



Students hang out in front of the Campus Center

Chapter Three

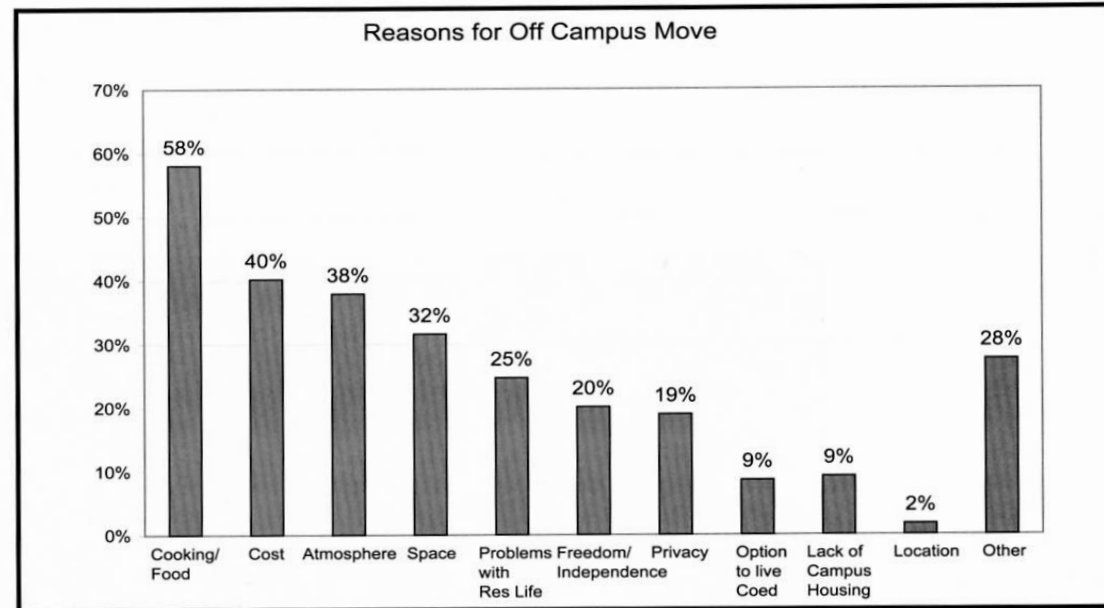
Off Campus Life



Chapter Three

Off Campus Life

- Reasons for Moving Off Campus
- Off Campus Life
- Time on Campus
- Aside: Transfer Students
- Transportation
- Conclusions



Reasons for Moving Off Campus

What factors did students identify as the most influential in shaping their decisions to move off campus? Food was clearly the primary consideration for most students. Cost, atmosphere, privacy, space, independence, problems with Residential Life, and lack of on-campus housing also emerged as salient factors.

Close to 60% of students cited food as a primary motivating factor in deciding to move off campus. Their dissatisfaction with the food situation on campus extends from the cost of meal plans to food quality to lack of freedom in deciding when, where, and what to eat. Many students think that the required purchase of a meal plan is unreasonable and costly. Furthermore, they feel that the general quality of food offered is inferior to food found at grocery stores and many restaurants.

Others prefer the variety of a grocery store to that of a cafeteria food-line. Many students are unhappy having to plan their meal times around a limited schedule, and still others are dissatisfied with the lack of intimacy felt when eating in the cafeteria, a space they feel is noisy, crowded, and sterile. It is important to note that seniors surveyed may have been referring to the old Kagin in addition to or instead of the new Café Mac.

The Importance of Food

Food plays an important role in the choice of whether to live on or off campus, and the meal plan has many positive and negative aspects. Meal plans liberate students from the time and responsibility that goes into buying and cooking food, and cleaning up afterwards. However, dining options are relatively limited (which can pose a problem for those with dietary restrictions), scheduled eating times are fixed, and many consider the cost to be too high. With rules prohibiting most cooking appliances in dorm rooms and dorm kitchens being converted into new rooms, the ability to cook for yourself while living on campus is limited. When asked for three reasons why he moved off campus, one student replied, "I thought that the meal plan was too expensive, I wanted my own cooking facilities, and I wanted to choose when [and where] I ate. Is that three?"

