

Demographics and Voting Patterns in Montevallo SGA Elections

Terry Hughston, University of Montevallo

Carl Doerfler, PhD, Faculty Mentor, University of Montevallo

Abstract

Many different factors influence whether or not a particular student will vote in a student government association election. By analyzing several different demographic categories of the participating voters and how they relate to the same proportional demographics for the entire student community, some specific variables can be used as significant indicators for how likely a particular person would be to vote in a future student government election. Demographic variables that indicate a higher level of participation on campus are the best ways to gauge a person or groups' potential participation rate or suggest a pattern of voting among a specific segment of the overall campus population. Given this information, various institutions of student government, student life and campus involvement can do some self-analysis of how effectively they are reaching the student body as a whole.

Theory

In his monumental work Democracy in America, Alexis de Tocqueville often noted the high levels of civic participation among American citizens of his day. He described the township as the basic building block for our both our government and our democratic values. Tocqueville also observed the seeming relationship between the level of civic participation to the level of political participation and association among the same groups of people. Involvement in the local community seemed to instill a certain sense of both duty and responsibility to appreciate and participate in American democracy from the local upwards to the highest level of government. Just as this was true in the 1830s, the same principles still apply today.

In recent years, much research has been done showing the influence that involvement in one's community can have on a particular individual or group's participation rates in politics and political discourse in general. In his article "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital" and in his subsequent book Bowling Alone: The Decline and Rebirth of American Community, Robert Putnam illustrates how a decline in "social capital" (involvement in one's community through various civic organizations and other social networks) can have direct effects on the likelihood that a given individual will turn out to vote in an election, attend public meetings, or run for an public office themselves. However, Putnam also shows his readers how as social capital wanes political participation drops off accordingly. As we become more isolated from our community, our sense of duty and responsibility to participate in its governance fades away.

In a similar study conducted at Stanford University, authors Daniel A. McFarland and Reuben J. Thomas show that the relationship between civic involvement and political engagement can even trace its beginnings in adolescence and young adulthood. Their article "Bowling Young: How Youth Voluntary Associations Influence Adult Political Participation" shows how involvement among young people ranging from community service organizations to the student council at the local school can be predictors of their future political participation that are just as statistically significant as their parents' level of participation and the family's socioeconomic status.

These studies all seem to show a very close correlation to one's level of involvement and the corresponding likelihood of participation in democratic governance. This study was conducted to see if this same correlation would be a significant predictor of participation among college students in the process of their own self-rule (albeit somewhat narrower) in the form of

student government elections. If the relationship was sound in this case, variables that would indicate a higher level of campus involvement could be used to generalize that some certain demographic groups were more likely to participate in SGA elections. The main focus variables were membership in Greek letter fraternities and sororities and a student's resident status (living in a residence hall on campus as opposed to alternative housing off campus).

Methods

In order to gauge whether or not a particular student's level of participation would affect turnout rates in student government elections, a survey consisting of fifteen questions was included with the ballot for the 2009-2010 University of Montevallo Student Government Association elections that took place via the university's online software. The survey asked respondents a variety of questions in order to acquire some basic demographic information and assess levels of participation in campus activities and organizations.

The results from the survey generated many descriptive statistics about those students who participated in the election and allowed certain demographic groups to be isolated and studied. Several of these variables were then cross tabulated with the respondents' self reported level of campus participation to see which demographic groups might be more involved. The most significant of these variables were then checked for statistical significance based on the voter turnout of that particular demographic group and the percentage of the group among the campus population as a whole by using a chi-square test. The test generated values for both the Pearson's Chi-Square model and the Yates' Corrected Chi-Square model along with their corresponding p values.

Data

The ballot and survey were available for student voting for five full days. Out of the 2832 students enrolled at the University of Montevallo in the Spring 2009 semester, 635 people voted for a turnout rate of 22.42% (a high turnout number given recent trends) and 599 people responded to at least some of the survey questions for a 94.33% response rate among those who voted and a 21.15% participation rate among the entire campus population.

