# Academic and Student Success within a Residential Commons Model

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## ABSTRACT

Contemporary scholars posit that more variables are necessary to understand the contributions of specific higher education programs and services to student success. Specifically, this study sought to understand the potential impacts of housing and a residential college model have on academic and student success over a five-year period. We employed an exploratory research study to understand variables associated with student retention, graduation, and other student success indicators – such as attempted versus completed credit hours and conduct incidents – and maintained in housing and institutional databases.

## METHODS

Analysis was conducted using secondary student educational records data for five cohorts of students, namely the fall cohorts of students during 2013 – 2018. This quantitative study (Creswell, 2017) included only first-time, full-time undergraduate students who commenced studies in the fall semester. Data was obtained from several university databases and was subsequently cleaned and merged into a single dataset to allow cross-sectional analysis across all variables.

The databases utilized included an institutional database of student profile data, a housing database of student housing records, a conduct database of student conduct violations, as well as several smaller, program-specific records. Examples of variables included in these datasets include demographic variables, GPA by term, yearly retention, number of conduct incident involvements, and housing location. The variables from these datasets were used to compute several other variables of interest, including yearly RC consistency, room style, and hometown rural-urban-suburban classification. The final database consists of 30 variables.

Descriptives were then run by examining academic and student success variables for numerous cross-sections of the database (e.g., cohort retention by housing location), with results compiled into tables. Tableau dashboards were also created to enable custom interaction with the database.

## RESEARCH SITE

Southern Methodist University is a mid-sized, private, liberal arts university located in Dallas, Texas. The student population contains about 6,710 undergraduate students (2018), with a student-faculty ratio of 11:1. Undergraduate tuition and fees total $58,540 (2020 -2021 academic year).

Since the fall of 2014, the institution has enforced a two year live-on requirement for matriculating students, which can only be waived in special circumstances. The entering fall of 2018 cohort was comprised of 1,530 undergraduates (52.81% male, 47.19% female) , 93.66% of which were retained through their first academic year. In this cohort, 98.37% of students lived on campus during their first year, 8.89% of students were eligible for Pell Grants, 3.20% of students were first-generation students, and 10.98% of students were classified as sophomores by credit hours due to high school testing and transfer credits.

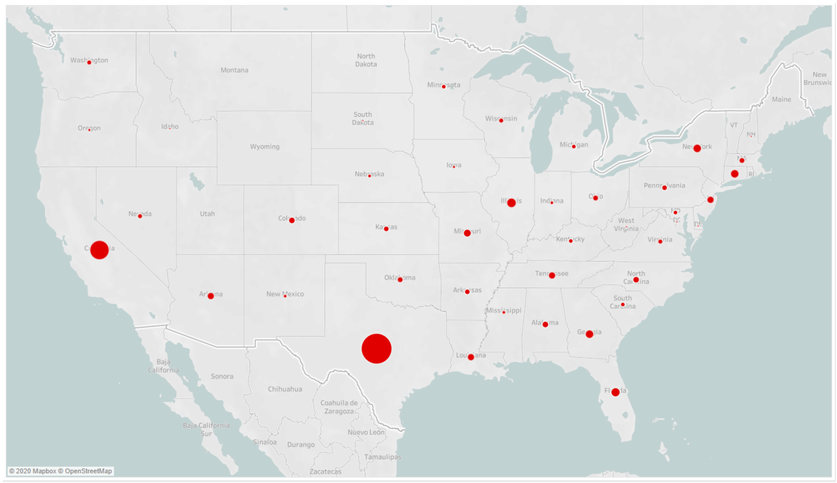


**Fig. 1:** Home states of students in the entering fall of 2018 cohort.

## RESULTS

### Conduct Incidents

- Overall, cohort percentages of students involved in conduct incidents began to decrease since 2012, but since 2015 have been rising for each cohort. The total change has been 19.97% in 2012 to 25.69% in 2018.

### Course Withdrawals

- The percentage of students with course withdrawals in terms 1-4 has generally decreased across all cohorts over the study period.

### Retention

- First-time full-time students have higher 1-year fall-to-fall retention over the study period. In fall 2012, students one-year retention was 88.93% to 93.66% in fall 2018. Overall, 1-year retention has trended upward.
- First generation 3-year retention by entry cohort experiences a large (but not monotonic) increase between the fall 2012 and fall 2016 cohorts, from 71.52% to 82.69%.
- For 2-yearretention, Black or African American and Non-Resident Alien (any race) are the two groups with the largest increase.
- For 3-year retention, Hispanic of Any Race experiences an almost strict increase across successive cohorts, rising from 76.61% for the fall 2012 cohort to 82.14%for the fall 2016 cohort.
- 1-year retention has steadily increased from 89.85% in fall 2012 to 93.66% in fall 2018.