In addition to food, cost proved to be a principal concern. Many students feel that Macalester's \$6,206 price tag for thirty weeks of room and board is a bit excessive. While some discussed cost in absolute terms, others expressed concern regarding the discrepancy between the amount they were paying and the



Most students enjoy the freedom to choose when, where and what they eat

services they were receiving. For example, one student believes that the sum charged per academic year for room and board goes much further in an off campus environment, yielding roughly \$800 per month to cover housing and food. The students surveyed pay an average of \$385 per month in rent and utilities and \$39 per week in groceries. Not only is living on campus more expensive, but it also entails living in a double, in a suite, or in a cramped single, most likely without a private kitchen or bathroom.

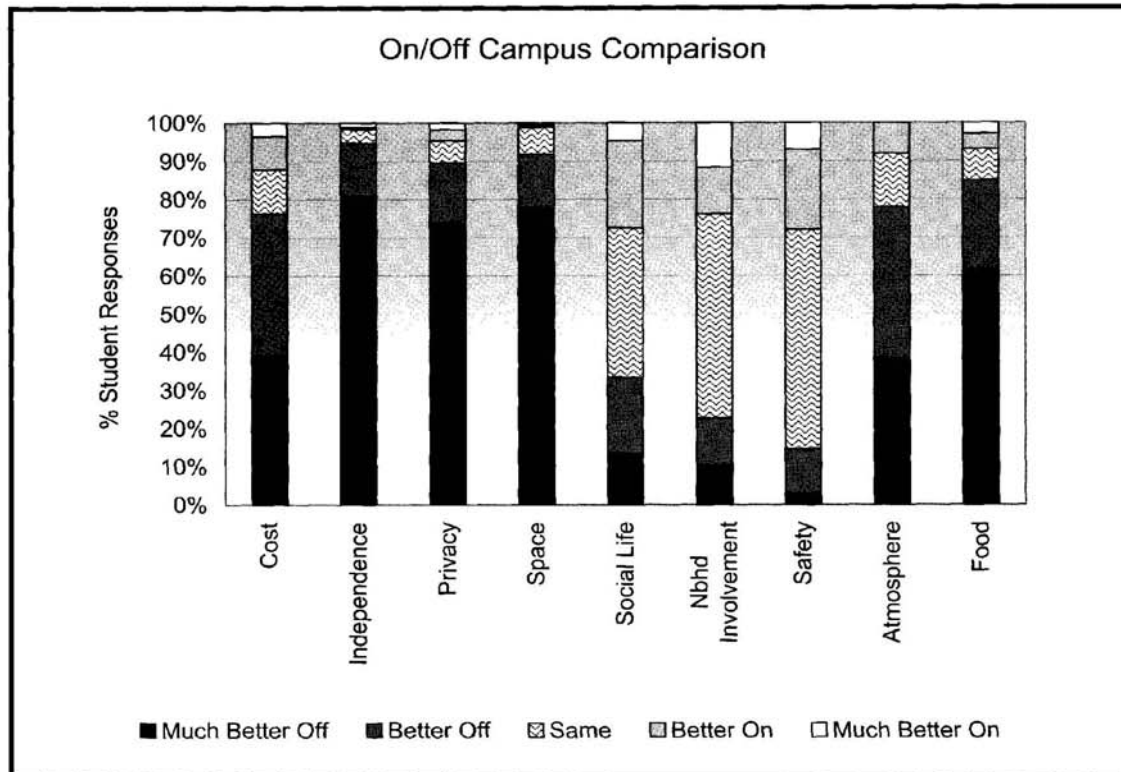
Atmosphere was also a large factor in the decision to move off campus. Although it is not easily described or quantified, atmosphere can refer to the physical environment of off campus housing as well as a general mood that is unlike the mood in residential halls. A desire to "get outside of the Macalester bubble" can fall under atmosphere, space, privacy, or independence because it involves the emotional and physical separation that comes with a move off campus. Increased privacy and independence also result from the

absence of Residential Life policy and surveillance in students' daily living environments.

Close to ten percent of students responded that moving off campus was not a choice. Transfer students and those who drew low room numbers were pushed off campus due to lack of available on-campus housing. Some students were asked to leave by Residential Life.

