

**THE CONTEMPORARY EDUCATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE  
OF HISTORIC EUROPEAN RESIDENTIAL COLLEGES:  
A STUDY OF SPANISH COLEGIOS MAYORES**

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**Abstract**

The European residential colleges, which originated in the Middle Ages, are institutions that had a major impact on the evolution of the Western university. Throughout the centuries, and especially in the Modern Age, they played a decisive role in educating many who went on to occupy important political, ecclesiastical, and academic positions. Vestiges of these residential colleges still survive today in institutions such as the Italian *Collegi di Merito*, the Hungarian *Szarkollegiums*, the Spanish *Colegios Mayores Universitarios*, or the Portuguese *repúblicas de estudantes*. However, despite their great historical importance, the educational value of these institutions is largely unknown. This research investigates the educational value of historic Spanish *Colegios Mayores* and their differential value compared to other residential alternatives. To this end, a cross-sectional quantitative study was carried out with the participation of 393 students using the validated CUEVU questionnaire. The results indicate that students in *Colegios Mayores* perceive greater educational opportunities regarding comprehensive education than those in other types of accommodation. The effect size was also larger when students attended public universities. No significant differences were found according to the type of *Colegios Mayores* in which the students resided. To sum up, centuries after their creation, the *Colegios Mayores* continue providing much more than mere accommodation, offering valuable educational space to those living there.

**Key words:** *residential colleges; university housing; humanities; character education.*

**1. Introduction**

European residential colleges are a little-studied area of research, despite the historical importance these institutions have had in developing the European university and promoting higher education institutions in Latin America, and in implementing the residential model in American universities. Indeed, the history of many of the world's most renowned universities, such as the Sorbonne, Oxford, Cambridge, Bologna, Alcalá de Henares, and Coimbra, is closely linked to residential colleges (Eguía, 1957; Lario, 2019). Over the years, these residential colleges have also been the cradle of numerous prominent personalities from the cultural, political, ecclesiastical, and artistic worlds, demonstrating the solid educational impact of these places. Over the centuries, these educational institutions have evolved in different ways, which have been preserved to the present day. Thus, traces of these ancient residential colleges can be found today in the Portuguese *repúblicas de estudantes*, the Italian *collegi di merito*, the English Colleges or the Spanish *Colegios Mayores Universitarios*, among other European institutions, which

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continue to preserve the rich intellectual and community life that characterized these institutions from the beginning of their existence (Cinque, 2012). Today, when very different voices point to an excessive shift of the university towards the professional training of its students as the goal of university educational action (Barkas & Armstrong, 2022; Barrio Maestre, 2022; Esteban Bara, 2019; Haidt & Lukianoff, 2018), residential institutions open a debate on the function of the university institution: whether this is reduced only to the mere acquisition of a professional degree, or whether it also includes a broader training related to the ability to inhabit reality (Marín, 2012) fully. As Deresiewicz points out:

College is not the only chance to learn to think. It is not the first; it is not the last; but it is the best. One thing is certain: if you haven't started by the time you finish your BA, there's little likelihood you'll do it later. That is why an undergraduate experience devoted exclusively to career preparation is four years largely wasted. The purpose of college is to enable you to live more alertly, more responsibly, more freely: more fully [...]. A real education sends you into the world bearing questions, not resumes (2015: 82).

European residential colleges in their current form still retain this capacity to help students ask the big questions and discover the importance of community amid an individualistic society. However, the formative impact of these residential colleges is often overlooked and they are quite often reduced to another option in the range of university accommodation. Even though some research has begun to highlight the formative impact of these institutions on aspects related to character education, liberal education, or the development of personal or professional skills (Cinque, 2012; Dabdoub, Salaverriá, & Berkowitz, 2023; Ibáñez Ayuso, 2023; Martín Rodríguez-Ovelleiro & Jutard, 2019; Naval, 2022; Villar, 2018), most of which address this impact from a theoretical analysis or through interviews with the managers of these institutions, these studies are very scarce compared to the long historical trajectory of these institutions and the large number of students who reside in them each year. This lack of empirical studies offers an interesting research horizon. A research horizon that in the United States, unlike in Europe, has a long history that has led to the discovery of the benefits of certain residential models for students' adaptation to university life, for reducing dropout rates or for improving academic performance, among other things (Blimling & Schuh, 2015; Bronkema & Bowman, 2017; Brown, Volk, & Spratto, 2019; Graham, Hurtado, & Gonyea, 2018; Konyar & Nguyen, 2022; Lopez Turley & Wodtke, 2010; Ong & Chu, 2021; Parameswaran & Bowers, 2014; Schroeder & Mable, 1994).