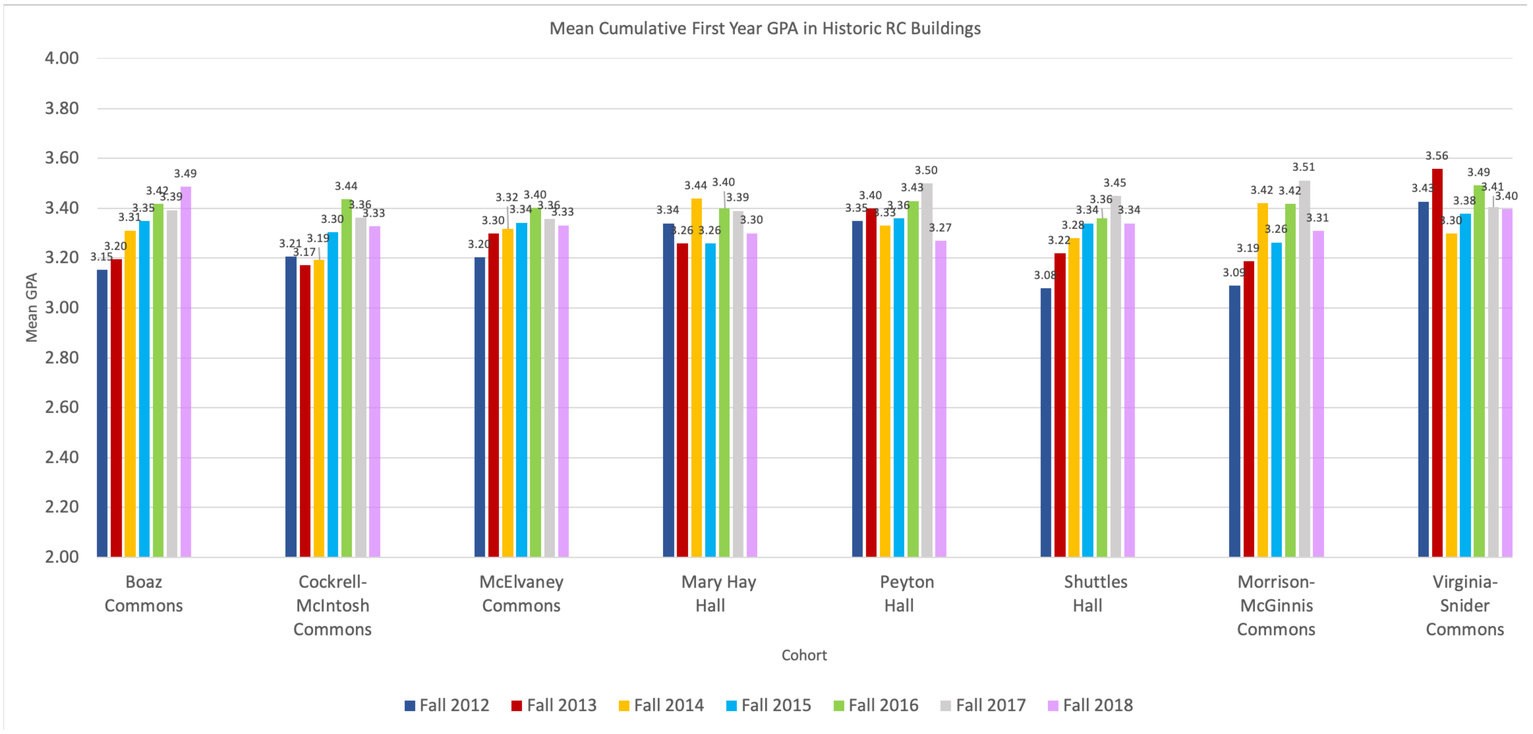


**Fig. 2:** Mean cumulative first-year GPA comparison by historic RC building and entry cohort.

### GPA

- The average first-year GPA experienced a slight increase across the cohorts from fall 2012 to fall 2018, rising from 3.24 to 3.36.

### Housing-Specific

- Enrolled students living off-campus during the study term have decreased substantially from 4.2% from fall 2012 to 1.63% in fall 2018. This change is due to the two-year live-on requirement and the establishment of the Residential Commons.
- MHPS Commons experienced a fairly steady increase in 1-year retention, up 7.28% from 87.13% in fall 2012 to 94.41% in fall 2018.
- Shuttles Hall has consistently reported higher first-year retention than the on-campus average since the establishment of the RC system.
- Every cohort who remained in their RC for two or more years reports (0.21% -2.54%higher retention then those who did not remain in their initial RC.
- Generally, all historical RC-buildings that existed before the establishment of the RC system have experienced a rough (usually steady) increase in mean first-year cumulative GPA from fall 2012 to fall 2018.
- On-campus mean first-year GPA is higher than off-campus across all cohorts. The spread has always been at least 0.08 GPA points (in fall 2018) but was much higher back in 2012/2013 (0.18 and 0.17, respectively).
- All of the new Residential Commons buildings have a steady increase in sophomore cumulative GPA across cohorts.
- Sophomore fraternity men GPA has increased across every successive cohort, but has always been less than the mean GPA of on-campus sophomore men not in fraternities. However, by the fall 2017 cohort the mean GPA of both groups are the same.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Define the RC-tenant of “microcosm” or “representative” of SMU student body (i.e. by race, school, in-or out-of-state, etc.). By striving to make RCs more representative by strata, better comparisons can be made between and among the RCs.
- Further investigate the release of sophomore fraternity men from the RC live-on requirement. As evidenced by GPA performance, this may not have positive effects.
- Consider targeted support and retention efforts for students living on-campus who identify as Hispanic of Any Race in the second year.
- Explore potential for PELL eligible student housing support due to retention concerns from year one to year two.
- SMU should explore the classification of conduct incident types into levels based on severity. This would enable more meaningful analysis related to conduct incidents.
- SMU should explore enhanced ways of documenting reasons first year and second year students are exempted from the housing requirement.

## REFERENCES

Creswell, J.W. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches.* Routledge.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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