

11-1-2009

# Conflict in Residence Halls: A Preliminary Study of the Efficacy of Roommate Negotiations to Reduce Roommate Conflict

Suzanne McCorkle  
*Boise State University*

Susan G. Mason  
*Boise State University*

**Conflict in the Residence Halls: A Preliminary Study of the Efficacy of Roommate  
Negotiations to Reduce Roommate Conflict**

**Suzanne McCorkle**

**Susan G. Mason**

**Boise State University**

**Boise, Idaho 83707-1935**

**Contact: [Smccork@boisestate.edu](mailto:Smccork@boisestate.edu)**

**208-426-3928**

## **Conflict in the Residence Halls: A Preliminary Study of the Efficacy of Roommate Negotiations to Reduce Roommate Conflict**

A student's experience living in the residence halls can be one of the most rewarding aspects of college life--or one of the biggest nightmares. Colleges and universities apply numerous strategies to control, enliven, and make their housing areas safe. Roommate matching, residential life activities, resident advisors, learning communities, and other strategies intend to transform the residences into places for social growth (Pike, Schroeder, & Berry, 1997). As issues emerge--such as alcoholism, bulimia, drug use, suicide, violence, computer pornography and hacking-- academic institutions respond with policies, support systems, and counseling interventions (Rawls, Johnson, & Bartels, 2004). Conflict in residence halls raises unique challenges as students confront widely diverse individual and cultural styles (Lee, 2008). Looming over all the numerous variables of matching roommates, one constant remains—freshmen arrive on campus and begin to sleep, study, and live their lives in close proximity with strangers.

The leading website for college level conflict management information concludes: “Since few 18-year olds have developed good conflict resolution skills, using each other as models of how to manage and solve conflict is often ineffective. Research on roommates in conflict suggests that typical first and second year students are often not developmentally prepared to effectively negotiate interpersonal conflicts with roommates on their own” (“Rationales,” 2007). Hawken, Duran, and Kelly (1991) expand the argument for the significance of roommate conflict in saying: “Students’ abilities to

communicate with roommates, peers, faculty and others has an impact on their success in establishing satisfying relationships and on their satisfaction with the college or university. One important relationship, perhaps especially for freshmen, is the roommate relationship. Without a satisfying roommate relationship, students may experience loneliness and may try to alleviate that loneliness by leaving college” (p. 298).

How universities assist roommates in moderating and managing predictable conflicts in residential living is the focus of this study. After examining previous studies to illustrate the impact of roommate conflict on college success, a study of the efficacy of a roommate behavior contract program will be discussed.

### **Conflict Affects the Success of University Housing Residents**

While roommate conflict has not been the primary focus of many studies, the prolific research on college success, persistence, and satisfaction provides insights into the negative effects of conflict on college students. Moving to a college or university is what Vangelisti and Caughlin (1977) label a family stress point—young adults enter into a time where a significant number of their relationships change. Change causes stress. Stress is known to have deleterious effects on student success (Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, & Cribble, 2007). In fact, stress emerges as the highest barrier to student success and a major contributor to other negative influences such as fatigue, depression, alcohol use, anxiety, and suicidal feelings. Conflict with a faculty or staff member, sleep difficulties, and roommate conflict are also significantly correlated to stress (Dusselier, Dunn, Wang, Shelley, & Whalen, 2005). Research found those who felt respected and who could study in their dorm/residence reported less stress. Surprisingly, those who felt comfortable in

their living situation also experienced higher stress, perhaps due to anxiety about maintaining good relations with a roommate. Problems with friends also emerged as a challenge to positive identity development (Jordyn & Byrd, 2003).