## **2. European residences: their impact on the history of the university and their educational relevance today**

The origins of residential colleges can be traced back to the foundation of the *Collège des Dix-Huit* near the University of Paris in the 12th century. This institution would be the seed of the collegiate movement that would later and rapidly spread to other European cities, such as Oxford, Cambridge, Coimbra, or Bologna, to provide talented students of low economic means with the necessary opportunities to complete their education (Hinterholz & de Freitas Ermel, 2023; Lario, 2019). It was during the modern era that these institutions experienced their most extraordinary splendor. In Italy, for example, from the last third of the 14th century, many colleges appeared in

cities such as Bologna, Perugia, and Padua, the founding of which was closely linked to the Catholic Church (Ibáñez Ayuso & Ruiz-Alberdi, 20-23; Mattone & Brizzi, 2010). It was also in Italy, at the end of the same century, where the first Spanish Colegio Mayor was founded, the Colegio San Clemente, and later, from the 15th century, the collegiate movement moved to Spain through the foundation of numerous Colegios Mayores in Spain (Carabias, 2013; Eguía, 1957). Also, in the 15th century, the collegiate movement awakened in Eastern Europe with the founding of colleges in places such as Cracow, Prague, and Leuven (Lario, 2019). The importance of Spanish residential colleges in promoting university systems in the Americas is also worth noting. The Spanish Colegios Mayores played a key role in the foundation of numerous universities in Latin America, such as the University of Mexico and the Colegio de San Ildefonso (Mexico), the University of Cordoba and the Colegio Máximo (Argentina), or the University of Caracas and the Colegio de Santa Rosa (Venezuela) (Lascaris Comneno, 1952). On the other hand, the English residential system had a notable influence on early American residential systems, especially the Yale and Harvard model, which was later exported to numerous American campuses (Ryan, 2001).

In the modern era, all these institutions played a key political and ecclesiastical role, as monarchs looked to them for people who would later occupy positions of power, such as general inquisitors, viceroys, ambassadors, or deans (Eguía, 1957). Examples include President of the Council of the Indies Jerónimo de Valderrama (16th century), Archbishop of Santiago Juan de Lierma (16th century), Cardinal Luis de Belluga (17th century), Chaplain to Philip III Andrés Fernández de Cepeda (17th century), the Rector of the University of Granada Juan Fernández Crespo (XVII century), the politician Domingo María Ruiz de la Vega (XVIII century) or the politician Manuel Seijas (XIX century) (Carabias Torres, 2009; Real Colegio Mayor San Bartolomé y Santiago, n.d.). However, from the 19th century onwards, these institutions began to lose their importance and even vanished in some countries, only to be reborn in an updated form during the second third of the 20th century, offering educational spaces of great pedagogical relevance.

In Portugal, for example, residential colleges still exist today in the form of the so-called *republicas de estudantes*, which can be found near prominent Portuguese universities, but are particularly numerous at the University of Coimbra - Alta e Sofia. Their self-governing character and the importance of community life make the different republics spaces of personal growth for the students. Each republic has its own name and characteristics, although they all promote their members' cultural, sporting, and social life. Each academic year, the different republics organize numerous educational activities, many of which are open to the entire university community, such as music concerts, study days, or charity projects (Associação Académica de Coimbra, 2022; Carreiro & Madeira, 2009; Hinterholz & de Freitas Ermel, 2023). However, in the 21st century, real estate speculation and the ignorance of the educational value of these spaces has led to the closure of many of these republics, which have now been replaced by privately managed university residences that offer students accommodation with numerous amenities, but with little interest on their formative character (Amaral, 2023; García, 2014). The self-managed character of the *republicas de estudantes* is also present in the residential colleges of certain Eastern European countries such as Romania,