Off Campus Life

How did students' perceptions change once they were actually living off campus? A survey question attempting to uncover this information asked students to rate attributes of off campus student life on a scale of one to five. Most students reported that independence and privacy, space issues, and food are "much better off campus." This confirms the perceptions that students had when making their decision to live off campus. Other factors that were often cited as being "much better off campus" or "better off campus" were cost and atmosphere. Students enjoy being able to control their own expenditures



walking from one house to another, rather than from dorm room to dorm room, but they are interacting with the same people they interacted with when they lived on campus. This shows the importance of living in the dorms as an introduction to the campus social scene. Students who reported that they do not feel a part of the Macalester community frequently stated that they never had felt a part and this feeling had not been altered by a move off campus. Reasons for feeling less a part of the community include missing out on hearing about lectures or special events that are advertised primarily in the dining hall or other areas that off campus students do not frequent. These disenfranchised students often expressed a general sense of not being part of the “Macalester grapevine.”

The neighborhoods around Macalester have low crime rates and students’ perceptions of safety are unlikely to change with a move several blocks from campus. The general sense of ease in the neighborhood is demonstrated by students’ ratings of safety.

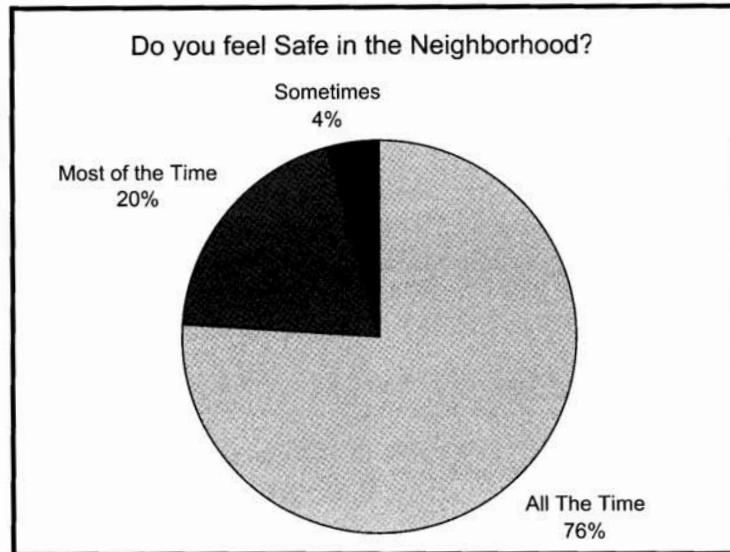
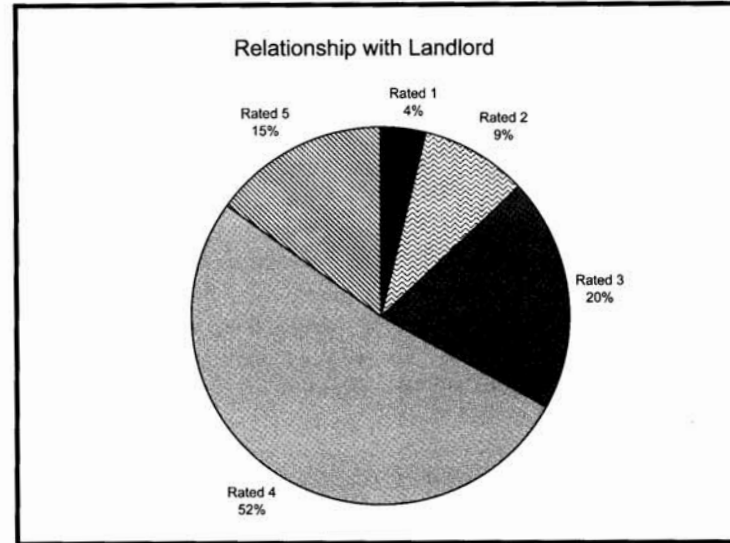
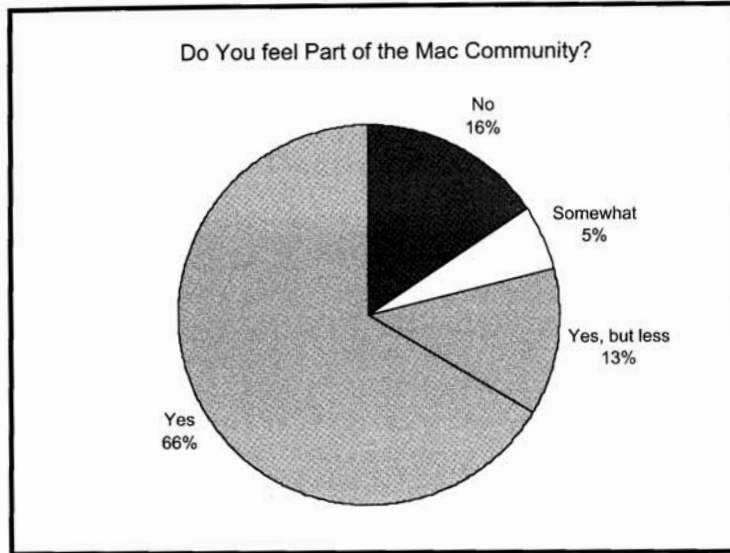
and saving money compared to room and board costs. The term “atmosphere” was used to measure students’ general feelings about their surroundings and its interpretation was left fairly open to the student.

