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Emotional Support Animals in College and University Housing

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT ANIMALS are increasingly common in residence halls. This study examines the benefits and challenges of having an Emotional Support Animal (ESA) while living in campus housing, from the perspective of the animals' owners and their roommates. Using a mixed methods case study approach, we collected qualitative and quantitative data via an online survey and in-person focus groups. The following themes emerged as benefits of emotional support animals, as identified by participants: improved or maintained mental health, motivation to take care of oneself, and increased social interactions. Challenges included having to disclose one's mental health diagnosis, needing to educate others about their emotional support animal, sharing it with others, ESA-related expenses, availability of pet supplies, barriers to respite care, transportation and parking difficulties, potential pet loss, and the difficulty of obtaining a letter from a health professional as part of the application process to have an ESA on campus. Despite these challenges, participants reported that the mental, social, and physical health benefits of having an emotional support animal far outweighed the challenges and helped them function personally and academically.

According to the American College Health Association (ACHA, 2019), approximately 33% of college and university students report experiencing anxiety, depression, stress, and other mental health concerns. Longitudinal data suggest that the percentage of students seeking mental health services in college is growing, and many students are already prescribed psychiatric medication and/or have severe psychological histories (ACHA, 2019; Oswalt et al., 2020; Twenge et al., 2010; Xiao et al., 2017). Both poor mental health and physical impairment can limit one's ability to perform major life activities, such as communicating, concentrating, and caring for oneself. More students with disability are attending college, and this trend is accompanied by an increase in the number of students with disabilities requesting the help of an emotional support animal (ESA) that they can bring with them to college (Kogan et al., 2016). However, few studies have documented the student

experience with ESAs. Intending to fill this gap, the present study sought to examine student perceptions regarding the experience of having an emotional support animal in campus housing. Specifically, we investigated the perceived benefits and barriers associated with emotional support animals, as well as participants' recommendations to those considering bringing an ESA into the residence hall.

RESEARCH ON THE BENEFITS OF ASSISTANCE ANIMALS

Emotional support animals are one of two types of assistance animals: service animals and support animals (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development [HUD], 2020). In the case of the U.S. Department of Justice (2010), which recognizes only dogs as service animals, they are defined as "dogs that are individually trained to do work or perform tasks for people with disabilities" (para. 2), while support animals are "trained or untrained animals that do work, perform tasks, provide assistance, and/or provide therapeutic emotional support for individuals with disabilities" (HUD, 2020, para. 1). People are considered to have a disability if they have "physical or mental impairments that substantially limit at least one major life activity" (HUD, 2020, para. 1). Because there are no governmental registration requirements for emotional support animals in the United States, it is difficult to measure the prevalence of ESAs. However, several studies have suggested that there has been a recent uptick in the popularity of ESAs among college students specifically (Smith et al., 2021).

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and of the Americans with Disabilities Act covers regulations related to service animals, while the Fair Housing Act (U.S. Department of Justice, 2021) specifically requires that housing providers grant reasonable housing accommodations—including ESAs—for persons with disabilities. The focus of this paper will be limited to ESAs, pets, and animal-assisted interventions in residence halls. For a good review of terminology and policies related to assistance animals, see Kogan and colleagues (2016).

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory posits that having a secure relationship with another being facilitates the development of new relationships and bolsters confidence, while separation from one's attachment figure can cause distress (Bowlby, 1988). For some students, a pet serves as an attachment figure, and this relationship confers the same kind of benefits as other attachment figures such as family members: "Their physical nearness and accessibility are enjoyable (proximity maintenance); they are missed when absent (separation distress); they are dependable sources of comfort (secure base); and they are sought to alleviate distress (safe haven)" (Kurdek, 2008, p. 439). As the transition to college and university often involves leaving one's attachment figures, this can be a distressing experience (Adams et al., 2017; Kurdek, 2008). Additionally, pets can help protect against suicidality by providing comfort, a distraction, or a reason to live (Love, 2021).

Under the Fair Housing Act, college students who have disabilities and documentation from a health or mental health provider stating that they would benefit from having an emotional support animal may request permission to have their ESA live with them on campus.

