

CRITERIA IN THE STUDENT DECISION TO MOVE OFF-CAMPUS; A PAIRED COMPARISON TEST OF GROUP-SPECIFIC PREFERENCES, SUNY GENESEO, 1991.

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ABSTRACT: At SUNY Geneseo, entering freshmen are almost all required to live on campus. For many years Geneseo's dormitory occupancy has exceeded capacity, and many students share a bedroom with two other residents. 'Tripling' is one of many commonplace student complaints about dormitory life. This study examined the rationale for moving off campus of sixteen groups in Geneseo's student population, including four sub-groups still living in dormitories. All respondents completed a paired comparison test which asked them to rate 'space,' 'privacy,' 'independence,' 'freedom,' and 'cost' as criteria for moving to off-campus settings. Although freedom and its semantic near-twin, independence, mostly scored positive Thurstone scores among the sixteen groups, and (despite the negative scores associated with 'space' as a priority among the five criteria) there were noteworthy differences in group preferences attributable to home background, gender, year, off-campus setting, and on-campus living arrangements. The results reveal the great difficulty of balancing permissiveness, regulation, and respect for individuals in high density college living. The results also suggest possible shifts in Geneseo's private sector off-campus apartment provision.

INTRODUCTION

This paper derives interval scales of the choice criteria commonly used in the decision to move from dormitory life to off-campus housing alternatives in a small public four-year liberal arts college and its associated small town. The analysis is based on a survey of 320 respondents, each of whom completed a paired comparison test of ten statements pairing the following five choice criteria:

- More Space
- Greater Privacy
- More Independence
- More Freedom
- Lower Cost

Criteria were selected based on a pre-survey of students, asking them to identify which factors they felt were paramount in the decision to move off-campus. This pre-test repeatedly revealed that 'freedom' and 'independence' are not synonyms in the student's outlook on off-campus living.

The State University of New York College at Geneseo enrolls five thousand undergraduates, the majority of whom live in the College's fourteen dormitories. Two basic dormitory designs typify the campus: a traditional corridor arrangement of double rooms, and suites incorporating several double rooms and a shared living area. For more than a decade

the College has provided a lower-cost option of tripling occupancy in rooms designed for two persons. This practice has helped to take the pressure off demand for off-campus accommodation, but simultaneously reduces privacy and increases crowding in the dormitories. Although SUNY Geneseo receives more than eleven thousand applications annually for approximately thirteen hundred freshmen admissions, no new on-campus building has been completed in two decades, and the one structure envisaged will not be a dormitory. A proposed joint public-private venture to augment the College's dormitory space was summarily denied by the State University's Central Administration five years ago.

Increasingly, local property owners and developers are creating off-campus accommodation alternatives that are priced and/or serviced to attract Geneseo students. Broadly speaking, the student can choose from the village's stock of Victorian homes converted to rental use, apartments on the upper floors of Main Street businesses, and new apartment or town house complexes. Also, the College's fraternities and sororities can accommodate roughly 250 of their members. Very few Geneseo students live with their parents and only a small minority commute more than two miles to the campus. Non-traditional students are still a small percentage of the College's total enrollment.

Our research design focuses on the relative importance of off-campus choice criteria among four sub-groups living in dormitories and four sub-groups living in the main off-campus living alternatives. In addition, we explored the influence of gender, age, and home background on students' weighting of choice criteria.

TABLE 1: THURSTONE SCORES: GENESEO STUDENTS CHOICE FACTORS IN THE DECISION TO MOVE OFF-CAMPUS; SIXTEEN STUDENT GROUPS (N = 20 for each group; 320 respondents in survey)

