

**Insiders & Outsiders:  
Perceptions of College Students in Oneonta, New York**

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## INTRODUCTION

The social relationships between college students and the residents of the community who host them is a topic discussed at length in countless college town newspapers and other media sources, including Oneonta. Racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic differences can at times become loci of conflict between college students and the local populations. Surprisingly, there are relatively few systematic studies of the perceptions of local populations in or near college. This study seeks to better understand the perceptions of college students by residents of Oneonta.

## LITERATURE

A recent conference at the University at Albany explored the increased role that colleges and universities are playing in their communities (Lewis Mumford Center, 2001). In many cases, colleges and universities are becoming more active due to the reciprocal relationship they have with their respective communities: educational institutions thrive or perish in part because of the health of their host communities (Lewis Mumford Center, 2001; Campbell et al, 1985).

Few studies have looked directly at the impact that student populations have on their respective communities. Kenyon (1997) found that when exploring the consequences of “town and gown” relations between academic institutions and community there are numerous tensions and anxieties that exist as a result of students living in residential neighborhoods in college communities in the U.K. In addition she found that many residents of the community felt that the academic institution allowed its students to form a “community within the community” and that this led to numerous

negative outcomes. This is consistent with the notion of a college community as a subculture of its own (Fischer, 1975).

Communities are also dependent upon their universities for economic survival as well. For instance, Warren (2001) found that the influence of a medium size state university on the local community was tremendous. Similarly, Harris (1997) concluded that in the absence of the University in one U.K. area there would be 3,375 fewer people employed. The University directly employed 1,885 people and had a multiplier effect of between 1.029 and 1,490 jobs. This indicates that despite the negative social factors found by Kenyon (1997), academic institutions have a positive economic impact on their communities.

In the past, academic institutions have been viewed with skepticism and mistrust as academics often fail to respect and value community resources and tend to focus on their own interests rather than on those of the community (Seifer, 2000). Seifer (2000) further comments that community members seeking to improve the health of their communities should look at local academic institutions as potential partners and assets to be used to benefit the community. Academic institutions have valuable resources and expertise to offer their communities and the leadership source for forming community-campus partnerships is not relevant as long as the goals pursued place value on the strengths and assets of each (Seifer, 2000). Chatterton (2000) explored the relationship between academic institutions and community and found that in the U.K. elite universities historically play a cultural role in their communities, however more recently there has been a shift that includes contemporary mass universities in this role. He also indicates that a new environment in the U.K. is reshaping the relationship between the

university and the community making it possible for such relationships to be strengthened and to exist on a more equal basis.

## METHOD

In order to investigate community perception of college students, a questionnaire was designed with eight questions asking the respondents to compare students' behavior to other (non-college) residents of the same age on a five point Likert scale (see appendix one). In addition, respondents were asked to identify basic demographic criteria, including gender, occupation, education, income, and street of residence. Due to the low percentage of the permanent resident population of the community belonging to minority groups and the attendant issues in representational sampling, the survey did not seek to measure race or ethnicity as a variable. Respondents were also asked to indicate if they had a close friend or relative who was a student at one of the two colleges.

Due to the high proportion of community residents who are college students, a sampling frame that included only local residents was constructed with the use of phone lists. Phone lists were selected because of the mode of administration (by phone). Phone lists for the current year and for 1996 were compared so that the sample would include only those residents with tenure of five years in the community, further excluding the student population from the sampling frame. As a safeguard, respondents were first asked if they were currently college students at one of the two area colleges. The sampling frame included about three thousand names.

Respondents were called between October 30 and November 10, 2001 during the early evening. A total of 450 names were selected for the study by means of a systematic

sample, and 288 completed the survey (completion rate= 64 percent). The data was entered into SPSS and analyzed.

## FINDINGS

In order to assess the perception of college student's wealth by local residents, respondents were asked:

Do you feel that the average college student's family is more wealthy/ less wealthy/ or has about the same wealth as your family and friends?