312 out of 899 students living in university residence halls in the Spring 2009 semester voted for a turnout rate of 34.71% for resident students and 12.59% for commuter students. 272 of the 401 Greek letter fraternity and sorority members voted for an overall Greek turnout rate of 67.83%, a fraternity turnout of 70.90% and a sorority turnout rate of 65.54%. Independent students voted at much lower rates with an overall turnout of 14.93%. 403 respondents identified themselves to be female while 180 were male which is seemingly in accordance with the male to female ratio of the campus at large.

Other demographic information was recorded but was not able to be compared to the overall campus population as those numbers were not available for the Spring 2009 semester as of the writing of this report. However, a full list of survey questions as well as more demographic information from the respondents is included in Appendix 1 and Appendix 2.

Overall, levels of participation seemed high among those who voted. 32.9% identified that they were “very active in numerous campus organizations and events,” 41.1% reported that they “sometimes participate in campus organizations and events,” and only 9.8% of respondents said they “do not participate in many campus organizations or events.” When cross-tabulated with the respondents’ self-reported level of campus participation, several demographic variables showed higher rates of involvement in campus organizations and activities.

Table 1
Cross Tabulation of Affiliation by Participation

Affiliation	Participation					
	Unanswered	Very Active	Doesn't Participate	Sometimes Participates	Prefer not To Answer	
Unanswered	37	0	1	1	0	39
Row %	94.9	0.0	2.6	2.6	0.0	6.1
Col %	82.2	0.0	1.6	0.4	0.0	
Greek	6	145	10	94	17	272
	2.2	53.3	3.7	34.6	6.3	42.8
	13.3	69.4	16.1	35.7	30.4	
Independent	2	57	48	153	21	281
	0.7	20.3	17.1	54.4	7.5	44.3
	4.4	27.3	77.4	58.2	37.5	
Prefer not To answer	0	7	3	15	18	43
	0.0	16.3	7.0	34.9	41.9	6.8
	0.0	3.3	4.8	5.7	32.1	
	45	209	62	263	56	635
	7.1	32.9	9.8	41.4	8.8	100.0

Cases Included 635 Missing Cases 0

Membership in a Greek organization, living in residence halls, and having been an SGA officer previously showed the highest levels of participation. Other variables (such as class rank, college attended, etc.) were almost evenly distributed among the three levels of participation but still in accordance with the overall trend towards the median answer of “I sometimes participate in campus organizations and events.”

53.3% of Greek students reported that they were “very active” while only 20.3% of independent students identified themselves this way. Conversely, only 3.7% of Greek students described themselves as not participating at all, but the same number for independent students was at a much higher 17.1%. Even more strikingly, Greek students comprised 60.4% of those that identified themselves as “very active” despite the fact that they are a numerical minority.

Table 2
Cross Tabulation of Residency by Participation

Residency	Participation					
	Unanswered	Very Active	Doesn't Participate	Sometimes Participates	Prefer not To Answer	
Unanswered	36	0	0	0	0	36
Row %	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.7
Col %	80.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	
Commuter	5	75	43	113	30	266
	1.9	28.2	16.2	42.5	11.3	41.9
	11.1	35.9	69.4	43.0	53.6	
Prefer not	0	7	1	2	11	21
	0.0	33.3	4.8	9.5	52.4	3.3
	0.0	3.3	1.6	0.8	19.6	
Resident	4	127	18	148	15	312
	1.3	40.7	5.8	47.4	4.8	49.1
	8.9	60.8	29.0	56.3	26.8	
	45	209	62	263	56	635
	7.1	32.9	9.8	41.4	8.8	100.0

Cases Included 635 Missing Cases 0

This same pattern can be notice in the data for resident and commuter students. Students living in a residence hall answered that they were very active 40.7% of the time while commuter students answered the same way only 28.2% of the time. Again, another big difference is the number of respondents who described themselves as not participating at all. Resident students answered this way only 5.8% of the time while commuter students chose this answer 16.2% of the time. Similarly to the Greek/Independent variable, resident students made up 60.8% of respondents that answered “very active” even though they make up less than a third of the overall campus population. Having previously been an officer in the Student Government Association was also accompanied by higher levels of reported involvement. 58.8% of those who had been involved in SGA before identified themselves as being “very active.”