Benefits of Pets and Animal-Assisted Interventions for Students

There are a diverse range of policies related to pets in residence halls. For example, the University of Illinois and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) allow students to live on campus with their pets (Pittman, 2020), while the vast majority of U.S. colleges and universities do not (Study International, 2020). Having a pet in the residence hall can ease the transition to college, as many incoming students with pets at home consider them to be an integral part of their lives, helpful both for reducing stress and providing comfort (Adamle et al., 2009; Highfill & Goodman-Wilson, 2017).

Using a community sample recruited from a university listserv, McConnell and colleagues (2011) found that pet owners reported higher self-esteem, less loneliness, and better physical fitness than did non-pet owners and acknowledged that pets supplemented their social needs. As more and more students are asking to be allowed to have their pets in residence halls (Polking et al., 2017), there continue to be concerns about negative impacts such as animal phobias, allergies, potential damage to property, noise, disputes, and dog bites (e.g., Yamamoto & Hart, 2019).

In colleges and universities where pets are not allowed, many have introduced animal-assisted interventions (AAI) using specially trained dogs and their handlers. Interacting with AAI dogs provided enjoyment (Pendry et al., 2019) and high stress relief (House et al., 2018), and participants were more willing to seek help from the counseling center (House et al., 2018) and reported decreased anxiety and loneliness after interacting with dogs (Stewart et al., 2014).

College Students and Emotional Support Animals

Research related to ESAs and college students is limited, and much of it focuses on relevant court cases and guidelines for accommodating ESAs on campus (e.g., Bewley, 2015; Von Bergen, 2015). For example, several describe the court case involving the University of Nebraska at Kearney (UNK), which initially refused to allow students to have their emotional support animals in the residence hall. In this case, a civil rights lawsuit was filed, and a settlement was reached (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015): UNK was ordered to cease discriminating against people with disabilities and to develop policies and procedures to start providing reasonable accommodations for students with emotional support animals. UNK also agreed to pay $140,000 to a settlement fund for the two students involved in the case. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2020) has subsequently issued a guidance statement explicitly clarifying that the Fair Housing Act covers residence halls and other types of congregate housing.

Under the Fair Housing Act (U.S. Department of Justice, 2021), college students who have disabilities and documentation from a health or mental health provider stating that they would benefit from having an emotional support animal may request permission to have their ESA live with them on campus. Only those with documented disability diagnoses, based on the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) or the *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems* (ICD-10; World Health Organization, 2004) are eligible to have ESAs. Once an application has been submitted, higher education institutions must then assess the request and may take into account factors such as animal size and whether it is housebroken, has up-to-date vaccinations, displays aggressive behavior, and might cause damage (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015). Students whose request is approved by the university are allowed to have their ESA on campus, provided they follow university rules and regulations related to such things as waste removal, noise, and supervision.

Through extensive research, only two empirical studies were found pertaining to ESAs and college students (Goodman-Wilson & Highfill, 2021; Kogan et al., 2016). One study (Kogan et al., 2016) surveyed university counseling center directors about how often they received requests for letters documenting students' need for an ESA, whether their center had a policy about writing these types of letters, and how often they write these letters. About a third of university counseling center counselors get requests for these letters of support at least yearly, though most centers do not have a written policy (Kogan et al., 2016). The second study explored the perceived benefits of emotional support animals for college students (Goodman-Wilson & Highfill, 2021). In a survey of 45 faculty and 228 college students (49 of whom lived with an ESA), participants thought ESAs helped promote daily routines, provide a sense of purpose, increase social interactions with others, decrease anxiety, and serve as an important source of emotional support.

The current study builds on the Goodman-Wilson and Highfill (2021) study by collecting both qualitative and quantitative data regarding the perceived benefits and challenges of having an emotional support animal in campus housing. This research identifies both the benefits and barriers—from the perspectives of ESA owners and roommates—of having ESAs on campus.

