

Light vs. Dark: Stereotypes About the Two Sides of the Hamilton Campus

Nesa Wasarhaley

Kirkland Project

Hamilton College

May 11, 2004

Light vs. Dark: Stereotypes About the Two Sides of the Hamilton Campus

I first became interested in looking at the use of the terms “light side” and “dark side” while I was a Hamilton College tourguide. We were discouraged from using the terms “light side” and “dark side” and were asked to use only “Hamilton and Kirkland sides” or “North and South sides.” During my three years of tourguiding, I would encounter parents and prospective students with preconceived notions about the Kirkland side of campus. At the beginning of my tours I would give a brief history of Hamilton College, Kirkland College, and the merging of the two. I would explain that the only differences between the two sides was the architecture and the location of departments, with Kirkland housing more arts and social sciences as it had when first established. Despite this introduction, when on the Kirkland side of campus, I would still hear questions such as, “Is this where all the weird kids live?” Questions like this made me question my own conceptions of the Hamilton and Kirkland sides of campus. While I had recognized that there were stereotypes about “light-siders” and “dark-siders,” I do not think that I ever really felt them to be true, at least for the first half of my college career. The longer I lived on the Hamilton side, the more I started to hate eating in Commons and prefer the atmosphere of McEwen much more. I have always spent a great deal of time on the Kirkland campus, studying Theatre and Music, and really felt more comfortable and more at home once I finally got the chance to live on the Kirkland side my senior year.

When I read about the Kirkland Project Research Associate positions, I saw an opportunity to study something about Hamilton that had always intrigued me. I felt that this position would give me the chance to answer some key questions: What are

student's perceptions of the "light" (Hamilton) and "dark" (Kirkland) sides of campus? What exactly are the stereotypes about the students that exist? Are they detrimental to the social climate on campus? How prevalent are these stereotypes? Where do students learn these stereotypes? How do these stereotypes compare to factual information? What is even considered the "light side" and "dark side?" I am also a Psychology major and had registered for Social Psychology for the spring semester. I felt that studying stereotypes would be a good supplement to formally learning about them in class, and that learning about them in class would give me a better understanding of why they existed on campus.

Method

Historical Information

The first step in my study was to determine the actual origin of these names, before I could find out if current students really know where the names come from. I contacted a sample of class years of alumni by e-mail, K'72, K'75, H'76, K'77, '88 and '92. I explained my project to them and my interest in the historical aspect of where this terminology came from. I asked if they were familiar with these terms and knew when or why they came into use. I also asked them to share their opinion on what these terms meant to them while they were students. Out of the 702 alumni contacted, over 100 responded. Many alumni speculated that the "dark side" term had come from the *Star Wars* movies, along with many other speculations, although most alumni had never heard of these terms and were even shocked to learn of them. Even though it wasn't dubbed the "dark side" during their time, many alumni expressed to me the abundance of negative stereotypes about the students on each side of campus, particularly those of the Kirkland

side. Those on the Kirkland side were seen as “crunchy” types, laid back, hippies and quiet students. Those on the Hamilton side were seen as loud, oarty-oriented and conservative.

I eventually discovered that the class of 1992 had heard the term “dark side,” but not “light side” in full use when they arrived at Hamilton. I found this to be quite interesting, and somewhat perplexing, because most alumni from the class of 1988 had never heard of the “dark side,” but it was apparently in use when the class of ’92 arrived in the fall of ’88.

In search of an answer, I spoke with Professor Raybeck, who began teaching at Kirkland College before the merger. He informed me that the term “dark side” came into existence after the Kirkland side of campus suffered shorts in the electricity feeder line, causing some Kirkland buildings to lose power on three occasions. This is the origin of the terms that I had learned of, but if that is why the “dark side” got its name, why hadn’t the “light side” been so-called at the same time? Professor Raybeck explained that people need to make sense of what is around them, in the absence of historical information. When those students who did not know of the origin learned the term “dark side,” they tried to make sense of it by calling the Hamilton side the “light side.” In doing this, however, the dark side became the marked side. Something had to be set in opposition to it. Just the terms themselves are loaded with connotations, as in “dark ages” versus “enlightenment.” As a side note, without knowing the origin, many Kirkland College alumni found it ironic that Kirkland was dubbed the “dark side” because they felt that Kirkland was more enlightened than Hamilton.

