantage points from which data has been accessed and analysed. The researcher, an academic staff member of the university, played the role of RA with the intention of collecting data through ethnography for this particular study. This was made known to the Department of Student Housing and Residence Life at the time of the application for the RA position. The core business of the RA is to assist, mentor, advise and monitor the social and academic progress and success of students in residences.

Research Methods

This study employed a qualitative research paradigm specifically using ethnography and participant observation as data collection methods. Ethnography is about maintaining physical and social proximity to the people as they go about their everyday activities. The researcher enters the research site with the intention of getting to know the people and of developing an understanding of the meanings and the values that they attach to their everyday lives (Emerson, 1995). It allows the researcher to provide an insider-outsider interpretation of their everyday lives. Participant observation is a research instrument that is engaged by ethnography (Herbert, 2000). It is a process whereby the researcher enters a community in its natural setting for the purpose of developing a scientific understanding of the lives, systems and values of the people in that community.

Ethnographers unearth what people take for granted (Herbert, 2000). Ethnography, while it involves no systematic method at all, produces an in-depth understanding of real-world social processes (Forsythe, 1999). Ethnography was conducted in one of the university residences, Ngunyeweni Residence (pseudonym). Ngunyeweni is located on the periphery of the city and it accommodates 577 male and female African undergraduate students. It has 210 rooms, each of which is shared between two to four students and the sizes of the rooms differ accordingly.

Ngunyeweni Residence should be understood as a vantage point from which we can begin to understand some of the key threads of student lives leading to or failing to lead to success at the universities' student housing. Ethnography has been used, with full consciousness of the major criticism against it, such as the claim that it is unscientific, that it is too limited to enable generalisations and that it is not representative (Herbert, 2000). However, using ethnography is learning to *see* (original emphasis) social institutions in a way that problematises certain phenomena. Ethnography is an exercise of epistemological discipline (Forsythe, 1999). Emerson (1995, p. 3) encourages us to understand that

"consequential presence" should not be seen as "contaminating" what is observed and learned but rather as a revelation of ongoing patterns of social interaction.

There is a need to understand the contexts at the micro-level in which our students live. Analysis of large sets of institutional quantitative data is never fully complete without access to the qualitative data. Researchers are becoming more aware and beginning to appreciate that there is a story behind every number. This understanding allows us to delve into certain complexities which are easier to comprehend once one understands the context (Santhanam, Ashford-Rowe & Murphy, 2017).

Research Findings

Conditioning context for student success

Residence life is a unique student experience associated with special benefits (Radder & Han, 2009). Residence becomes a new temporal home for many students who have to leave their homes in order to be closer to campus. A home is an environment that can exhibit a sense of place for the student (Clemons et al., 2004). Cuseo (2007) notes that student success is enhanced by human interaction, collaboration and formation of interpersonal connections between students and other members of the university. Student housing programmes provide students with opportunities to participate in different leadership structures (Swartz, 2010).

At Ngunyeweni Residence, amongst many other essential structures, there is a House Committee, which is composed of students who are elected and this excludes first-year students. The committee and the RA are provided with various training programmes to help carry out their roles and responsibilities. The House Committee along with the RAs respectively develop a Plan of Action, which needs to be approved by the Senior Residence Life Officer. Programmes need to be inclusive of academic and social activities and aimed at student integration and success. They are prepared partly in consultation with students and in response to their social and academic needs.

For most students, campus is the only place where they meet and engage (Tinto, 2014). However, by the mere fact of being accommodated at a university student residence, students have more time to meet and get to know each other. For study purposes, this is more beneficial for students who are registered in the same programme. Being based at a student residence improves access to university facilities such as the library for research and study purposes. The library closes at 10:00 p.m. every day from Monday to Thursday and hours are extended during the examination period. There are buses that transport students in the evening from residences to campuses and back from Monday to Thursday at 6:00 p.m., 8:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. Students use this time for either individual, formal or informal group study on campus. Travelling by bus to campus in the evening is preferred by those students who do not wish to use residence study areas. Students who do not have computers or laptops also have easier access to computer laboratories on campus.