> *Several respondents reported that their ESA promoted taking care of both the animal and themselves, which resulted in hygienic, emotional, and academic benefits.*

METHODOLOGY

To examine the perceived benefits and challenges of having an ESA while living in college residence halls, a mixed methods study was conducted at Miami University (IRB approval 03343e) in October of 2019. The ESA owner participants took part in semi-structured interviews or focus groups and then were asked to complete an online survey. These participants were recruited for the study through emails sent by the Miller Center for Student Disability Services (SDS) to the list of 36 ESA owners who were currently registered with SDS and had received university approval to have an emotional support animal in the residence halls (Miami University, 2023). As part of the online survey, ESA owners were asked whether they would be willing to have their roommate take part in the study as well.

Four focus group meeting times were identified, and participants selected the best day/time for their schedule. Four ESA owners and one roommate participated in focus groups, while two ESA owners participated in individual interviews. The same semi-structured interview protocol was followed for both the focus groups and individual interviews, which lasted an average of 45 minutes, after which ESA owners were asked to complete an online survey. One additional ESA owner was unable to participate in the focus groups and interviews but completed the online survey, and two roommates of ESA owners completed the roommate survey.

Sample

A total of nine participants ages 18–24 were included in the study: seven were ESA owners and two were roommates of those ESA owners. Of the nine participants, seven participated in a focus group or interview, and all nine completed a survey. All participants were currently enrolled at Miami University, a large Midwestern public university. Demographically, for the 2019-20 academic year, 15% of undergraduate students at the university were from racial or ethnic minority groups, and 50% were female (Miami University, 2020). All participants self-identified as White, with one person identifying as Hispanic/Latino. Six ESA owners had cats, and one had a guinea pig, and the average length of time having an ESA was 2.2 years (SD = 1.5). The two roommates identified as female and White, ages 19 and 22; one identified as Hispanic/Latina, while the other identified as non-Hispanic.

Measures

During the focus groups and interviews, ESA owners were asked questions about how they thought people at Miami University perceived ESAs, the benefits and disadvantages of having one, and whether people interacted differently with them when they had their ESA present. The ESA owner survey asked demographic questions (age, race, ethnicity, gender identity, and class standing); how many years they had their ESA; the number of hours devoted to the ESA (caring for needs and playing or bonding) each week; what barriers they experienced in the process of seeking permission to have an ESA (1 = *yes*); the frequency of difficulty in caring for the ESA while juggling academic responsibilities (1 = *never*, 5 = *always*); the frequency of negative experiences

The ESAs provided mental health benefits that included encouraging their owners to be in the moment instead of worrying about the past or future, distracting them from negative thoughts, providing companionship and the comfort of physical touch, and insisting on attention.

with other students related to the ESA (1 = *never*, 5 = *always*); and how their level of social interaction had been impacted by having an ESA at college (1 = *significantly increased*, 5 = *significantly decreased*). The survey also included space to share additional information (optional) and a request to share the name(s) of their roommate for inclusion in the study. The survey instrument was developed before conducting the focus groups and interviews in order to give participants an opportunity to describe both positive and negative aspects of having ESAs on campus.

The survey for the roommates of ESA owners asked the same demographic questions (age, race, ethnicity, gender identity, and class standing). Participants were then asked to describe their positive and negative experiences with their roommate's ESA and invited to share any additional information they wished. Originally the intention was to ask roommates close-ended questions about how the ESA had impacted them and their roommate, but due to concerns expressed by SDS staff these items were replaced with two open-ended items.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Univariate statistics were computed for the quantitative measures (*see Tables 1 and 2, page 93*). Consistent with attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988) and Kurdek's (2008) findings that pets can act as a "secure base" (p. 439), we hypothesized that the amount of time spent playing or bonding with the ESA would be positively correlated with ESAs increasing the owner's level of social interactions. Given the small sample size (seven ESA owners) and the non-normal distribution of responses, the non-parametric Spearman's Rho test was used to test this relationship using SPSS 25.0 software. We also explored whether the total amount of time spent with one's emotional support animal was correlated with the difficulty and competing time demands of juggling the responsibilities of both the ESA and school.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data from the focus groups and interviews were analyzed using a constant comparison analysis approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). The first and second authors attended all focus groups and interviews as facilitators. All meetings were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and checked for accuracy prior to thematic analysis. After an initial list of codes was identified jointly by the authors, transcripts were then coded in Microsoft Word separately by the two authors who had attended the focus groups, and additional codes emerged inductively. The resulting transcripts and codes were reviewed by the first and second authors, and themes were identified. Data from the open-ended survey questions were also coded using the constant comparison approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Any thematic discrepancies between authors were reconciled through consensus. Afterwards, ESA