Current Study

In order to find out the current students' perceptions of both sides of campus and any existing stereotypes, I distributed an open-ended survey that I created to the entire senior class (2004). This survey had 13 questions that tried to access students' conceptions about Hamilton's campus and students, and where and when any stereotypes may have been learned. The content of the survey is included in the Appendix. There was also a page of demographic information so I could compare students' stereotypes to actual information. The survey included a consent form that participants returned separate from the survey so that survey responses were kept anonymous. The consent form indicated that participation was anonymous and voluntary, and that they did not have to answer any questions that made them uncomfortable. In order to compare survey data to factual data, I also obtained information from the Registrar that included junior and senior year housing locations, major, and race of students in the current senior class.

I wanted to survey the seniors because they, generally, have been at Hamilton the longest and therefore have had the most amount of time to learn any stereotypes and decide for themselves if they believe them or not. They also have the most freedom to choose where they want to live, since housing is chosen by lottery starting with the rising senior class. Of the approximate 430 surveys distributed in seniors' campus mailboxes, 98 students, 72 women and 26 men, completed and returned them. Respondents ranged in age from 21 to 24 years old. Ninety respondents identified as White, 2 as African-American, 1 as Latino/a, 4 as Asian, and 3 as "Other." Eighty respondents were not Greek-affiliated, while 28 respondents were Greek, representing 11 of the 14 Greek societies on campus.

Results

Terms

Out of all 98 responses, 93 respondents used the term “light side” and 92 respondents used the term “dark side.” In describing the Hamilton side of campus and the students who live there, the most frequently used words were “beautiful,” “athletic,” “preppy,” and “Greek.” The most frequent words used to describe the Kirkland side of campus were “ugly,” “artsy,” “concrete,” and “hippie.” Yet, out of all the respondents, only 58 of them had ever lived on both sides of campus. That means 41% of the people using these words to describe the two sides of campus had never even lived on both sides.

Source

As for the source of the terms “light side” and “dark side,” the majority of respondents learned the terms before they even arrived here as students. Twenty-five respondents learned them from their tourguide, 15 learned them as a prospective or recruit on an overnight visit, 16 learned them from Adirondack Adventure or Orientation Leaders, and 11 learned them from family members, friends or alumni before arriving as a first-year student. As for the rest of the respondents, most of them had learned of the terms some time during their first year at Hamilton. Eighteen learned them in their first year from upperclassmen or other students, 3 could not remember, 2 learned them some time their freshman year, and 1 learned from a professor. See Figure 1 for a breakdown of the source of the terms.

Meaning

As for what these terms mean, respondents provided a variety of answers and few of them knew the real origin. Only 10 respondents said that the terms originated from a black-out on the Kirkland side of campus. Twelve respondents thought the terms

described the people on campus, 10 said that these words meant “nothing” to them, and 9 thought they referred to the architecture. Five respondents thought the terms referred to literal darkness on the Kirkland side of campus in that the rooms are poorly lit and the close proximity of the buildings makes that side of campus seem darker in comparison to the more open, spread-out Hamilton side. Three respondents felt the “dark side” term stemmed from a negative view of Kirkland while 1 felt there was a negative view of the “light side.” Only one respondent linked the term to the *Star Wars* movies. Twenty-one respondents felt that these words were “just labels” used to describe locations on campus. See Figure 2 for a breakdown of the meaning of the terms.

I want to focus on the idea of these terms as being *just* labels. One man wrote, “The terms themselves carry no real meaning for me. They are simply ways to define the two sides of campus, which are very different. Light vs. dark is appropriate because the 2 sides are so different that it is like night vs. day or black vs. white. I do not feel that the ‘dark side’ carries a negative connotation.” In reference to the “dark” label being related to power outages, one woman wrote, “I think people sometimes think this gives the Dark side a negative connotation. That’s silly. They’re just names.” I think it is important to look at these terms as being “just labels” or not. Even if some students feel that these words have no meaning to them, simply by maintaining their use, they can help to perpetuate the stereotypes that go along with them.