Because several of the Greek organizations at the University of Montevallo have designated halls in the university owned residence halls, cross tabulation was also done to see if

the resident numbers might be influenced by the fact that many Greek students are also resident students. However, this was not shown to be true. 45.8% of Greek students identified themselves as resident students while 46.2% said they were commuters. This was similar to the respective percentages of 47.4% resident and 48.5% commuter among independent students who voted.

The variables concerning Greek affiliation and residency were then tested against the numbers for the campus population at large for statistical significance to measure whether these were true predictors of voter turnout or were caused due to chance. The results of both the Pearson's Chi-Square Test and the Yates' Corrected Chi-Square Test along with their corresponding p values for both the Greek/Independent variable and the Resident/Commuter variable are reflected in Table 3 and Table 4.

		Voted		
		Yes	No	
Greek	Yes	272	129	401
	No	363	2068	2431
		635	2197	2832
Pearson's Chi-Square		553.74	Yates' Corrected Chi-Sq	550.70
P (Pearson's)		0.0000	P (Yates)	0.0000

		Voted		
		Yes	No	
Resident	Yes	312	587	899
	No	323	1610	1933
		635	2197	2832
Pearson's Chi-Square		114.24	Yates' Corrected Chi-Sq	113.20
P (Pearson's)		0.0000	P (Yates)	0.0000

It is important to note when viewing Table 3 and Table 4 that the reflected p values for both the Pearson's Chi-Square and Yates' Corrected Chi-Square models in both instances are not actually 0. When running both tests, the SPSS software could not round the true p value to enough decimal places to show a non-zero digit. However, for each test the standard measure of statistical significance still applies ($p < 0.05$ is significant, $p < 0.01$ is very significant).

Analysis and Conclusion

The statistics suggest very strongly that membership in a Greek letter fraternity or sorority and living in a residence hall are two of the best predictors of whether or not one will participate in a student government election. However, the overall trend of respondents self-reporting high rates of campus participation seem to be the most compelling evidence and the Greek/Independent and Resident/Commuter variables seem to be only areas that represent even higher levels of involvement. Logic also suggests that this phenomenon might be true.

Students who live on campus are more likely to participate in various organizations and events merely because they are closer in proximity to the location of most events. A student who commutes to an apartment, house, or other form of housing off-campus is less likely to be motivated to return to campus after classes are over (and this effect should be stronger the further away the student lives from school). Resident students participate at higher rates if for no other reason than convenience. In addition, the office of Housing and Residence Life plans many events specifically geared at those who live in residence halls and many other campus events are planned in conjunction with popular meal times in the cafeteria (which is frequented more by resident students because meal plans are required). In some instances, some planned action is required on behalf of resident students who wish to totally abstain from campus events.

Students who are members of Greek organizations are more involved almost by definition. To join a fraternity or sorority is to participate in a campus organization already. In addition, Greek organizations often plan a wide variety of social and community service events attendance at which is often either strongly encouraged or mandatory. Many Greek students are involved in a variety of other organizations on campus as well, from intramurals and campus ministries to student government and other special interest organizations. Greek life on campus entails much more than participation only in a weekly chapter meeting.

This same effect even reaches out to some of the potential flaws with this study. Some may say that all elections and especially an election like this that deals with a relatively small population are candidate-driven and that these specific results will be skewed. The fact that several of the candidates running in the election that this study dealt with were Greek would seem to be evidence of that fact. However, rather than being a negative influence, the fact that those who are interested in student government enough to run for office come from the same group of more involved people that could be predicted to turn out and vote should come as no surprise.

Although the data seems to support the hypothesis that campus involvement (specifically Greek organizations and residency) are predictors of what demographics will turn out to vote, future studies could be done to further investigate those who vote in these elections and their motivation. More in-depth studies into the effects of class rank and which college a particular student attends could reveal some very interesting results. However, any new findings should not negate the relationship between campus involvement and voter turnout.