GROUP	THURSTONE SCORE FOR:				
	Space	Privacy	Ind.	Freedom	Cost
CURRENTLY ON CAMPUS					
Doubled in corridor room	-.41	-.45	.07	.30	.48
Tripled in corridor room	.47	-.17	.09	.47	-.87
Doubled in suite room	-.62	-.07	.41	.78	-.49
Tripled in suite room	-.33	.30	.11	.58	-.06
CURRENTLY OFF CAMPUS					
Sophomore, male	-.65	-.75	.40	.75	.25
Junior or senior, male	-.62	-.33	.15	.73	.07
Sophomore, female	-.79	-.21	.82	1.83	-1.64
Junior or senior, female	-.68	.29	.62	.70	-.92
Lives in fraternity or sorority house	-.71	-.32	.13	1.04	.03
Lives in rented house	-.53	.15	-.47	.24	.62
Lives in apartment complex	-1.13	.26	.44	.66	-.21
Lives on Main St. over bus.	-.53	.19	-.41	.92	-.15
HOME BACKGROUND					
Rural background	-.61	.19	-.003	-.07	.49
Small town background	-.46	-.15	.15	.35	.11
Suburban background	-.66	-.16	-.01	.90	-.08
Urban background	-.16	.19	.39	-.06	-.37

Survey: Joseph Griffo, Jeff Rose, Jon Runckel, and David Sliwa. For GEO 378 (D. Norris Spring 1991).

METHODOLOGY

Twenty respondents were contacted among each of sixteen sub-groups based on current campus or off-campus residence alternatives as well as year, gender, and home background (Table 1). Scale values derived from Thurstone's Law of comparative judgement were calculated revealing the relative emphasis of each factor by each sub-group. The scale values provide an interval scale of the clarity or fuzziness of human discriminant processes (Thurstone, 1959). Positive and negative scale values signify higher- and lower-rated factors, but no special meaning is attached to a scale value of zero. Scale values derived from Thurstone's Law do assume that respondents' discriminant judgement of criteria is normally distributed (Green and Tull, 1975, 186).

FINDINGS

Overall, Geneseo students cite 'freedom' as the primary draw of off-campus living (Figure 1). Freedom was rated the highest factor among twelve of the sixteen sub-groups surveyed. Respondents who did not place freedom first were apt to emphasize 'cost' as a principal criterion. Freedom was assigned particular emphasis by female sophomores currently living off-campus, by fraternity and sorority house occupants, residents of Main Street apartments, and by suburbanites. Respondents repeatedly pinpointed dormitory restrictions on alcohol, overnight guests, and parties as the antithesis of what they meant by freedom. It is noteworthy that the twenty sophomore women sampled were almost as unconcerned about cost as they were committed to freedom.

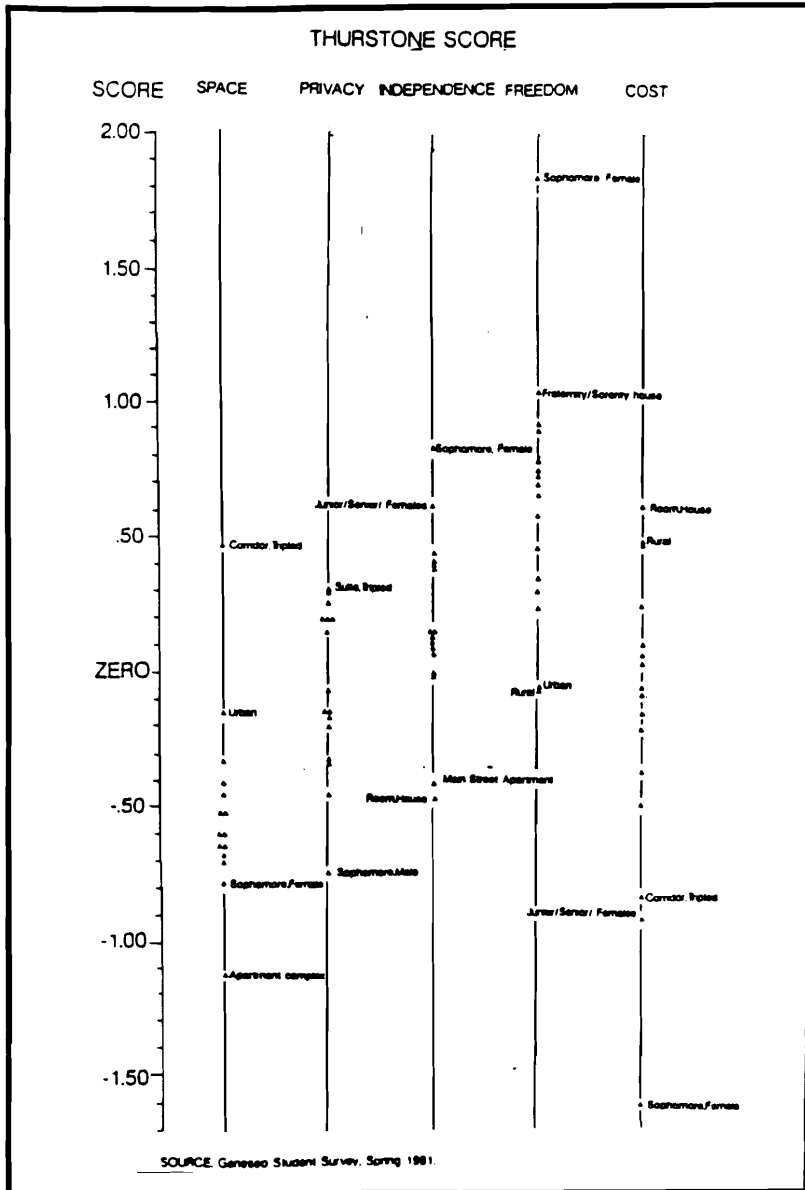
Indeed, the same twenty sophomore women students also led all groups in the emphasis they placed on 'independence.' This factor placed an overall second among all respondents sampled (Figure 1). 'Independence' tended to connote liberation from the cafeteria meal plan, greater personal control over one's daily schedule, and separation from some of the social pressures of dormitory life. Emphasis of this factor was most characteristic of women students. Geneseo's apartment complex renters placed a premium on independence whereas those with room rentals in village homes or in Main Street rentals gave the factor little emphasis.