Hungary, or Poland, with the Hungarian *Szarkollegiums* being a great exponent of students' active role in the *kollegiums'* governance. In fact, in these *kollegiums*, it is the students themselves who are in charge of the administrative aspects of the institution as well as of ensuring its educational nature and, in particular, the academic excellence of its members. These *kollegium* are built around three pillars: first, the professional preparation of their residents. To this end, students complement the training received in the university classrooms with seminars, workshops, and lectures, existing a minimum number of which they must attend to continue in the *kollegium*. Secondly, the community. These *kollegiums* attach great importance to interaction among their members through various activities. Third, social responsibility. *Kollegium* students are actively involved in improving their communities through social projects, mainly educational or sustainable projects (Cinque, 2012; Rajk László College, n.d.). Student involvement in the dynamization of collegiate life is also notable in the student dorms of Ljubljana, where the 7500 residents coordinate through a system of collegiate representation to organize cultural, social, and sporting activities for all those housed in the dorms and thus enrich their university experience (Studentski Dom Ljubljana, n.d.).

Both the Italian *Collegi di merito* and the Spanish *Colegios Mayores Universitarios* are also noteworthy for their formative character. As the name suggests, the Italian *collegi* are notable for the importance given to academic merit, not only in terms of admission to the center but also in the demanding educational project on which the residents embark. Italian *collegi* depend on the MIUR (Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito), which sets demanding requirements for residential institutions wishing to acquire the status of the college, as well as for students who wish to obtain the *collegi's* diploma at the end of their stay (Avalle, 2007; Ibáñez Ayuso & Ruiz-Alberdi, 2023; Monti & Lorenzelli, 2018). In these institutions, great importance is given to the humanities, the development of transversal competences, and the internationalization of their students thanks to a varied educational offer and the accompaniment of students by a tutor. The educational project of the Italian *collegi* has many points in common with the Spanish *Colegios Mayores Universitarios*, where a broad training of the residents is also promoted thanks to a rich cultural, sporting, social, or charitable activity offer (Ibáñez Ayuso, 2023), as well as the involvement of students in the dynamization of the life of the centers. Although in Spain, these institutions lost importance at the beginning of the 21st century, the latest legislative provision (Ley Orgánica del Sistema Universitario) has defended the particular nature of these centers and the differential value for a student to reside in them (Consejo de Colegios Mayores Universitarios de España, 2022b). However, these centers have also been criticized for aspects related to the differentiation of students by sex in some of these institutions (Grupo Parlamentario Izquierda Confederal, 2022; Silió, 2022) or for practices such as hazing, against which the Colleges are carrying out numerous campaigns for their total eradication (Díaz, 2022; Mérida, 2021). These controversial phenomena, together with the scarcity of empirical studies on the educational value of these institutions, have led to a lack of awareness of the differential nature of these accommodations and the enrichment that living in these accommodations entails for university students. Likewise, the proliferation of numerous residences promoted by investment funds, given their high economic profitability, is a trend that is present in several European countries, which makes it urgent to explore

the educational character of the different university residential offers (de la Cruz, 2022; Meneses, 2022).

Therefore, this research aims to explore the educational opportunities that students perceive in their university environment according to the accommodation they live in. These educational opportunities are related to the experience of the university from a comprehensive educational perspective that involves three main aspects: a broad education that is not limited to knowledge specific to the degree and that expresses the search for the truth characteristic of the university institution; the experience of the community as interactions between students from different degrees and courses, as well as the promotion between students and teachers; and, finally, opportunities related to the experience aspects related to the common good. After reviewing the literature, we expect to find statistically significant differences in favor of students in *Colegios Mayores Universitarios* compared to those who live in other types of accommodation (flats with relatives, flats with friends, university residences, etc.).

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Research design**

The research was carried out according to a cross-sectional quantitative design (Ato, López-García, & Benavente, 2013) through the application of the validated questionnaire CUEVU (Questionnaire of University Life Experiences), which has reliability measured by Cronbach's alpha of .957. The questionnaire, consisting of 21 items and some *ad hoc* questions, was completed through an online form. The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Complutense University of Madrid.