The apparent correlation of social capital and political participation that can be seen here has a variety of applications. Not only are these findings a confirmation that certain

demographics are currently being reached effectively, this also provides a sign that some groups seem to be systematically left out from student governance (particularly commuter students who make up a numerical majority of students at the University of Montevallo). Every effort should be made to ensure that the voice and concerns of every demographic group are equitably represented in the process of choosing student leaders.

If the correlation that the data suggests is true, some facets of campus participation are valuable and effective predictors of voter turnout. Yet this should come as no surprise, as such participation cannot happen in a vacuum. Anyone spending a lot of time, effort, and energy in an organization and an event (whether Greek or other campus groups and events) is going to feel the resulting sense of pride that only comes from participation in one's community. This phenomenon exists here at the University of Montevallo to the extent that people (students, alumni, faculty, staff and members of the surrounding community alike) all place meaning in the term "the Montevallo experience." Involvement in campus activities instills a love of one's alma mater that mere attendance could never aspire to match. These feelings of fondness and affection can easily manifest themselves in a sense of duty to the same institution and a responsibility to take part in its governance when given the chance. To use the terminology of the literature in the field, campus involvement is a college student's method of gaining social capital. The correlation between increased levels of social capital and political involvement that can be measured in governmental levels ranging from the local township to the federal government can be seen even in the student government elections at a small university in Alabama.

Appendix 1: Survey Questions

1. What is your sex?
 - Male
 - Female
 - Prefer not to answer
2. What is your current status?
 - Resident Student
 - Commuter Student
 - Prefer not to answer
3. What is your affiliation?
 - Independent
 - Greek
 - Prefer not to answer
4. In which college are you a student?
 - College of Arts and Sciences
 - College of Education
 - College of Business
 - College of Fine Arts
 - Prefer not to answer
5. What was most influential factor in your decisions in this election?
 - Personal relationship/friendship with the candidate
 - Candidate's experience with SGA
 - Candidate's campus involvement and affiliation
 - Candidate's stance on campus/student issues
 - Candidate seemed approachable/friendly
 - Amount of publicity for individual candidates
 - Prefer not to answer
6. What was second most influential factor in your decisions in this election?
 - Personal relationship/friendship with the candidate
 - Candidate's experience with SGA
 - Candidate's campus involvement and affiliation
 - Candidate's stance on campus/student issues
 - Candidate seemed approachable/friendly
 - Amount of publicity for individual candidates
 - Prefer not to answer
7. What is your current academic status?
 - Freshman
 - Sophomore
 - Junior
 - Senior
 - Prefer not to answer
8. Have you ever been an officer (Executive Officer, Senator, or Justice Counsel Member) in the Student Government Association?
 - Yes
 - No
 - I would but I don't know how to get involved.
 - Prefer not to answer
9. What is your current GPA?
 - 0 – 0.9
 - 1.0 – 1.9
 - 2.0 – 2.9
 - 3.0 – 4.0
 - Prefer not to answer

10. Did you review the election guide before voting in this election?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer

11. How did you find out about the SGA elections?

- Signs and posters around campus
- Online (Facebook, Myspace, ForUM)
- A candidate approached me about voting
- A friend told me
- Prefer not to answer

12. How many hours a week do you study?

- 0-4 hours
- 5-9 hours
- 10-14 hours
- 15-19 hours
- 20+ hours
- Prefer not to answer

13. Which of the following best describes your activity on campus?

- I am very active in numerous campus organizations and events.
- I sometimes participate in campus organizations and events.
- I do not participate in many campus organizations or events.
- Prefer not to answer

14. How would you rate your political identification?

- Very Liberal
- Moderately Liberal
- Moderate
- Moderately Conservative
- Very Conservative
- Prefer not to answer

15. How would you rate the SGA?

- Very responsive to student concerns
- Mildly responsive to student concerns
- Neutral
- Mildly unaware of student concerns
- Very unaware of student concerns
- Prefer not to answer