More

Less

About the same

The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Residents' Perceptions of Student Wealth

	Number (%)
Students Less Wealthy	16 (5.6)
Students Equally Wealthy	201 (70.5)
Students More Wealthy	68 (23.9)
<i>TOTAL</i>	288 (100.0)

\* Percents may not add to 100 due to rounding

The perception of student wealth was a significant factor in only one way. There is a significant relationship ( $p=0.012$ ) between perception of socioeconomic difference and the belief that students drink to excess too often: those who perceive the students to be wealthier than themselves were eighteen percent more likely to perceive that students drink to excess too often than those who perceive them of the same or lesser wealth.

Respondents were asked two questions meant to assess the perception of benefit for the local economy:

On a scale from one to five where one is very poor, five is very good, and three is neutral, how would you rate the impact of the college students for local businesses?

And

On a scale from one to five where one is very poor, five is very good, and three is neutral, how would you rate the impact of the college student population on employment opportunities for local residents?

The answers were coded on a five point likert scale where 1 (very poor) became -2, 5 (very good) became +2, and 0 was neutral. The results are as follows in table two:

Table 2: Residents' Perceptions of Student Benefit to the Local Economy

	<u>Perception of Benefit for Business (%)</u>	<u>Perception of Benefit for Labor Market (%)</u>
Negative Effect	11 (3.8)	33 (11.5)
No Effect	54 (18.8)	105 (36.7)
Positive Effect	222 (77.2)	148 (51.8)
<i>TOTAL</i>	287 (99.8)	286 (100.0)

\* Percents may not add to 100 due to rounding

There was no significant difference among residents of the greater Oneonta area in regard to perception of benefit of students for area businesses. However, residents of outlying towns (outside the Town of Oneonta) were more likely to perceive the influence of the students on the local labor market as neutral or negative and center city residents were more likely to perceive the influence of the students as positive on the local labor market.

Respondents were asked two questions dealing with both the use of alcohol and illicit drugs. For both categories, respondents were asked to indicate whether students drink alcohol or illicit drugs to excess too often and to compare the use of alcohol and illicit drugs to other people of about the same age:

6. a. On a scale from one to five where one is much less likely, five is much more likely, and three is average, how would you rate college students' consumption of alcohol compared to local residents of the same age?

Much Less Likely 1 --- 2 --- 3 --- 4 --- 5 Much More Likely

→ b. Do you feel the average college student consumes alcohol to excess too often?  
 Yes  No

Question seven asked the same questions about illicit drugs. In regard to alcohol, 73.6 percent answered that they think students drink to excess too often; 64.1 percent answered that they think students use illicit drugs to excess too often. The results of the likert scale questions are shown in table three.

Table 3: Residents' Perceptions of Student Use of Alcohol and Illicit Drugs

	<u>Perception of Alcohol Use (%)</u>	<u>Perception of Illicit Drug Use (%)</u>
Less than others their age	4 (1.4)	17 (6.3)
About the same as others their age	108 (38.2)	153 (57.1)
More than others their age	171 (60.5)	98 (36.6)
<i>TOTAL</i>	283 (100.1)	268 (100.0)

\* Percents may not add to 100 due to rounding

There were no significant differences in regard to proximity to college students.

However, those who perceive the students to be more wealthy than themselves are also more likely to perceive that the students drink to excess too often (84.8%, as opposed to 69.3% of those who perceive the same wealth and 68.8% of those who perceive the students as less wealthy.

Respondents were also asked to compare the incidence of acts of violence and vandalism between students and others of the same age. The questions were:

8. On a scale from one to five where one is much less likely, five is much more likely, and three is average, how would you rate college students' likelihood of committing acts of vandalism compared to local residents of the same age?

Much Less Likely 1 - - - 2 - - - 3 - - - 4 - - - 5 Much More Likely

9. On a scale from one to five where one is much less likely, five is much more likely, and three is average, how would you rate college students' likelihood of committing acts of violence compared to local residents of the same age?