TABLE 1

Characteristics of Sample Participants and Their Emotional Support Animals (*N* = 7)

	N (%)
Class standing	
First-year	2 (28.6%)
Sophomore	1 (14.3%)
Junior	1 (14.3%)
Senior	2 (28.6%)
Graduate student	1 (14.3%)
Gender identity	
Cisgender woman	6 (85.7%)
Transgender man	1 (14.3%)
ESA species	
Cat	6 (85.7%)
Guinea pig	1 (14.3%)

TABLE 2

Relationship, Barriers, and Perceived Impact Related to Emotional Support Animals (*N* = 7)

	M (*SD*)	*N* (%)
Years of ESA ownership	2.2 (1.5)	
Hours spent caring for ESA weekly	4.64 (4.59)	
Hours spent playing/bonding with ESA weekly	22.29 (28.28)	
Experienced barriers getting ESA approval		
Yes		2 (28.6%)
No		5 (71.4%)
Negative interactions with other students related to ESA		
Never		1 (14.3%)
Rarely		6 (85.7%)
Impact of ESA on social interactions		
Significantly increased		1 (14.3%)
Somewhat increased		5 (71.4%)
No impact		1 (14.3%)

owners were asked to review an early draft of the manuscript and provide feedback about whether their perspective about ESAs on campus was adequately captured, and the findings were then refined based on this feedback. Triangulation was utilized by collecting data from multiple sources: ESA owners and roommates of ESA owners. Preliminary and background information was also provided by SDS staff.

RESULTS

Participants spent an average of 4.6 hours ($SD = 4.59$) weekly taking care of their ESA's needs and 22.3 hours ($SD = 28.3$) weekly playing with or bonding with their ESA (see Table 2). While six students reported only rarely or sometimes experiencing difficulty juggling care of their ESA with their schooling, the other student said they never had difficulty. Results of the Spearman correlation between the amount of time spent and difficulty encountered in juggling care for one's ESA and school was not statistically significant, ($\rho = -.13$, $p = .78$).

Six reported that having an ESA had somewhat or significantly increased their social interactions with others. However, there was not a statistically significant relationship between the amount of time spent playing with and bonding with one's ESA and the perceived impact of the ESA on social interactions ($\rho = .27$, $p = .56$). Further, six participants said they rarely had negative experiences with other students related to their ESA, while one said they never had negative experiences.

Qualitative analysis revealed a total of 13 themes related to the participants themselves, other students, and the university. Overall, students were emphatic about the benefits they accrued from having an ESA and that the benefits far outweighed any challenges they experienced. The primary positive aspects were connected to mental health benefits, taking care of oneself, and increased social interactions. Students also identified some downsides to having an ESA, including having to disclose one's mental health diagnosis, needing to educate others about ESAs, sharing their ESA with others, ESA-related expenses, the availability of pet supplies, barriers to respite care, transportation and parking difficulties, potential pet loss, and the difficulty of obtaining a letter from a health professional to qualify for permission to have an ESA on campus. An additional theme emerged related to roommates in general.

Benefits

Taking care of oneself. Several respondents reported that their ESA promoted taking care of both the animal and themselves, which resulted in hygienic, emotional, and academic benefits. As one person stated,

> *Just being able to take care of an animal helps me take care of myself. That's just like the biggest thing to me. Without her I wouldn't go to class. I would just lay in bed and just be in bed all day and do nothing and just hate my life. I would never shower, I would never brush my teeth because I just wouldn't want to get up. But, like, literally having her and wanting to take care of her makes me take care of myself and I thrive because I have her.*

Sometimes the effect was direct: the ESA cat meowing in the morning asking to be fed, refusing to eat the cat food unless their person was also eating, or making sure their person was coming to bed. Sometimes the effect appeared indirect; for example, one participant talked about needing to buy more pet food, so they ended up buying groceries for themselves as well. Another described the desire to provide a nice place for her ESA to stay, so they cleaned their room for that reason.