Appendix 2: Other Charts and Tables

Figure 1

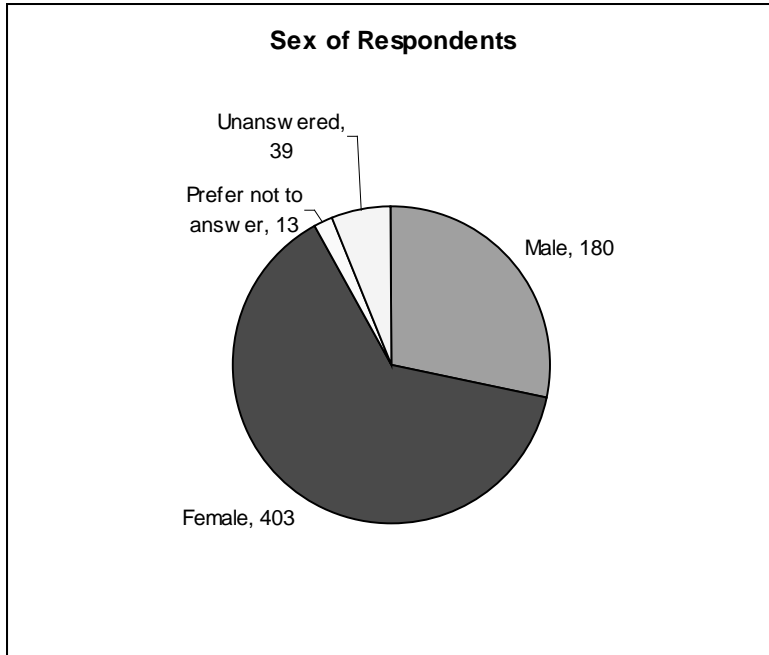


Figure 2

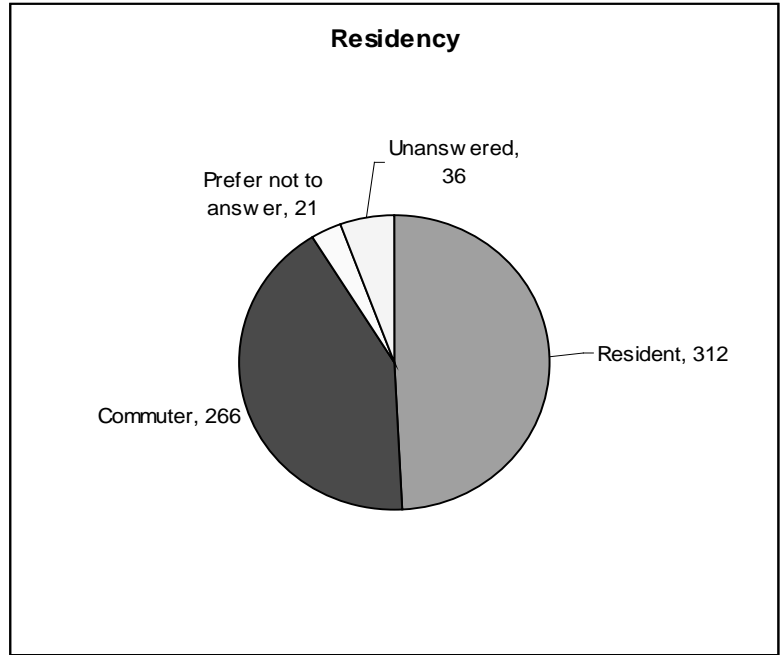


Figure 3

