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Maine Perspective

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Decade of Research Reveals Profile of UM Students

In coming weeks, thousands of first-year students will enter institutions of higher learning across the country and face new challenges. But more and more colleges and universities like the University of Maine are determined to minimize a traditional trauma some on-campus students encounter—roommate incompatibility.

"Roommate matching is more difficult than ever before," said Scott Anchors, director of Residential Life. "Basically it comes down to balancing challenge and support for incoming students. We want them to have some commonality so the challenge (of making a living situation work) is not too strong."

Gone are the days of "odd couples" grinning and bearing it. Opposites still attract and birds of a feather still tend to flock. But there are many more factors taken into account when making room assignments for incoming students, especially in today's consumer-oriented society when a response like, "tough luck, work it out" is unacceptable when it comes to roommate difficulties, and when the quality of "away-from-home" life is so crucial to overall academic performance and well-being, Anchors said.

For the past 10 years, research has been ongoing at the University of Maine by Anchors and others to address issues related to roommate matching. "A Summary of a Decade of Research on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator in the Residence Halls at the University of Maine" was presented in July at the annual conference of the Association of College and University Housing Officers International at the University of Georgia. Anchors, author of "Applications of MBTI in Higher Education" (1987), co-authored research on roommate matching that won an ACUHO-I award in 1985. As a result of his work, Anchors is sought-after by national...
media as an authority on the subject of roommate matching, factors affecting the first-year student's adjustment to college life and student behavior in general.

Much of the research revolves around use of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) - a series of questions that categorizes individuals by psychological type, i.e. introvert/extravert, thinking/feeling, planful/spontaneous. Created during World War II, it was designed to help military personnel identify and effectively apply their talents, MBTI has since grown to be the most frequently used psychological instruments in the country in such areas as education, business and industry, and psychology/counseling.

It was first used in roommate matching in the mid-'70s at Auburn University and today, at least 15 higher education institutions use MBTI to help their students in everything from roommate selection to career advisement.

Two years ago, the University of Maine ceased administering MBTI to all incoming first-year students wishing to live on campus because of the expense. However, it is still used for research in understanding student behavior; as a tool for teambuilding among student, faculty and staff groups; and as another tool for self-understanding and development. It is available for roommate matching on request, but now Residential Life depends on a series of questions on its housing contracts - questions that have evolved from 10 years of research findings and have proven to be equally or even more important in determining roommate compatibility.

"I'm not convinced MBTI is the best way to match roommates," Anchors said. "We learn just as much by finding out if the students are smokers or non-smokers, their sexual orientation, whether they go to bed early or late - issues more powerful than personality type."

Among the highlights of the research:

* UM students were found to differ significantly from the general North American population on which MBTI data is available. What surfaced was a profile of the typical UM student - extraverted, "into everything," seeking out social events to fill the weekends that begin on Thursday, always in search of something new and novel. The profile of the atypical UM student is a "bookworm" who often is focused on inner goals and standards, organized, nothing hazardous in his/her social life.

* More students are interested in having very active social lives. Over the past decade, UM has increased significantly in the amount of spontaneous MB types in contrast to planful MB types.

* The high number of extraverts at UM may suggest continual tension in meeting stimulation needs, learning style mismatches and a variety of other person/environment challenges.

* The highest persisters (those who stay) at the University of Maine are described as practical, concrete, logical and analytical.

* The University of Maine, extraverted women more frequently join campus health clubs (87 percent) over the same type of men (51 percent).

A decade of research with data collected from more than 16,000 UM students has resulted in some interesting findings that have implications in many areas - from how resident assistants are recruited to how the University is marketed. "It's behavioral science research done not to change lives but to stimulate people to think," said Anchors.

The Microcomputer Resource Center, Computing & Instructional Technology Department, 11 Shibles Hall, will be closed Aug. 27-31. MRC is changing accounting/inventory systems and will be unavailable for all calls, customers or equipment pickup/delivery.