Mental health benefits. Respondents reported that their ESA helped reduce their feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression, as well as interrupting negative mood cycles and increasing positive moods. The ESAs provided mental health benefits that included encouraging their owners to be in the moment instead of worrying about the past or future, distracting them from negative thoughts, providing companionship and the comfort of physical touch, and insisting on attention. For example, one participant said their ESA "can kind of tell when I'm going to have a little freak out episode and she'll like hit me on the foot, like hey pay attention to me." Others said that playing with their cat makes them really happy and brings their mood up quickly, and "Having a cat in there [my room] really helps me not feel as lonely."

Increased social interactions. The presence of their ESAs often reduced feelings of loneliness and actually prompted social interactions. One participant explained how people would "come over and then we play with [my ESA] and there's more conversation. . . . I definitely use [my ESA] as an icebreaker sometimes." Another talked about how they would let others pet their ESA, which increased their social interactions.

Challenges

Reduced privacy but not too stigmatizing. Since eligibility for having an ESA on campus requires a mental health diagnosis, having an ESA is a public clue, whether the student wants to be open about their diagnosis or not. As one student said, "Because I have the cat it's kind of like saying hey I have a reason to have this cat. It's a little bit more public." Despite fears, study participants did not report experiencing a lot of stigma regarding their mental health diagnosis. As one participant noted, "The number of people that have [ESAs] de-stigmatized that really fast." Another said she became used to others knowing about her ESA, saying "I'm not really, like, shy about having him because . . . I've dealt with this kind of stuff for quite a few years so . . . I don't care if people know."

Needing to educate others about ESAs. One common reaction of others to having an ESA in the residence hall was "You're so lucky!" or "That's so cool!" However, as one participant astutely mentioned, "There's a reason why I have an emotional support animal in the first place so I wouldn't necessarily say I'm lucky." In talking about the need to educate, one student said, "The education thing is a little bit uncomfortable for me because I know there's a lot of controversy regarding, well, do animals actually help or are you just looking for an excuse to have your pet?" In response to this comment, another student responded, "I get that a lot too. It really upsets me honestly."

A third student's explanation reveals misconceptions about disability and university rules about ESAs and the effect of disrespectful and envious reactions:

> *I think when they first saw me walking in the dorm with this cat . . . they were like: "Why the heck does she have a cat?" because a lot of people just don't know what [an ESA] is. And that's the biggest thing, it's like they just think it's weird ya know. Like "She's just hiding a cat in her dorm room. I don't think she's allowed to have it". . . . They're like "what kind of strings did she pull?". . . So, I think that if kids know the situation, they're totally cool with it. They think it's a really neat idea. A lot of kids just don't know that it's a thing. You know, they think that you have to have a visible disability to have an animal. Why would you have a little cat ya know. You're not blind, ya know, all this stuff. Why do you need a cat?. . . . People are like "Oh my god, I want a dog in my room." [And I respond] "No, you have to have a reason to have the animal." I think it's really cool and I made a lot of friends because of [my cat], but a lot of people don't . . . understand that it exists. Or aren't always super respectful because they don't know, they don't understand it.*

Unwanted attention. Several participants discussed the effect of receiving unwanted attention. Often this was related to a lack of understanding about ESAs and eligibility requirements, but sometimes it was related to not wanting to stand out. One person said they would wait to take out their trash until after people were asleep:

> *I didn't want people to see me . . . carrying cat litter in the building and be like what is she doing ya know. Because it just attracted a lot of unwanted attention . . . people knew I had a cat, but I didn't want people to look at me weird.*

Another talked about not taking her cat for walks because "I would just feel weird. If I walked around with a cat they would be, like, why does she have a cat." Other respondents talked about having people come to their room at all hours to see their ESA, which was sometimes inconvenient or disrupted their studying.

ESA as public property. Almost all participants talked about how other students would interact with their ESA. Some described certain students as being obsessed with their ESA, while others mentioned having others come to visit their ESA regularly; one floor wanted to make the ESA their residence hall/sorority mascot. Overall, to the extent that ESA owners were willing to let others interact with their support animal, the ESA was viewed as being accessible to everyone on the floor; as one participant stated, "Everyone benefits from the emotional support animal."