Students responded that their levels of neighborhood involvement, social life, and

perceived safety are the same on and off campus. This is unsurprising, given that most off campus students have few if any relationships with non-students. Students generally reported that they do not interact with their neighbors at all.

Most students claimed that they still feel a part of the

Macalester community while living off campus. Many stated that they feel a part of the community because “all of my friends are Macalester people.” Given the answers to this question, it is not surprising that many students rated social life as being the same on and off campus. Students may be



Seventy-six percent of students reported that they feel safe “all of the time” and an additional twenty percent said that they feel safe “most of the time.” The remaining four percent who reported only feeling safe “sometimes” often had their perceptions of safety altered by a specific event, such as a “Peeping Tom” or a keyed car.

The majority of students reported that they interact with their landlords once a month or less. Most students rated their landlord favorably on a one to five scale, with 87% rating their

landlord a three or better. Although most students reported that repairs are done in a timely fashion, there were notable exceptions to this rule. Several students noted that repairs are “never” done and many reported that repairs often take more than a month. Broken ovens, toilets, and leaky roofs were all cited as problems that are ignored by landlords. In cases where a landlord or caretaker lives nearby, repairs seem to be done more quickly than with absentee landlords.

Internet

Eighty-nine percent of students surveyed have a personal computer and 61% have internet access. Of those with internet access, 19% have a cable modem, 34% have DSL, and 43% have dial up. The students without internet access frequent the on campus computer labs much more often than those with access. It seems that the computer labs, especially the ones in the library, are providing a very useful service for the 39% of off-campus students who do not have private internet access, as well as the additional 26% that do not have high speed access. Easy high-speed access to the internet could be a reason that the library is such a popular student space.



Time On Campus

One goal of the survey was to learn how much time off-campus students spend on campus while not in class. They were asked to specify how many hours they spend on campus per week, as well as where they spend them. As expected, there was variation among students, with some spending one to two hours just checking their mail while others spend thirty hours per week in various buildings. Those with scheduled reasons for being on campus such as athletic teams or work-study jobs spend more time on campus than most. The average off-campus student spends approximately 16 hours on campus each week, or about two hours per day. This is a significant amount of time but is not large when compared to living on campus full time.

When asked where they spend their time on campus, virtually every student listed the library or the campus center for some amount of time. Other answers were the gym and various buildings with studio or study space, such as Olin-Rice



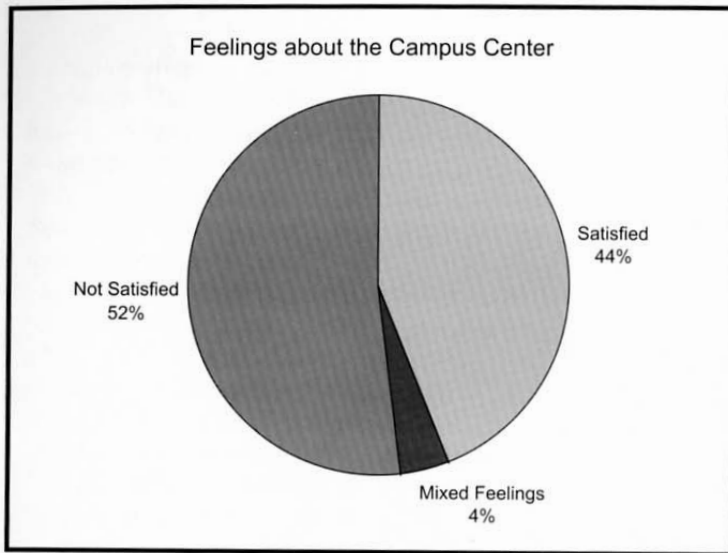
Students use the library to socialize as well as study

and the Art and Music buildings. Dorm rooms were also given as an answer, though certainly far less frequently than some responses. This means that students are either more isolated socially or have most of their friends off campus with them. As one transfer student pointed out, without a "D-Key," an off-campus student cannot drop in on friends in dorms without calling ahead to be let in.