Also related to the clusters of events that cause stress is misperception among college students about their peers. Beatty, Syzdek, and Bakkum (2006) explain that social norms theory would predict that college students are influenced by what they presume their peers think and do. For example, college students may presume other students drink and use drugs more than most students actually do, so they drink as well. Likewise, students mistakenly perceive that men have more stereotypical masculine beliefs than they actually do. Role discrepancies occur when a student thinks he or she does not match a social norm. When role discrepancy exists, the student may conform by drinking more, engaging in overly stereotypical behaviors, or through self-imposed isolation. Excessive drinking is believed, in part, to occur among young males who conform to their peers' presumed hyper-masculinity and alcohol over-indulgence (Lewis & Gouker, 2007).

One measure of the probability of student success is roommate satisfaction. Instruments such as the Social Satisfaction Questionnaire (SSQ) have been used at the one month mark for new roommates as a predictor of which roommates will separate or otherwise not be successful (Lovejoy, Perkins, and Collins, 1995). An emerging concept with application to student success in residential living is *hardiness*. A hardy person thrives during times of stress and finds ways to succeed. Lifton, Seay, and Bushko (2000) explain that hardiness has three components—commitment, challenge, and control. A hardy person responds to situations differently due to his or her position on

commitment, challenge, and control. Commitment means having a sense of purpose and meaning in life, that living life fully is rewarding. Challenge is a willingness to face new events, to problem solve, and to learn and grow. Control is a feeling that one is in charge of one's destiny. While the research has not been applied directly to roommate situations, it seems probable that high hardy individuals would arrive with more experience in managing conflict than low hardy individuals, who might be predisposed to avoid or simply endure conflict. Likewise, programs to nurture hardiness might enhance student success.

A changing characteristic of the early twenty-first century college student compounds the challenges faced by residential life staff and universities. About twenty-five percent of college freshmen were raised in a single parent household (Curley, 2003), and many have never shared a bedroom or a bathroom before. Freshmen classes increasingly are multi-racial--creating a potentially volatile mixture of values, customs, expectations, and sensibilities in the residential living areas.

Counseling centers face increasingly urgent needs for crisis interventions in residence halls. For example, alcohol consumption has been linked to at least 1,400 student deaths and over half a million student injuries (Lewis & Gouker, 2007). This urgency of crisis management created a trend at some schools where prevention and relationship maintenance work have taken a backseat to emergency responses (Rawls, Johnson, & Bartels, 2004).

The ability to meet people and resolving conflicts are the top two predictors of overall satisfaction with a housing program (Curley, 2003). Hence, questions must be asked on how colleges and universities are helping their residential population prosper in

an increasingly complex social living situation. A cursory survey of university web resources and links from the Campus-ADR website offers a variety of conflict tips, booklets, and roommate resources. Surprisingly, some of the strategies used to adapt to modern complexity, may have unexpected consequences. For example, freshman learning communities where students live together and go through the same set of first year classes as a cohort, may prolong high school demeanor, such as cliques (Jaffee, 2007).

Predicting the types of conflicts experienced by freshmen and creating support structures to smooth the troubled waters during those times of stress could contribute to enhanced student success and retention. To investigate levels of conflict among dormitory residents and the usefulness of roommate behavior contracts, freshmen were surveyed during the Fall of 2008 and 2009, with particular focus on freshmen living on campus.

### **Methods**

Study one occurred during the Fall of 2008. All student staff assistants who lived in the residences at a midsized public university in the West received conflict management training and were briefed on the roommate behavior contract and how to administer it to new freshmen. Each freshman received a questionnaire and independently filled out their preferences in areas where difficulties commonly arise: proper activities in the room/residence, cleanliness, noise levels, study habits, and socializing with friends in the room/residence. Residential advisors asked freshmen to discuss their individual answers on the questionnaires and then negotiate a roommate

behavior contract within the first two weeks of arrival on campus. In some cases, the resident advisor facilitated the conversation while roommates completed their behavior contracts.