ESA-related expenses, availability of supplies, and transportation. Participants talked about the costs of veterinary care, such as vaccines and medical treatment, and of supplies needed for the ESA: food, crate, collar, and toys. Focus group participants also

The presence of their ESAs often reduced feelings of loneliness and actually prompted social interactions.

talked about the need to plan ahead in order to obtain their ESA supplies. While some students' families helped with expenses, procurement of supplies, and transportation, others were solely responsible for all expenses and figuring out logistics. One said,

> *Whenever I'm home I'll be like do I need anything and just . . . stock up just in case I [do] run out of things. Like right now . . . I have a few cans of food left so I told my mom earlier can you buy me some food so I'm going home this weekend to get some more supplies just because I only have a bike and I don't want to . . . buy a bunch of groceries at Kroger and bike up the hill back so I just wait till I go home. I might just get a bunch of stuff and I'll bring it back.*

Others talked about ordering pet food and supplies online and then carrying the box from the package center to their residence hall. Several mentioned how the lack of a car (or being a long distance from their assigned parking lot) made this difficult and that they wished there was a place on campus where they could purchase cat food and cat litter.

Barriers to respite care. Residence hall closures for school holidays such as winter break created issues for participants who did not have a home to go to or were not able to bring along their ESA. They also noted how difficult it was to get someone else to watch their ESA due to residence hall security procedures. One person said, "So normally I'd just ask somebody to . . . cat sit but I live in a residence hall and you can't get into the building or my room without like my card." Another agreed, saying,

> *If I go away for the weekend or if I have to leave for a certain period of time there's only certain people who can tap into the residence halls . . . and I'm not allowed to give my ID to anybody else.*

ESA approval process. When prompted, participants described their experience with getting approval to have an ESA on campus. Those who had all the necessary documentation—such as proof of mental health diagnosis, letter from a therapist or health professional recommending an ESA, and up-to-date vaccinations for their ESA—described the approval process as being quick and easy. However, some described encountering issues with getting letters from a therapist or health professional for the initial approval and confusion about whether another letter would be required for reapproval. One talked about how the campus student counseling center would not write letters for students saying that they would benefit from having an ESA. Another said,

> *At this point since I moved away from home I haven't really found a therapist here yet so next year when I need a letter from a therapist who am I gonna go to because right now my [ESA] is my therapist.*

Future death of ESA. One participant, whose ESA was a guinea pig, talked several times about fears related to its eventual death. She had researched the average lifespan of guinea pigs and knew that her ESA would probably die within the next year or so.

Honestly, [my ESA's] nearing the end of her lifespan which worries me a little bit so honestly she might not be helping as much as the anxiety that it kind of gives me just knowing that. . . . I have a tendency to think ahead way too much and then I stress myself out thinking about what if this happens, what if that happens.

Other downsides. Some participants worried that their ESA might damage their room by tearing up the carpet or scratching baseboards, and one noted how this impacted their initial choice of the ESA. Another mentioned how dogs needed a lot more space and playing time than cats, that ESAs in general required them to spend all or most of their available time with their ESA, which decreased their time or willingness to study in the library or hang out with friends at other locations. Finally, several participants acknowledged that their ESAs could sometimes be distracting due to pet care needs, requests to play, and being "just so cute, it's distracting."

Roommates' Experiences

In one focus group, an ESA roommate explained how her perception regarding the ESA changed over time. At first, she explained, she thought it was great to have an emotional support animal in the room, as if it were just a pet. However, over time as she watched her roommate interact with the animal, she saw how much the ESA meant to her and how it helped her roommate's mood. This participant explained her efforts to maintain some measure of distance:

Not to get super involved with [the ESA] just because I want him to be more attached to [his owner] than he is to me . . . [the ESA] has a job to be there for [his owner] and not for me, so if he was more attached to me then he won't be doing his job and I think that would be hurtful for my roommate.

That being said, the roommate also described how the animal helped her mood too, and since both she and the roommate were cat people, the ESA has helped them bond. One ESA owner described how, when she was feeling stressed, her roommate and friends would encourage her to go spend time with her ESA to help her to feel happier and less stressed.