Labels

I found it interesting that so many respondents felt that the terms were “just labels” for locations on campus. If this is the case, then one would think that all students should use the same labels for the same buildings, otherwise there could be confusion

talking to someone. However, this is not what I found in my survey data. I found that different students had different labels for some of the “questionable” buildings on campus. Some buildings had up to 6 different labels! These buildings include the Griffin Road apartments, the Campus Road apartments, Rogers Estate, 3 College Hill Road, Wallace Johnson, DKE, Saunders, the Farmhouse, Babbitt and Milbank. These buildings were labeled as “light side,” “dark side,” “the suites,” “down the hill,” a separate entity in itself, no affiliation with light or dark side, or an exception to “light side” and “dark side,” (You will understand why I made a distinction between having no affiliation with light and dark versus being an exception to light and dark in my discussion.) In trying to classify Milbank and Babbitt, one woman wrote, “The suites are tough- I would say dark side, but I have heard them be called ‘grey side’ where the two campuses meet.” I had never heard this terminology before, but one would think that if anything would be referred to as the “grey side,” it would be the Farmhouse, where the two campuses actually do meet, and which was specifically built to join the two campuses together.

Three College Hill Road is an example of a building that was labeled in a variety of ways. See Figure 3 for a breakdown of labels used for 3 College Hill. Thirty-eight respondents thought it had no affiliation, 5 considered it the “light side,” 3 considered a separate entity, 3 considered it “down the hill,” three considered it an exception to light and dark and, interestingly enough, 3 considered it to be on the dark side. I thought “dark side” was supposed to refer to the Kirkland campus and 3 College Hill Road is definitely not part of the old Kirkland campus. Maybe “dark side” refers to everything on the south side of College Hill Road. Although, I am not convinced.

To me, the most interestingly labeled building was Milbank. See Figure 4 for a breakdown of labels used for Milbank. Since it is part of the Kirkland campus, one would assume that Milbank would be labeled the “dark side,” if “dark” is referring to Kirkland. However, I found that only 51 respondents referred to Milbank as being on the “dark side.” Six respondents thought of Milbank as an exception to the labels, 5 as “the suites,” 4 as having no affiliation with the labels, and 2 as a separate entity. Four respondents considered Milbank as being the “light side!” If light and dark are “just labels” for the buildings, then nobody should consider Milbank to be on the light side. Obviously, these labels are labeling the people who live in these buildings. These labels are definitely stereotypes. The current use of “light side” really refers to the preppy, athletic and Greek students, while “dark side” refers to the artsy and hippie students.

Demographics

To compare the stereotypes with factual information, I broke down the information about the entire senior class from the Registrar into five housing locations and coded the locations of everyone’s major on campus. Those students who were double majors with one major on each side of campus were placed in a separate category. The information is broken down into those students living in residence halls on the main Hamilton quad and Dunham (“Hamilton”), those living in the renovated fraternity houses on Campus Road (“Frat Houses”), those living in Milbank or Babbitt (“Suites”), those living in the other residence halls on the Kirkland side of campus (“Kirkland”) and those living in the Griffin Road apartments (“G-Road”). As it turns out, there is about an equal proportion of seniors in each area of residence who have majors on either side of campus. There is also a handful of seniors in each area with majors on both sides of campus. This

data indicates that not all the Art students live on the Kirkland side and all the Science students on the Hamilton side of campus. Although students seem to think that everyone lives near to where their classes are, this is not necessarily so.

My survey results indicated that most respondents lived in their current residence to be with friends or had a proxy choose (37%) or because of the type of housing available (26%). Many seniors (15%) also indicated that their current housing or their reason for living on a particular side of campus was due to the housing lottery.

Discussion

In order to understand why students have these perceptions about the types of students who reside on each side of campus, I turned to my Social Psychology course to help provide an explanation. I will first discuss some important social psychological terms. Most importantly, a stereotype is a belief about the personal attributes of a group of people. In this case, the main stereotype is that light-siders are preppy, Greek, and athletic, and that the dark-siders are artsy and hippie. There were many other terms used to describe students on each side, but I will focus on the most prevalent ones. An *ingroup* is a group (two or more people who interact and influence each other) who share a feeling of common identity and a sense of belonging; an ingroup is “us.” An *outgroup* is a group that is seen as distinctly separate from one’s ingroup; an outgroup is “them.” Research has demonstrated that an *ingroup bias* exists, in that people tend to favor their own group. Tajfel’s minimal group paradigm has shown that no matter what factor people are grouped by, including a bogus reason, and even if they do not know who else is supposedly in their group, people will still rate their ingroup as better than the outgroup. This phenomenon helps to explain why 41% of the respondents were able to

make such strong statements about students on both sides of campus, even though they had only lived on one side. Just because someone considers herself as part of the “light side,” she will have less favorable attitudes about those other students that are not part of the “light side.”