Much Less Likely 1 - - - 2 - - - 3 - - - 4 - - - 5 Much More Likely

The results are shown in table four.

Table 4: Residents' Perceptions of Violence and Vandalism Committed by Students

	<u>Perception of Vandalism</u> (%)	<u>Perception of Violence</u> (%)
Less than others their age	47 (16.7)	27 (9.5)
About the same as others their age	143 (50.7)	156 (54.9)
More than others their age	92 (32.6)	101 (35.6)
<i>TOTAL</i>	282 (100.0)	284 (100.0)

\* Percents may not add to 100 due to rounding

Again, there were no significant differences due to the proximity to the college students or on any other measure.

## DISCUSSION

Statistical tests of the variation for each variable presented above failed to show any significant effect on the part of respondents' proximity to students living in their neighborhood, working with students through community service, having a close friend or relative who is a student, or the perception of wealth (see Appendix 2). The only exceptions were noted above: neighborhood or residence effects the perception of benefit for the local labor market, and those who perceive the students to be wealthier than them. Given such results, it seems unlikely that Oneonta residents perceive the students the way they do because of specific behaviors of local college students. Instead, it is more likely that the perceptions of students found among Oneonta residents are indicative of wider attitudes toward college students found in the culture at large.

The vast majority of respondents perceived the students to be less or equally wealthy compared to themselves, and this is not surprising given socioeconomic realities. That 23.9 percent of respondents perceived students to be more wealthy than themselves is also not surprising: college students are disproportionately represented by middle and upper income groups, but the community is a microcosm for the society at large. In other

words, it should be expected that a certain proportion of community members, in any community, should perceive college students in this way.

Respondents perceived the presence of the student population as more beneficial to businesses than to the labor market. The benefit to local business likely seems self-evident to most area residents because of the visible economic orientation of downtown and other economic areas. However, as students compete for low wage service sector employment against local residents, it is not surprising that nearly half (48.3%) perceive the students to have either no impact or a negative impact on the labor market. Many local residents seem to believe that the many of the added jobs due to the colleges are in turn filled by students. It is a topic deserving of more research.

The perception of alcohol and drug use is not altogether surprising given that college students are often portrayed in juvenile movies and tabloid television specials specifically for shock appeal. Students are often portrayed indulging in drugs and alcohol, and the findings of this survey reflect the portrayals of mass culture. Without significant effects based on proximity to students, it is unlikely that the opinions are founded on any level of experience or inexperience specifically with local students. This is also true for perceptions of vandalism and violence.

The relationship between “town and gown,” Oneonta and its two colleges, is indeed healthier than might be imagined based solely on media imagery and anecdotes spread amongst friends. Like any relationship there is room for improved communication and understanding, but the foundation for dialog is stable. With continued discussion, relations between the city and the colleges can continue to be strong and become stronger.

APPENDIX ONE  
Oneonta Community Perception Survey

Questionnaire

1. Are you a student at any of the Oneonta area colleges? Y/N  
If yes, thank respondent for her/his time and end call

2. Do you feel that the average college student's family is more wealthy/ less wealthy/ or has about the same wealth as your family and friends?

More

Less

About the same

3. On a scale from one to five where one is none and five is very often, how much contact do you have with college students performing community service or volunteer work?

None/ Never 1 --- 2 --- 3 --- 4 --- 5 Very Often

4. On a scale from one to five where one is very poor, five is very good, and three is neutral, how would you rate the impact of the college students for local businesses?

Very Poor 1 --- 2 --- 3 --- 4 --- 5 Very Good

5. On a scale from one to five where one is very poor, five is very good, and three is neutral, how would you rate the impact of the college student population on employment opportunities for local residents?

Very Poor 1 --- 2 --- 3 --- 4 --- 5 Very Good

6. a. On a scale from one to five where one is much less likely, five is much more likely, and three is average, how would you rate college students' consumption of alcohol compared to local residents of the same age?