Students depend on certain campus spaces to hang out or study in between classes or activities. One might assume

that students would socialize in the campus center. However, as many Macalester students can attest, to a large extent this does not happen, and the library has become a place of social interaction. This is despite the fact that the campus center is intended for multiple uses, including socializing, while the library is intended for studying.

After the student union was torn down in the summer of 1999, people began congregating in the library. It became a place for students to socialize in the absence of a union, and its



The campus center cafeteria dominates the ground floor

purpose expanded from solely work and studying to become a building where students go to see each other. The increased noise level on the first floor and in the basement demonstrate this. Students use the library for a wide range of tasks including research, group study, using computer applications, checking email, and using the Internet. While the library was initially established as a very formal space, the bottom two floors now resemble an Internet café, where students can simultaneously work, email and socialize.

The library can be contrasted with the new campus center. In the campus center, heavy compartmentalization within the building and a lack of a central space upon entering ensure that most students enter with a task-oriented approach instead of wanting only to bump into others. Students immediately go downstairs to check their mailboxes or upstairs to a sectioned off room where a student organization is holding a meeting. The entire first floor is taken up by the cafeteria, which generally serves on-campus students. Sixty-four percent of those interviewed eat at the Grille less than once a week, whether due to the menu and prices or to the general aesthetics of the building. For these reasons many see the campus center as aimed towards those living on campus.

Thus it is unsurprising that a majority of off campus students are not satisfied with the campus center. Those who said they were dissatisfied frequently mentioned the lack of a central meeting place as a reason. The other reasons given are of a similar tone. They

Reactions to the Campus Center

Fifty-two percent of students surveyed said that they are not satisfied with the new campus center. Forty-four percent said that they are satisfied, but many expressed reservations about the functionality and/or aesthetics of the space. Repeated criticisms pointed to the campus center's compartmentalization and formal feel. Many students feel that the identity of the space centers around the cafeteria and that the center lacks an informal gathering place. People frequently remarked that the campus center feels like an airport. Those who enjoy the campus center often described it as classy.

Aside: Transfer Students without Campus Housing

Macalester is primarily a residential college, with all students living on campus for their first two years. In that time people build relationships, especially on their dorm floor, that carry through their time at Mac. What then is the experience like for transfer students, who due to the housing shortage never live on campus? Anecdotally, with three interviews, the community experience of Macalester seems to be largely lost for transfers. One student remarked that she was a "pariah," that she only knew other transfer students. Another said people constantly come up to her and ask her if she is in fact a Macalester student.

When asked if the lack of campus housing has had an effect, one student responded that it has had a

"really, really large effect, especially socially. I think the transfer experience is isolating...especially when 80 percent of the school is on campus. It is hard to meet people when you are not part of the community." Another said

I didn't know that many people outside of football or rowing. The immediacy of waking up and going to Kagin or going to class is different when you have to make a trip and park somewhere. You are not necessarily included in that many things when you don't know what is going on because you are just not around...There are people you interact with socially but they are the people that you chose to, you don't have the general crowd of people that you are exposed to in a dorm setting.

The lack of random interactions that this student described was a recurring theme in the interviews. The same student stated that "No one ever visits you. Why would they? Why would you make a trip down Grand when you can just go across the hall?" Another student said that random and casual interactions were impossible "because (for interactions

with) the few people that I have made connections with on campus, we have to plan it out, I can't just stop by.... I live a 20 minute walk away."

Transfer students are left to find their own ways of meeting other students. One interviewee was an athlete, and said,

If I didn't have football or rowing, I would hate Macalester. I honestly don't know what I would do... What happens is that people come freshman year and get groups of friends, and get comfortable with that, and it stays like that... To come in sophomore year and just expect to be included with the rest of the students... it's just not going to happen.