Among the respondents rooming in rented houses 'cost' was the paramount factor, as it was for students with a rural background and those doubled in corridor dormitory rooms at the time of the survey (Figure 1). It is interesting that the economics of tripling is enough to consign 'cost' to comparative unimportance (Figure 1).

'Privacy' is generally perceived by respondents to be somewhat less important than 'cost' and students exhibit more general agreement about the privacy factor. Male sophomores are notably unconcerned about privacy, whereas the crowded experience of tripling in suites seems to impel some interest in off-campus solitude.

The mirage of greater space has yet to lure Geneseo's students. In most cases they cite 'space' as the least important of the five criteria evaluated. Indeed, off-campus dwellings are often shared by so many students that space is decidedly limited. Thus the generally low emphasis placed on space may reflect simple realism as well as the greater importance placed on other criteria. In Geneseo the spacious apartment is an elusive and expensive chimera. As well, Rossi's landmark analysis of residential mobility found that dissatisfaction with space provision reflects household size much more than square footage (Rossi, 1955). In our analysis

this is mirrored in the fact that students tripled in dormitories put a higher premium on space than other sub-groups surveyed (Figure 1).



IMPLICATIONS

Where off-campus housing is concerned Geneseo students are not homogeneous. Granted, for many the status quo of dormitory life is a 'push' factor toward a 'freedom' from regulation and supervision. Short of the College abandoning its legal responsibilities or New York State reducing the drinking age it is unlikely that Geneseo students will cease to view the move off-campus as a march to 'freedom.' For many, especially women students, it is fair to describe the move as a resolution to greater independence, and it is striking that these same women are relatively unconcerned about the cost of off-campus living. It therefore appears that well-equipped apartment and town-house complexes targeted at responsible students will continue to find a ready market. Students' variable sensitivity to cost and apparent indifference to floor area suggest that very small and modestly priced studio or one-bedroom apartments in Geneseo would be successful. Further rental conversion of the village's Victorian housing stock would also draw the cost-conscious, but such conversions are less likely now given high single family home values in Geneseo's metropolitan fringe housing market.

Missing words such as accessibility, security, friendship, community, and even inertia provide clues to the motivation of the many students who elect to stay on-campus for most or all of their time at Geneseo. Further research will focus on identifying the structure of preference among long-term dormitory residents.

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