#### **3.2. Participants**

A double sampling technique (convenience and snowball sampling) was used to select the participants, resulting in a total of 393 university students. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, gave their informed consent, and received no compensation for their participation. The anonymity of the participants was guaranteed, as they were not asked for any personal data that could identify them. Concerning the sample, it should be noted that the sample was balanced in terms of the type of university and the gender of the participants. Thus, 52.4% studied at a private university and 47.6% at a public one. Of the respondents, 52.2% were women, and 47.8% were men. Regarding the place where they lived during their time at university, 38.2% lived with relatives in the same city where they had studied for their baccalaureate, 33.6% lived in a *Colegio Mayor*, and 27.7% lived in other accommodation (mainly student residences and flats shared with peers). It should be noted that there was an even distribution concerning the type of accommodation (mixed 33.6%, female 32.8%, or male 33.6%).

#### **3.3. Analysis of the results**

In order to achieve the research objective, the following three hypotheses were formulated:

- Hypothesis 1. Students living in a *Colegio Mayor* will perceive themselves as having greater educational opportunities than those living with relatives or in other living arrangements.

- Hypothesis 2. The effect size will be smaller if participants attend a private university than if they attend a public university.

- Hypothesis 3. There will be no statistically significant differences in the perception of educational opportunities according to the type of *Colegio Mayor*.

In order to test the hypotheses with a single independent variable divided into more than two levels, the assumption of homogeneity of variances was first tested using Levene's test. If the assumption was met, the ANOVA F test was used; if not, the Welch's W test was used. On the other hand, the Chi-square test was used to test the hypotheses concerning categorical variables.

#### 4. Results

##### 4.1. Perception of training opportunities according to housing type

With regard to hypothesis 1, the assumption of homogeneity of variances was first tested using Levene's test, which indicated that the assumption was not met [ $F(2;390) = 9.669$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ]. Therefore, Welch's test was applied, indicating the existence of statistically significant differences in training opportunities according to housing type [ $W(2; 247,852) = 70.053$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ]. A posteriori tests, according to Scheffé's method, showed statistically significant differences only when comparing the scores of students living in a *Colegio Mayor* with those living in an apartment with relatives ( $p < 0.001$ ) and when comparing the scores of students living in a *Colegio Mayor*, with those living in other types of accommodation ( $p < 0.001$ ). As seen in Table 1, students living in *Colegios Mayores* have a significantly higher mean than those living in other types of accommodation. Hypothesis 1 was, therefore, fully supported. The effect size was 0.234, i.e., 23.4% of the differences found in the perception of educational opportunities are explained by the accommodation type.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics on educational opportunities according to housing type

Accommodation	N	AVG	SD
Flat with relatives	150	53,96	21,22
Colegio Mayor	134	76,48	15,19
Other	109	56,46	18,42

##### 4.2. Perception of educational opportunities according to both the type of accommodation and type of university

With regard to hypothesis 2, for students attending a private university, the assumption of homogeneity of variances was tested using Levene's test, which indicated that the assumption was met [ $F(2;203) = 1.578$ ;  $p = 0.209$ ]. Therefore, the ANOVA test was applied, indicating the existence of statistically significant differences in training opportunities according to the type of housing [ $F(2; 203) = 10.944$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ]. A posteriori tests according to Scheffé's method showed statistically significant differences only when comparing the results obtained by students living in a *Colegio Mayor* with those living in a flat with relatives ( $p = 0.001$ ) and by students living in a *Colegio Mayor* with those living in other types of accommodation ( $p < 0.001$ ). As seen in Table 2, students living in *Colegios Mayores* have a significantly higher mean score than those living in other accommodation types. The effect size was 0.097, i.e., 9.7% of the differences found in the perception of educational opportunities among students attending private universities can be explained by the accommodation type.

For students attending a public university, Levene's test showed that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was fulfilled [ $F(2;184) = 0.579$ ;  $p = 0.562$ ].