Similarly, in the open-ended responses on the ESA owner roommate survey, both respondents said that their experience with an ESA was positive. As one explained,

I can tell that [the ESA] is really beneficial for her and it helps to have a loving animal around. For me, I really love having a cat around because I have cats at home that I had to leave behind for college. It's been a fun experience to help take care of him.

Likewise, the other roommate said, "It's been a positive experience and I'm glad I've also been able to share her pet's company."

> *The mental health benefits ascribed to ESAs in this study are consistent with those attributed to attachment figures . . . and proximity with one's attachment figure acts as a "secure base" and "safe haven."*

DISCUSSION

This study describes the benefits and challenges of having an emotional support animal in college and university residence halls from the perspective of ESA owners and their roommates. While quantitative analyses failed to find statistically significant support for the study's hypothesis about the relationship between time spent playing or bonding with one's ESA and the impact of the ESA on social interactions, the qualitative data provided rich information about the experience of having an ESA in residence halls. Overall, participants said the benefits of having an ESA outweighed the negatives, which is consistent with previous research on ESAs and college students (Goodman-Wilson & Highfill, 2021; Spence, 2015).

The mental health benefits ascribed to ESAs in this study are consistent with those attributed to attachment figures (Bowlby, 1988). People select pets as attachment figures that are familiar and are associated with decreased distress, and proximity with one's attachment figure acts as a "secure base" and "safe haven" (Kurdek, 2008, p. 439). Our participants described how spending time with their ESA, and knowing their ESA was nearby and available, helped prevent or reduce distress. Other studies have also reported animal-related benefits of comfort and reduced distress (e.g., Adamle et al., 2009; House et al., 2018; Pendry et al., 2019). In addition to mental health benefits, participants described their ESAs as providing companionship and entertainment, acting as an icebreaker for relationships with others, and motivating self-care, results that are consistent with those of Spence (2015).

Since pets are not allowed at the university where this study took place, having an animal living on campus publicly signaled for those who knew about ESA provisions that the owner had a disability. However, many students lacked knowledge about ESAs and expressed jealousy and a desire to fill out paperwork so they could bring their own pet to campus. Unfortunately, many people lack understanding about the differences between service animals, emotional support animals, and pets as well as the federal regulations related to these different types of animals (e.g., Goodman-Wilson & Highfill, 2021). There is also controversy and negative public perceptions about false claims related to service animals and ESAs (Goodman-Wilson & Highfill, 2021; Schoenfeld-Tacher et al., 2017). In general, participants reported having many conversations with other students who expressed interest in having their own pet on campus. Other students often sought ESA owners out with questions about the approval process, either not understanding or caring that ESA regulations are meant to help individuals with disabilities to be able to function.

Other challenges of having an ESA were related to logistics: pet care and supplies, expenses, veterinary services, transportation, respite care, housing during university breaks, and the ESA approval process. Students who are considering bringing an ESA with them to campus should think about how they would obtain the necessary food and supplies and how they would transport their ESA to get medical treatment or

vaccinations. While delivery services can be used, packages are generally delivered to a central location on campus, which may be a long distance from the student's residence hall. Table 3 presents a list of important considerations for those who are contemplating bringing an ESA with them into a residence hall.

TABLE 3

Questions for Potential ESA Owners to Consider Regarding Having an ESA in a Residence Hall

- How comfortable do you feel about educating others about ESAs?
- How prepared are you to disclose your mental health diagnosis with others, as it relates to ESA eligibility?
- How would you obtain ESA food, accessories, and other supplies (e.g., kitty litter)?
- Do you have a place to go during school breaks where your ESA would be welcomed?
- Do you have someone who would be willing to care for your ESA in case of emergency or if you are going to be gone for a few days?
- Do you have the knowledge about how to properly care for an ESA?
- What is the life expectancy of your ESA?
- Do you have the financial resources to care for the needs of an ESA (e.g., vaccines, medical treatment in case of illness, accessories, crate, food)?
- What is the likelihood of your ESA damaging your campus housing, and are you able to pay for damages if they occur?
- How much space, social interaction, exercise, and grooming does your ESA need to thrive?
- Are you willing and able to devote time and attention to caring for the needs of your ESA?

Emotional support animals help students with disabilities to function. The mental, social, and physical health benefits of having an ESA far outweighed the challenges for our participants and helped them not only to function but also to thrive at school.