A paper, self-administered survey of students living in the resident hall was administered between September and December 2007 to assess levels of conflict experienced by new freshmen. The survey recipients lived in one of seven residence halls. Two-hundred and five people responded to the survey out of a potential 1040 freshmen residents, providing a response rate of 20 percent. The majority of respondents (60%) lived in four person suites. Fifty-six percent of the respondents were female and 44 percent were male.

The survey instrument asked questions to discover if the freshmen completed a roommate behavior contract, how confident they felt in resolving problems that might emerge after completing the contract, and what conflicts they had experienced. Residents were asked as a result of the negotiating and contract exercise to respond on a 10 point scale about their confidence to resolve difficulties that might arise between roommates. Responses ranged from 1, signifying not at all confident to 10, signifying high confidence.

Study two was administered to all first semester freshmen at the same university during the Fall of 2008. As in the previous year, residential life staff asked students to complete the behavior preference questionnaire and then negotiated a behavior contract with their roommate(s) within the first few weeks of arrival on campus.

A follow-up survey was presented to all Freshmen taking a University 101 class. The response for the paper version was 189 of 337 students (56%). Freshman who did



not complete the paper format in University 101 were sent a web version of the survey, and 428 of 1936 students (22 percent) responded. The overall response rate was 27 percent of the first semester freshmen enrolled during Fall 2008. Forty percent of the survey respondents reported living on campus. Finally, 94 percent of the respondents were full-time students.

## **Findings**

### **Study One.**

Of those who responded, 91 percent indicated they completed a roommate behavior contract. Confidence was high in their ability to discuss difficulties with a roommate after the contract discussion. Sixty-four percent indicated high confidence (8, 9, or 10 on the 10-point scale). Twenty-six percent indicate they were somewhat confident (4, 5, 6, or 7) and only seven percent reported little or no confidence (1, 2, or 3).

Seventy-seven percent indicated they had not had a problem with their roommate in the prior month. Of those reporting a problem, the most common topics were: cleanliness and noise (Table 1). Of those that reported a problem 42 percent indicated it was something that was not covered in the behavior contract, 39 percent said it was covered in the contract, and 20 percent reported they did not know if it was in the contract.

Gender was statistically significant ( $\chi^2=9.985$ ;  $Pr=.04$ ) in predicting student confidence in managing conflicts. While the “little or no confidence” in their ability to manage conflict responses were similar by gender, more males had high confidence

(77%) to compared to females (56%) (Table 2). While the vast majority of students reported no conflict occurred during the preceding month, females reported more conflicts than males ( $\chi^2=9.979$ ;  $Pr= .00$ ). Thirty-two percent of females reported conflicts compared to 13% of males (Table 3). There were no statistical differences by number of roommates in whether students reported a conflict in the preceding month.

### **Study Two.**

The Fall 2008 survey collected information on roommate conflict and added other variables related to student success. While we do not integrate all of the variables of student success in this report, preliminary results are reported to provide a larger context about freshman university life.

By November of their first semester, 69 percent of freshmen had made at least one meaningful friend since coming to the university. Seventy percent of freshmen communicating with a professor outside of class time. More than half of the students (53%) indicated they interacted with other students outside of class in another organized activity (club, sport, etc.). Nearly three-quarters of freshmen indicated they were not funding school expenses (70%), living expenses (75%) or social activities (72%) with credit cards. Of the first semester freshmen surveyed 96 percent indicated this was their first semester. The remaining four percent may be students who had taken a course previously or attend part-time elsewhere.

Eighty-five percent of the students indicated they studied 15 hours or less a week. Three-quarters (76%) of students indicated they study in their residences (survey takers could choose all locations that applied), followed by the library, student union, an

Interactive Learning Center, coffee shops, the student athlete study hall, department labs, and the university theater.

When students were asked what was the biggest surprise upon arrival at the university, some of the most frequently cited comments included: how different college was from high school, how difficult it was to make friends, how much more work (or in some cases less) was required than expected for classes, and that the professors were more approachable than expected.