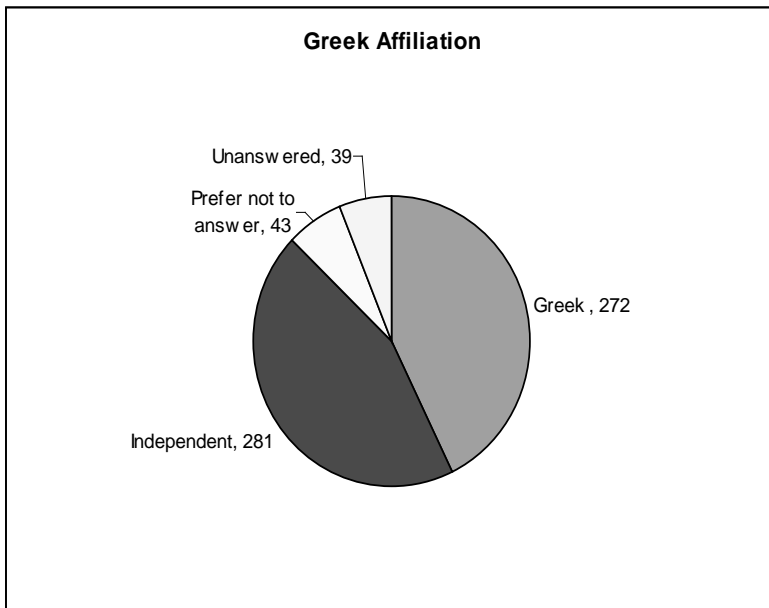


Figure 4

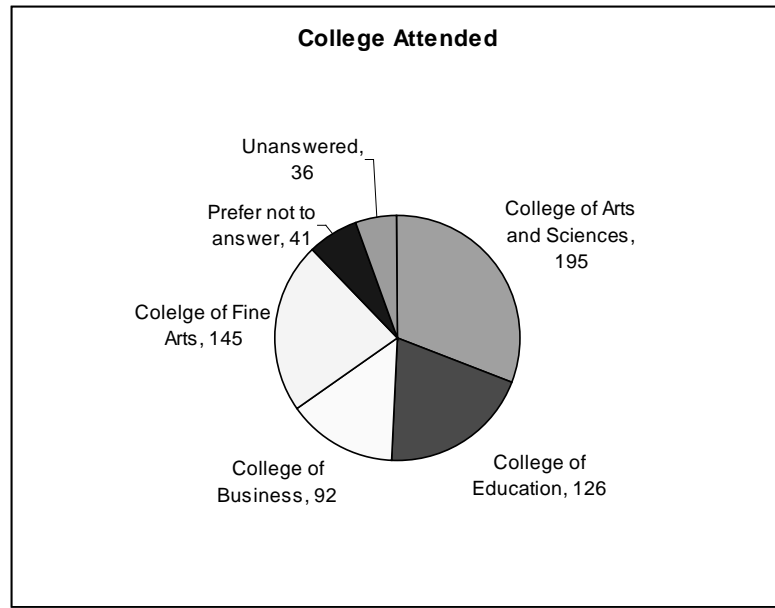


Figure 5

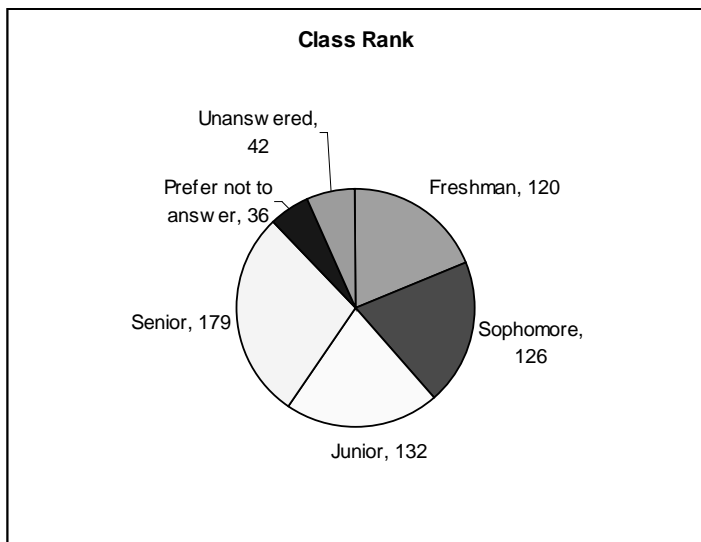
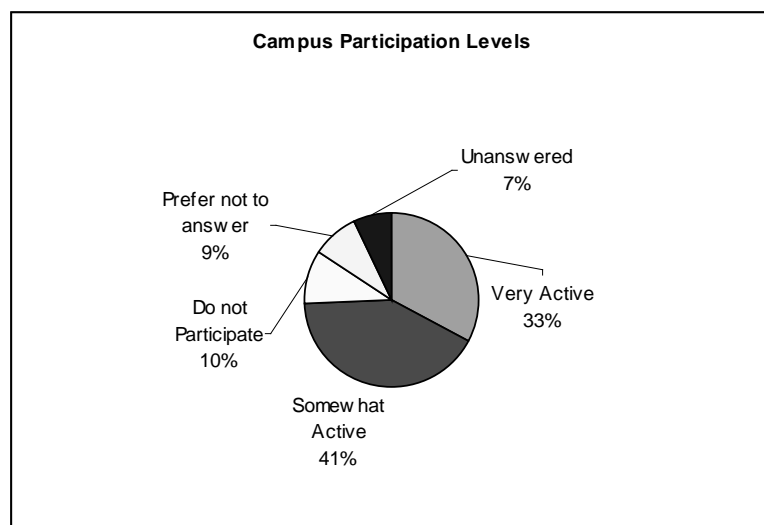