Much Less Likely 1 --- 2 --- 3 --- 4 --- 5 Much More Likely

→ b. Do you feel the average college student consumes alcohol to excess too often?

Yes

No

7. a. On a scale from one to five where one is much less likely, five is much more likely, and three is average, how would you rate college students' consumption of illegal drugs compared to local residents of the same age?

Much Less Likely 1 - - - 2 - - - 3 - - - 4 - - - 5 Much More Likely

→ b. Do you feel the average college student consumes illegal drugs too often?

Yes

No

8. On a scale from one to five where one is much less likely, five is much more likely, and three is average, how would you rate college students' likelihood of committing acts of vandalism compared to local residents of the same age?

Much Less Likely 1 - - - 2 - - - 3 - - - 4 - - - 5 Much More Likely

9. On a scale from one to five where one is much less likely, five is much more likely, and three is average, how would you rate college students' likelihood of committing acts of violence compared to local residents of the same age?

Much Less Likely 1 - - - 2 - - - 3 - - - 4 - - - 5 Much More Likely

10. Do you have a family member or friend or works or studies at an Oneonta area college?  Yes

No

11. Do you live in Oneonta?  Yes

No

→ If **YES**, on what street do you live? \_\_\_\_\_

(After call, code for neighborhood)

12. What is your gender?  Male

Female

13. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_

14. What is the highest level of education you have completed? \_\_\_\_\_

15. What is your approximate yearly income? \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX TWO

### Correlation Matrix of Measured Variables

		Correlations									
		perception of benefit to business	perception of benefit to labor market	perception of alcohol consumption	perception of illicit drug use	perception of vandalism	perception of violence	Neighborhood Distance from Colleges	contact with student volunteer work	perception of student's wealth	
Spearman's rho	perception of benefit to business	1.000	.421**	-.140*	-.057	-.094	.007	-.006	.086	.055	
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.018	.351	.117	.911	.920	.144	.352	
		N	287	285	282	267	281	283	275	287	284
	perception of benefit to labor market	.421**	1.000	-.113	-.037	-.089	.020	-.131*	.158**	-.016	
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.059	.542	.136	.734	.029	.007	.794	
		N	285	286	282	267	281	283	275	286	283
	perception of alcohol consumption	-.140*	-.113	1.000	.382**	.139*	.156**	-.066	-.099	.081	
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.018	.059	.000	.020	.009	.275	.096	.175	
		N	282	282	283	268	278	280	273	283	280
	perception of illicit drug use	-.057	-.037	.382**	1.000	.240**	.224**	-.023	-.118	.093	
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.351	.542	.000	.000	.000	.710	.054	.129	
		N	267	267	268	268	267	268	268	265	
	perception of vandalism	-.094	-.089	.139*	.240**	1.000	.566**	-.038	-.074	-.005	
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.117	.136	.020	.000	.000	.537	.216	.931	
		N	281	281	278	267	282	282	273	282	279
	perception of violence	.007	.020	.156**	.224**	.566**	1.000	-.051	-.052	.034	
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.911	.734	.009	.000	.000	.402	.381	.565	
		N	283	283	280	268	282	284	275	284	281
	Neighborhood Distance from Colleges	-.006	-.131*	-.066	-.023	-.038	-.051	1.000	-.132*	.037	
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.920	.029	.275	.710	.537	.402	.028	.545	
		N	275	275	273	260	273	275	276	274	
	contact with student volunteer work	.086	.158**	-.099	-.118	-.074	-.052	-.132*	1.000	-.146*	
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.144	.007	.096	.054	.216	.381	.028	.013	
		N	287	286	283	268	282	284	276	288	285
	perception of student's wealth	.055	-.016	.081	.093	-.005	.034	.037	-.146*	1.000	
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.352	.794	.175	.129	.931	.565	.545	.013	
		N	284	283	280	265	279	281	274	285	285

\*\* .Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

\* .Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

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