Study Strengths, Limitations, and Directions for Future Research

The strengths of this study come primarily from having students describe, in their own words, the benefits and challenges related to having an ESA in campus housing. Data triangulation was obtained by collecting data from both ESA owners and roommates and by using surveys and semi-structured interviews. Another strength was the use of multiple coders/raters for theme identification, as well as member checking (Doyle, 2007) of the study findings.

Sampling strategy, representativeness, and small size were limitations in this study. First, our sample size was small, which reduced the statistical power for the quantitative analyses. Second, all participants self-selected to take part in the study. It is possible that students who did not respond to the recruitment email would have different responses, perhaps reporting fewer benefits or experiencing more negative effects. Additionally, our participants were current ESA owners; future research should include the perspectives of students who previously applied to have an ESA on campus but no longer had one due to lack of perceived benefits, moving off campus, experiencing barriers or challenges caring for the ESA, or the animal's death. It could also be informative to collect information about ESAs from the perspective of resident assistants and resident directors, who would be in a unique position to know of student conflicts, logistics, or policy violations related to ESAs in campus housing. Third, this study was conducted at one institution, which means that university-specific policies and experiences (e.g., the ESA approval process) were administered through the same university office, which could have resulted in less variability of experiences. Finally, longitudinal research could follow incoming first-year students with ESAs in order to examine the trajectories of their bond and the benefits of having an ESA throughout their collegiate experience.

CONCLUSION

The present study's findings can help students who are debating whether to obtain an ESA and whether to bring their ESA with them to college. Important considerations should include the animal's needs for space, social interaction, exercise, and grooming, as well as the potential benefits and challenges for the ESA owner. The information in Table 3, which summarizes these considerations, could be distributed to individuals who inquire about ESA policies for the residence halls. By being aware of potential barriers or logistical considerations, students can better prepare for the realities of having an ESA in their residence hall or can ultimately decide against having it on campus. Prospective ESA owners may also benefit from talking with current ESA owners about their experiences.

Colleges and universities could use this information to make their schools more ESA- (and possibly pet-) friendly by facilitating access to ESA-related supplies such as food and cat litter. Bewley (2015) suggests that schools could designate specific areas for animal bathing and grooming, provide separate laundry facilities for persons with animals (service animal, ESA, or pets), create a dog park on campus, and establish community partnerships with local veterinary services to facilitate easier access for routine wellness checks and vaccinations. Campus counseling centers should consider developing formal policies related to whether or not their staff are permitted to evaluate students for the purposes of writing letters of diagnosis and/or documenting the need for an ESA. Kogan and colleagues (2016) describe some of the issues around this type of student request and provide guidelines for what to include in ESA support letters. Finally, there is a need for more training, especially for faculty and staff, related to federal and university policies governing service animals and ESAs (Goodman-Wilson & Highfill, 2021).

Emotional support animals help students with disabilities to function. The mental, social, and physical health benefits of having an ESA far outweighed the challenges for our participants and helped them not only to function but also to thrive at school. As the number of college students with mental health issues continues to grow, colleges and universities could promote the retention and persistence of students with disabilities through policies that facilitate having an ESA on campus, as well as providing opportunities for other animal-assisted interventions and interactions. ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Since emotional support animals are currently only covered under the Fair Housing Act and not the Americans with Disabilities Act, do you think this impacts access for students? Why?
2. In the study there are several questions for potential ESA owners to consider. What questions would you ask the roommates?
3. How does your institution handle roommates who don't want to or can't live with animals?
4. Since all the students surveyed either had cats or a guinea pig, do you think that their answers would change if they had a different type of animal such as a bird, rabbit, or dog?
5. What type of general population education does your institution facilitate about ESAs and service animals on campus? If none, what are some things that could be done in this area?
6. What are some ways institutions can limit the need for public disclosure of mental health or of having an ESA (e.g., special tags worn by the animal, designations on management accounts)? What does your institution do?
7. Does your institution have restrictions on allowable ESA animal types, such as which type of housing they can be in? Do you think this limits access for students?

Discussion questions developed by Laura Glasgow, University of Texas at Dallas