When asked about what had helped them the most to succeed thus far students indicated study groups, personal determination, family, friends, and professors, University 101, and coffee.

Students indicated their biggest barriers to success thus far were lack of time, time management skills, procrastination, money, distractions, social, life, T.V., the computer, professors' teaching styles, and class expectations.

Forty percent of freshmen indicated they lived in the Residential Hall or on Campus. Forty-two percent lived at home and 15 percent lived in an apartment off-campus. When asked if they had completed a roommate contract 81 percent living in Residential Housing on Campus indicated they had. Of the students that completed a roommate behavior contract 68 percent were highly confident they could talk about any difficulties that came up with a roommate. When asked if they had a problem in the last month with their roommate 75 percent indicated they had not. Twenty-five percent reported a problem in the prior month. The most frequently noted problems were: being loud, not cleaning, other, stealing/borrowing, and generally not getting along. In 2008,

there were no significant differences by gender in conflict management confidence or in the number of difficulties expressed in the past month.

### **Discussion**

In both surveys, about 24 percent of students reported roommate issues in the preceding month, with females more likely to report experiencing a problem than males (although the gender difference was statistically significant only in 2008). While not all students experience conflict, almost a quarter of students do. If these issues are not resolved well, prior research indicates that student success and persistence may be affected. It may be that around 25 percent is the benchmark number of students we can predict will experience roommate conflict. Alternately, the number may be higher if satisfaction surveys at the one month mark are too soon for roommate conflicts to manifest. Similarly, more conflict may be exhibited among freshmen at universities who do not complete early roommate behavior negotiation exercises.

While we cannot assume causality from the completion of a roommate behavior survey and the amount of conflict experienced, student confidence in their abilities to manage problems was high. It may be that the behavior contract inoculates some students against common problems or that it provides a way to bring up troublesome issues with a roommate when problems do arise—either effect would enhance the student success factor Lifton, Seay, and Bushko (2006) call hardiness. The gender differences in reporting that a conflict occurred in the last month and in overall confidence in managing one's conflict may point to a need for different training and behavior contract content for males and females.

Future research would be profitable that gathered more roommate information to assess interaction effects with student's confidence in managing conflict. For example, a personality inventory, family of origin conflict style test, or hardiness inventory could lead to insights on how students in residence halls cope with conflict.

### **Conclusions**

Students bring a cornucopia of experiences and predispositions to their first college roommate experience. Roommate conflicts routinely are about fairly predictable issues such as cleanliness and noise, although other significant flashpoints arise such as drinking, having sex in the room/shower, and sharing of expenses. The results of this study show about 25 percent of college roommates experience conflicts significant enough for them to comment about them on a survey. Roommate behavior contract exercises have promise as a strategy to induce students to think early about stress areas in their new living arrangement and to negotiate roommate behavior contracts around routinely troublesome issues.

## Works Cited

- Beatty, A., Syzdek, M., & Bakkum, A. (2006). The Saint John's experience project: challenging men's perceptions of normative gender role conflict. *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 14(3), 322-337.
- Curley, P. (2003). Making campus a home. *American School & University*, 75.12.
- Dusselier, L., Dunn, B., Wang, Y., Shelley, M. C., & Whalen, D. F. (2005). Personal, health, academic, and environmental predictors of stress for residence hall students. *Journal of American College Health*, 54(1), 15-25.
- Friedlander, L. J., Reid, G. J., Shupak, N., & Cribbie, R. (2007). Social support, self-esteem, and stress as predictors of adjustment to university among first-year undergraduates. *Journal of College Student Development*, 48(3), 259-274.
- Hawken, L., Duran, R. L., & Kelly, L. (1991). The relationship of interpersonal communication variables to academic success and persistence in college. *Communication Quarterly*, 39(4), 297-308.
- Jaffee, D. (2007). Peer cohorts and the unintended consequences of freshman learning communities. *College Teaching*, 55(2), 65-72.
- Jordyn, M., & Byrd, M. (2003). The relationship between the living arrangements of university students and their identity development. *Adolescence*, 38(150), 267-279.
- Lee, S-Y. (2008). Mediation techniques of an informal intermediary in intercultural-interpersonal conflict. *Human Communication*, 11(4), 461-482.
- Lewis, T.F., & Gouker, J., E. (2007). Ideological maturity and drinking behaviors among college students. *Journal of Alcohol & Drug Education*, 51(1), 17-35.