Figure 6



Cross Tabulation of Affiliation by Sex

Table 5

Affiliation	Sex				
	Unanswered	Female	Male	Prefer not	
Unanswered	36	2	1	0	39
Greek	1	175	95	1	272
Independent	2	199	77	3	281
Prefer not	0	27	7	9	43
	39	403	180	13	635

Cross Tabulation of Residency by Affiliation

Table 6

Residency	Affiliation				
	Unanswered	Greek	Independent	Prefer not	
Unanswered	36	0	0	0	36
Row %	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.7
Col %	92.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	
Commuter Student	2	123	129	12	266
	0.8	46.2	48.5	4.5	41.9
	5.1	45.2	45.9	27.9	
Prefer not	0	6	4	11	21
	0.0	28.6	19.0	52.4	3.3
	0.0	2.2	1.4	25.6	
Resident Student	1	143	148	20	312
	0.3	45.8	47.4	6.4	49.1
	2.6	52.6	52.7	46.5	
	39	272	281	43	635
	6.1	42.8	44.3	6.8	100.0

Cross Tabulation of SGA Involvement by Participation						
SGA	Participation					
	Unanswered	Very Active	Doesn't Participate	Sometimes Participates	Prefer not To Answer	
Unanswered	42	0	0	2	1	45
Row %	93.3	0.0	0.0	4.4	2.2	7.1
Col %	93.3	0.0	0.0	0.8	1.8	
I would but I don't Know how	0	9	4	21	2	36
	0.0	25.0	11.1	58.3	5.6	5.7
	0.0	4.3	6.5	8.0	3.6	
No	3	155	52	219	30	459
	0.7	33.8	11.3	47.7	6.5	72.3
	6.7	74.2	83.9	83.3	53.6	
Prefer not	0	5	1	3	18	27
	0.0	18.5	3.7	11.1	66.7	4.3
	0.0	2.4	1.6	1.1	32.1	
Yes	0	40	5	18	5	68
	0.0	58.8	7.4	26.5	7.4	10.7
	0.0	19.1	8.1	6.8	8.9	
	45	209	62	263	56	635
	7.1	32.9	9.8	41.4	8.8	100.0

Cross Tabulation of Class by Participation						
Class	Participation					
	Unanswered	Very Active	Doesn't Participate	Sometimes Participates	Prefer not To Answer	
Unanswered	40	0	1	1	0	42
Row %	95.2	0.0	2.4	2.4	0.0	6.6
Col %	88.9	0.0	1.6	0.4	0.0	
Freshman	2	49	6	58	5	120
	1.7	40.8	5.0	48.3	4.2	18.9
	4.4	23.4	9.7	22.1	8.9	
Junior	1	48	10	65	8	132
	0.8	36.4	7.6	49.2	6.1	20.8
	2.2	23.0	16.1	24.7	14.3	
Prefer not To answer	0	6	10	5	15	36
	0.0	16.7	27.8	13.9	41.7	5.7
	0.0	2.9	16.1	1.9	26.8	
Senior	1	65	22	72	19	179
	0.6	36.3	12.3	40.2	10.6	28.2
	2.2	31.1	35.5	27.4	33.9	
Sophomore	1	41	13	62	9	126
	0.8	32.5	10.3	49.2	7.1	19.8
	2.2	19.6	21.0	23.6	16.1	
	45	209	62	263	56	635
	7.1	32.9	9.8	41.4	8.8	100.0

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