Students living at residences have access to additional evening tutorial classes. They can choose which specific subjects they feel they need more support with. These tutorial classes

are voluntary and there is no limit to their choice of subjects. CELT, through REP, allocates students into groups accordingly and generates a timetable for those extra evening tutorials. RAs assist in facilitation of the logistical arrangement of these classes.

Being based at a university residence means continuous Wi-Fi access for students' online learning and research. Students are demanding more comfort and creative features in their residences, DSTV connection, more heating or cooling systems. They are claiming those things which they believe they have a right to.

Department of Student Housing and Residence Life gives students more opportunities to participate in various recreational, cultural and spiritual activities. Students are confronted with diversity and opportunities to integrate at many levels (Najib et al., 2011). The actual individual residences are also pots of diversity with differences in gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language, religion and qualification registered for.

Travelling from student residences to campus and back takes less time than moving from off-campus residences or family homes to campus. Students in residence can save up to three hours of travelling, which they can use towards their studies or relaxing. This also means that no funds are directly spent on bus fare. Less time is spent on house chores, which most students understand take a lot of time, especially female students living in their family homes. This directly translates to saving time and having more time to relax, study or socialise.

Social integration as conditioning context for student success

Being in residence for students, creates not only physical distance but also psychosocial distance from their families. When students get to residence, they have to create new associations and also find new and different survival strategies from the ones they were using while at high school or at home. Students made various positive references to the supportive and mutual relationships they have with their fellow students, who are also their friends and with whom they live together in residence.

Most students claimed that their friends are more important than their families. "A friend is a person who knows and understands you better than your family," one student uttered. More than one student made reference to how there is always judgement coming from family, whereas a friend does not judge but rather supports you in all you do. Family is seen as a selfish circle of support as they expect students to do things according to family values in terms of aspects such as sexual orientation, substance abuse and career choice. On the other hand, by virtue of the mere fact of being in residence, students have an opportunity to reconstruct their identities based on their own preferred values and beliefs.

The idea of having friends at a university residence is important for this study because it speaks to the social integration of Tinto's student integration model. Tinto (1975) argues that if a student is socially well-integrated within the university system, there is a greater chance of academic integration and success. For the purposes of this study, having a good circle of friends (as defined by students) at university is interpreted as an indication of some degree of social integration into the university system. For students in residences, the

kind of friendships are mostly along the lines of roommates, floor or residence mates. The other set of friends are the ones with whom one studies the same subjects, or who come from the same geographical origins, especially the rural areas. Sometimes these categories of friendships are intertwined. These are important sets of people who are in a position to assist academically and socially.

One student explained that friendship is not always about influencing each other, it is often about supporting each other in whatever each one likes, as part of proclaiming their identity. She argued that one must appreciate the other's differences and learn from each other. Another student maintained that a friend is somebody who actually feeds you, not only with food when you are hungry, but also with drugs when you are in need of intoxication.

A number of students admitted to being addicted to various substances, such as dagga and codeine. They offered different explanations about how or why they became addicted. Some use these substances to deal with the harsh home environments that continue to confront them even when they are in university residence. Some use them as a way of dealing with the academic pressure as well as peer pressure associated with being a university student. In the midst of such pressure, friendships are very highly valued by students because friends do not judge each other in situations where families would be inclined to reprimand them for their choices.

This study, through participant observation, confirmed the widespread presence of hungry students at university residences. So, while students can miss opportunities to be fed by certain organisations of the university, because of fear of stigmatisation, they can never hide the reality of not having food from their roommates. The reality of hungry students[2] was always brought to the attention of the RA not by the hungry student, but by roommates.