Therefore, the ANOVA test was applied, which indicated the existence of statistically significant differences in educational opportunities according to the type of housing [ $F(2; 184) = 93.342$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ]. A posteriori tests, according to Scheffé's method, showed statistically significant differences only when comparing the scores of students living in a *Colegio Mayor* with those living in an apartment with relatives ( $p < 0.001$ ) and when comparing the scores of students living in a *Colegio Mayor* with those living in other types of housing ( $p < 0.001$ ). As seen in Table 2, students living in *Colegios Mayores* have a significantly higher mean than those living in other types of accommodation. The effect size was 0.504, i.e., 50.4% of the differences found in the perception of educational opportunities among public university students are explained by the accommodation type.

Therefore, hypothesis 2 was supported in the expected sense, as the effect size was higher in public than private housing.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics on educational opportunities according to the type of accommodation and type of university

University	Accommodation	N	AVG	SD
Public	Flat with relatives	72	66,50	18,86
	Colegio Mayor	71	77,14	16,09
	Other	63	64,16	16,92
Private	Flat with relatives	78	42,38	16,15
	Colegio Mayor	63	75,73	14,20
	Other	46	45,91	14,94

#### 4.3. Perception of educational opportunities according to the type of *Colegio Mayor*

With regard to hypothesis 3, Levene's test showed that the assumption of homoscedasticity was fulfilled [ $F(2;131) = 1.662$ ;  $p = 0.194$ ]. Therefore, the ANOVA test was applied, indicating no statistically significant differences in training opportunities according to the type of *Colegio Mayor* [ $F(2; 131) = 0.191$ ;  $p = 0.827$ ].

Table 3. Descriptive statistics on training opportunities according to the type of *Colegio Mayor*

Colegio mayor	N	AVG	SD
Female	44	77,55	13,09
Male	45	75,56	17,34
Co-educational	45	76,36	15,08

## 5. Discussion

Firstly, the results allow us to confirm that students who live in a *Colegio Mayor* perceive that they have greater educational opportunities in terms of comprehensive education than those who live in other types of accommodation, with an effect size of 23.4%. The confirmation of the first research hypothesis is essential in light of the erosion of the humanities in higher education institutions, which has been denounced by numerous voices in recent years (Barrio Maestre, 2022; Deresiewicz, 2019; Esteban Bara, 2022; Haidt & Lukianoff, 2018; Nussbaum, 2010). In this sense, taking into account the items of the questionnaire, students from *Colegios Mayores* perceive that it is

easier for them to attend conferences, gatherings, or meetings not directly related to their studies; to encounter culture through experiences such as music, art exhibitions, theatre or great books; or to have moments that invite them to ask themselves the big questions. In this sense, as theoretical studies have pointed out (Ibáñez Ayuso, 2023; Naval, 2022; Torralba, 2022), the *Colegios Mayores* emerge as a space for liberal education, with practices that deserve to be studied in greater depth in order to transfer them to other educational settings. In addition, students were also asked about their perceptions of the extent to which their university environment allowed them to interact with students from different majors and courses and with university professors outside the classroom. In this sense, we believe that the *Colegio Mayor* is reminiscent of the 'cultured coexistence' proposed by thinker Newman when discussing the university institution (Newman, 2014). Given these interactions between students of different years in projects outside the classroom, it is not surprising that different studies have explored the educational potential of these institutions for the development of transversal competences such as teamwork or leadership (Cinque, 2012; Garay, Romero, & González, 2017; Pedrosa & Fernández, 2007; Villar, 2018). Finally, students were also asked about training opportunities related to the common good, so given the importance of training people who are critical and committed to the challenges of their time, a research horizon opens up to find out about the proposal of *Colegios Mayores* in this regard. Similarly, given the interest in the renewal of university tutoring (Esteban Bara & Caro Samada, 2023), due to its great formative potential, it is worth looking at the support and follow-up students receive in these institutions.