- Lifton, D. E., Seay, S., & Bushko, A. (2000). Can student “hardiness” serve as an indicator of likely persistence to graduation? Baseline results from a longitudinal study. *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, 4(2), 73.
- Lovejoy, M. C., Perkins, D. V., & Collins, J. E. (1995). Predicting Fall semester breakups in college roommates: A replication using the Social Satisfaction Questionnaire. *Journal of College Student Development*, 36(6), 594-602.
- Pike, G. R., Schroeder, C.C., & Berry, T. R. (1997). Enhancing the educational impact of residence halls: The relationship between residential learning communities and first-college experiences and persistence. *Journal of College Student Development*, 38(6), 609-621.
- Rationales—Why conflict resolution matters to students. (2007, accessed 11 December). [http://www.campus-adr.org/Student\\_Center/rationales\\_student.html](http://www.campus-adr.org/Student_Center/rationales_student.html).
- Rawls, D. T., Johnson, D., & Bartels, E. (2004). The counselor-in-residence program: Reconfiguring support services for a new millennium. *Journal of College Counseling*, 7(2), 162-170.
- Vangelisti, A. L., & Caughlin, J. P. (1997). Revealing family secrets: The influence of topic, function, and relationship. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 14(5), 679-368.

**Table 1**  
**Past conflict topics**

Topic	2007	2007	2008	2008
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Cleaning/Bathroom cleaning	16	27%	14	22%
Noise/Loud voices, ring tone, speaker phones, voices	11	18%	16	25%
Drama/"Girl issues"/Not talking to the person you have a problem with	6	1%	0	0%
Tight space	4	.07%	0	0%
Borrowing/Stealing	4	.07%	6	.09%
Personal respect	4	.07%	3	.05%
Personality clash	0	0%	6	.09%
Boy/Girl Friend over too much	0	0%	4	.06%
Other*	15	25%	15	23%
<b>Total</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>100%</b>

\*Two responses each 2007 (unwanted touching, long showers, using drugs, teasing); one response each (guest behavior, roommate sex in room, setting alarm and not getting up, sleeping all day, window open or closed, lying, no time to talk)

\*Three responses (not sharing expenses); two responses each (no alone time, drinking); one response each (door open/messy, stranded, friends over too much, doesn't like boyfriend to be over, had a relationships with ex, not paying rent on time).

Source: Authors' calculations from *Resident Hall Roommate Contract Follow-Up Survey*, 2007 and 2008



**Table 2**  
**Confidence by gender**

Confidence	2007			2008		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
Little or No	9%	6%	8% (14)	2%	5%	3% (5)
Somewhat	36%	17%	28% (52)	11%	7%	9% (15)
High	56%	77%	65% (121)	87%	86%	88% (143)
Total	100% (106)	100% (81)	100% (187)	100% (102)	100% (61)	100% (163)
$\chi^2=9.985$	Pr= .04			$\chi^2=1.83$	Pr= .4	

**Table 3**  
**Report of conflict in the past month by gender**

Conflict in Past Month	2007			2008		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
No	68%	87%	77% (151)	74%	82%	76% 171
Yes	32%	13%	23% (46)	26%	18%	24% 53
Total	100% (110)	100% (87)	100% (197)	100% 148	100% 76	100% 224

$\chi^2=9.979$       Pr= .00                       $\chi^2=1.748$       Pr= .19