Discussion

The university has a responsibility and has committed itself to building a sustainable living and learning environment for students which, for the purposes of this article, is understood as a conditioning context for success. Unlike in the past, where university residence was just a place for students to be accommodated so that they could be geographically closer to the campus environment, student housing is now a place where students live and learn. The learning, as much as the living, is facilitated by the university. This research shows that the university has done well in providing human resources, as has been shown in the roles played by the RA, House Committee and TMAs, which maintain an environment

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2   Some students have to work while studying in order to be able to feed themselves while at residence. A few students have to work to supplement payment for their tuition fees. Some have to work to support the families they left at home. Some have to work because they are parents themselves. They need to support their children, who remain at home with their parents or relatives. Some students are orphans and have to play the role of household head to their younger siblings. Most students get support from their grandparents, especially grandmothers, who primarily rely on the social grant for the elderly. While they are at university fighting their challenges on campus and at residence, they still have to deal with socioeconomic difficulties at home.

conducive to success for students. All their programmes are designed in response to students' needs, e.g. substance abuse.

Furthermore, the election of second-, third-, or fourth-year students into the house committee and to be TMAs allows them an opportunity to share their experience and knowledge acquired in the previous year(s) with all students. So the students get a chance to learn from the house committee members about matters that are both academic and social in nature.

The university has provided facilities for students to pursue their academic goals at the university. Some of those resources are as follows: bus transportation, computer laboratories, library, sports, TMAs programmes, leadership and entrepreneurial programmes as well as cultural activities.

However, when it comes to social integration as a conditioning context for success, the findings above demonstrate that this is a complex area. Individual students have personal reasons regarding why they become friends with some and not with certain other people; why they would come forward when hungry or why they would not. Previous research (De Klerk, Spark, Jones & Maleswena, 2017; Manik, 2015; DHET, 2011) had already established that there are hungry students at universities. It had further been established that students are reluctant to respond to the programmes for the hungry students because they do not want to be seen as poor (Manik, 2015). Hungry students are one big challenge that the universities possibly will not be able to prevent because of the varied family backgrounds from which South African universities continue to receive students.

Gofen (2009) refers to families' habits, priorities, belief systems and values as non-material resources with which previously disadvantaged families provide their first-generation students on their journeys at university. He further argues that although students face many challenges, their families are often facilitators of their success. While Gofen's research might be true, the findings of this study provide a different lens through which one can look at the non-material support that families give students, with specific reference to those at residences. Students are actually challenging that part of what we mostly see as support but which they see as selfish acts by their families. Students' base at the residence gives them freedom to become who they want to be and free to choose how to deal with pressing circumstances.

Conclusion

Student success is broader than academic success, with the latter normally narrowing to the end-of-semester or end-of-year results. Student success speaks to the rounded identity of the student as a responsible citizen, inclusive of cultural, leadership, social and academic qualities. Using Tinto's theory of student integration, this study has focused more on the social integration of students because university residence was chosen as a research site. The intention of the study was also to focus on the qualitative data by the use of ethnography as a data collection method on student success versus the institutional quantitative data on student success.

This research has shown that student housing gives students the freedom to explore and determine their own identities away from familial and home pressures. It has shown that the perceived unconditional family support actually has strings attached. The support provided by the university in the form of resources also allows students to develop alternative social support systems in the form of friendships. It can be concluded that the lives of students in residence are not linear, which would often assume that their academic lives are not affected by other associations in their lives. The success of the student is made up of a mix of healthy and sometimes unhealthy relationships.

The strategic positioning of student housing in building sustainable communities of living and learning uncovers the often not-so-obvious connections between academic success and students' socioeconomic backgrounds and their psycho-social issues. These findings have cautioned us that we should never take for granted the role of the family and friends in the student's life. As varied and complex as are the student backgrounds, so are the kind of relationships they have with their families and friends. These findings have also shown that integration should not only be regarded as positive as it can also enhance peer pressure, e.g. in substance abuse.

From the initiatives of the university of building a living and learning student environment, a one-size-fits-all approach in supporting students cannot work (Van Zyl, 2016; DHET, 2011). Although students might have a lot of shared characteristics, they still retain a lot of individual complex differences and preferences.

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