Secondly, this research has compared the size of the effect of the type of accommodation according to the type of university that students attend, showing that living in a *Colegio Mayor* is much more significant when students go to public universities. In this sense, it should be noted that public universities, especially in large cities, tend to have their faculties more dispersed due to their larger size and age, while private universities, being smaller, favor, for example, greater interaction between students from different programs. In any case, it is considered essential to be aware of the impact that a *Colegio Mayor* can have if he attends a public university, in both the selection of students who enter the *Colegios* (by giving preference to students from public universities) and in the support given to the *Colegios* by the public universities, by continuing the line of work reflected for example on the Santiago Declaration on the differential value of student residences supported by many public universities (Consejo de Colegios Mayores Universitarios de España, 2022). Similarly, given the influx of investment funds into the sector, whose interests are more economical than educational, it is necessary to continue to emphasize the educational nature of the *Colegios Mayores* and to protect them legally following the latest university regulations (Consejo de Colegios Mayores Universitarios de España, 2022b).

Thirdly, in recent months, an intense debate has arisen in Spain about the differentiation of students by sex in the *Colegios Mayores* attached to public universities, claiming that all these *Colegios Mayores* should be mixed in order to eliminate supposed segregation and favor equality between men and women (Grupo Parlamentario Izquierda Confederal, 2022; Parra, 2022). However, following Vidal Prado (2021), we can affirm that in order to be able to speak of segregation in an educational system,

there must be a reduction either in the educational opportunities of students or in the educational background with which they finish their studies. The corroboration of the third hypothesis is that there seems to be no evidence that in all-male or all-female *Colegios Mayores*, students' educational opportunities are diminished, since students in *Colegios Mayores*, regardless of the type of it they live in (female, male, or mixed), perceive themselves as living in an educationally rich environment. For this reason, given this problem, which is part of the wide-ranging debate on differentiated education in Spain (Carazo Liebana, 2022; Navas Sánchez, 2019; Navas Sánchez, 2021; Rodríguez Moya, 2022) it seems that there is no evidence to suggest that the defense that *Colegios Mayores* must be compulsorily co-educational, because there are no differences on the educational opportunities of students in differentiated *Colegios Mayores*, especially if we take into account that residents of differentiated institutions attend university classes with students of the other sex and that both regional and national associations of *Colegios Mayores* organize numerous activities that allow for coexistence between the two sexes.

Finally, as the literature review has shown, studies on the educational potential of residential colleges are minimal and, in the case of Spain, most have focused on exploring their educational potential from a theoretical point of view (Ibáñez Ayuso, 2023; Naval, 2022) or through surveys of management teams (Dabdoub et al., 2023) or by exploring the formative impact of educational practices in specific colleges (Garay et al., 2017; Villar, 2018), so measuring the educational impact of the college experience through quantitative and qualitative studies is an area that remains open. In this sense, it is worth continuing to study certain aspects that can promote better use of collegiate life, as shown by various studies in the United States, where, in addition to studying the impact of different types of housing on student participation, academic life, and dropout rates (Blimling & Schuh, 2015; Graham et al., 2018; Schroeder & Mable, 1994; Thompson, Samiratedu, & Rafter, 1993), other variables such as the impact of the architectural design of residential facilities on student interactions (Bronkema & Bowman, 2017; Brown et al., 2019) or the influence of student background on the collegiate experience (Chu et al., 2019) have been observed, providing further insight into how to create a richer formative experience through residential institutions.

## 6. Conclusion

Residential colleges are institutions that have played a significant role in the historical development of the European university. Despite their long history and survival in current educational systems, there is a significant lack of knowledge about their educational value. In this sense, it is necessary to look more closely at the educational potential of these spaces, mainly because of the emergence of new actors in the European student accommodation sector, motivated more by economic profit than by the educational potential of these spaces. Therefore, it is essential to try to clarify, through empirical studies, the educational value of the different housing formulas, not only to evaluate their work but also to be able to identify factors that allow a more outstanding educational impact. To this end, this research has focused on the Spanish residential colleges known as *Colegios Mayores*. However, it would be of great interest to carry out similar studies in other European countries that also have residential

colleges to obtain a European overview of the educational impact of these institutions in the different countries.

Furthermore, this research seems to point to the relationship of residential colleges with liberal education and character formation amid a university panorama in which, in the face of an excessive emphasis on the labor market, various voices are once again firmly asserting the humanizing function of the university through the encounter of students with the culture and the community.

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