As was pointed out, this difference is more pronounced when transfer students do not live on campus.

What then is the solution? The obvious one seems to be guaranteeing housing to sophomore transfer students. Given the current housing crunch, this may be hard to do. However, as one student said, "I know the school has an obligation to returning sophomores, but it is a lot easier to live off campus when you have already established friends and

community."

One student would at least like to see off campus students offered the same meal plan that on-campus students buy. "For someone who doesn't cook like me," he said, "it is a nice place to eat as well as meet and greet people."

Dean of Students

Laurie Hamre acknowledged the concerns of transfer students. She said that she met with five of them to hear their concerns about life at Macalester. According to Hamre, the students asked for a series of measures to help their and future transfer students' transition to Macalester. Their demands included a student organization for transfers, a game room and commuter bulletin board in the campus center and a reasonably priced, smaller meal plan. She said the administration was working on all these issues. However, the biggest issue, on-campus housing, was not going to change immediately.

Hamre said that until Macalester has more beds, the situation will not be remedied,

and that although Residential Life has taken steps to help transfer students find housing, they can do more and publicize it better. Starting in summer 2002, construction in the attic of Wallace Hall will yield approximately 25 new beds. Following that is a proposal to build townhouses for upperclass students. At that point, Hamre said, they will be able to accommodate many more transfer students.

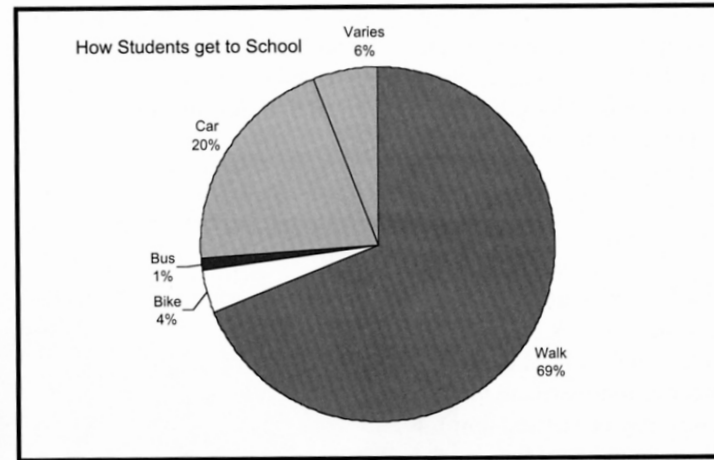
Whether a student comes to Macalester as a first year or a sophomore, the implicit agreement of a residential college is to provide a living space on campus. The consensus of the students interviewed is that the impact of the lack of housing has been large, having an overwhelmingly negative effect on their overall experience at Macalester. The total impact of the new measures for transfer students has yet to be seen, though as Hamre acknowledged, anything the school can do to help will be better than the current situation.

include lack of a game room, limited eating options for students, locked doors upstairs, and a general institutional feel.

Those who expressed satisfaction with the campus center often gave qualified answers. For example, a frequent response to this ques-



The upper floor of the campus center



tion was that a student liked the campus center because of the post office downstairs, and that was all he or she needed. There were some positive responses, with people specifically mentioning the microwave available for cooking lunches, the computers upstairs, and the meeting space for student groups. Still, there is a general lack of enthusiasm for the new building among off campus students.

Mode of Transportation

In addition to questions about time spent on campus, students were asked how they traveled to campus each day. Twenty percent of students used a car as their main mode of transportation to and from campus. This is a significant number, especially considering how close to campus most Macalester students live. However, a large majority of students, 70%, walked to campus each day, even though 55% owned cars. This means that

many students who own cars are choosing not to drive to campus. Some students live extremely close to campus, some enjoy walking, and others cited a lack of parking near campus as a reason for walking rather than driving. Only four percent listed a bike as their primary mode. However, given that most of the surveys took place in February and early March, the number of those driving to campus may be skewed upwards while the number of those walking and biking may be low.

that will require further attention by administrators, especially if more and more juniors are forced to move off campus.

Conclusions

In summary, we found that students are generally satisfied with their off campus experience and prefer living in a private residence to residential halls. Though off campus students do have some complaints, they generally do not affect their overall quality of life and could be ameliorated through conversations with the college. Issues such as a lack of on campus housing for transfer students and lack of unstructured social space in the new Campus Center may be issues