Another concept that can help to understand the reasons for the existence and perpetuation of these stereotypes on campus is the *outgroup homogeneity effect*. This effect is the perception that outgroup members are more similar to one another than are ingroup members. It is the idea that “they are alike, we are diverse.” The greater familiarity we have with a group, the more we see its diversity, but the less familiar we are, the more we stereotype. This idea explains why many students would make statements such as, “Everyone on the light side is preppy and rich. Students on the dark side are much more diverse.” The outgroup homogeneity effect also helps to explain why so many people who had never lived on both sides were able to confidently make generalizations about those students living on the other side.

As for the finding of many different labels for the same buildings, there is another social psychological phenomenon that can help to explain it. *Subtyping* is the accommodating individuals who deviate from one’s own stereotype by splitting off a subgroup stereotype. Subtyping thereby protects, and often strengthens, the original stereotype. This is why many students label Babbitt and Milbank “the Suites” or why so many students see Milbank as an “exception” to the light and dark sides. They consider the “dark side” to be artsy, hippie students, yet many Greek students and athletes live in Milbank. Therefore, it is not really the “dark side,” it is an exception, so that all the other students on the “dark side” are artsy and hippie.

Conclusion

I think that these stereotypes are detrimental to the social climate on campus because they produce a division in the student body that does not have to exist. In order to overcome the physical division, students must learn to abandon the stereotypes about the light and dark sides and learn that they are, in fact, only stereotypes and are not true. The two sides do have different atmospheres, and I am not saying that students shouldn't find a particular niche that suits them. However, if the stereotypes persist to the point where students are written off as being "dark side weirdoes" or "light side conservatives," they can be detrimental in the learning environment as well. By believing these stereotypes, or even just continuing the light and dark terminology, the stereotypes become self-perpetuating because they will cause people (41%) to not want to live in a particular area or try something new. I was not able to provide factual data on the breakdown of where the preppy or hippie kids live, but my data does show that students are of diverse majors no matter what area of campus is examined. Students need to keep in mind that housing is chosen by lottery and people like to live near their friends. Some students may prefer the atmosphere of a big quad in Carnegie while others prefer to have a single with a big common room to share in the suites. Personally, as a junior I had hoped that my senior friend would be able to pull a suite and I wound up in a Dunham single. One never really knows what the housing lottery will bring and it is not fair to stereotype students who may have just gotten a bad lottery number.

In conclusion, it is hard to breakdown stereotypes, since they help people to classify and understand the world. However, I think there are certain things that can be done to try to reduce the stereotypes here. One simple suggestion is to take better care of

the Kirkland buildings and dorms. If better lighting is installed and the buildings are kept up with, as many students expressed was necessary, many students would not be able to call Kirkland dark for those reasons and might be more likely to try to live there.

I think that we should try to discourage use of the “light side” and “dark side” terms and try to use terms such as “north side,” “south side” and “down the hill.” (I think even using “Hamilton and Kirkland sides” could continue stereotypes. Since this is Hamilton College, the “Kirkland side” may seem “less Hamilton” or “other.”) North and south are not as loaded terms, and seem to be better labels for geographical locations (and not people) than light and dark. I think that the use of the new terms would really have to start with tourguides, Adirondack Adventure and Orientation leaders, based on the finding that most students learned of the terms light and dark before starting their freshman year. This might be a hard process that takes time to go through, but I think it would be for the benefit of the student body if we tried to eliminate the terms “light side” and “dark side” and all the connotations that go with them.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Nancy Rabinowitz, Robin Vanderwall and the Kirkland Project for making this study possible. Thank you to Julie Raynsford for help with contacting all the alumni, and to Professor Raybeck for the historical and psychological insight. Thank you to Rob Foels for help with creating my survey and the Print Shop and Mail Center for helping me to distribute them. Thank you to Mark, Haley and Brian, the other research associates. And thank you to the numerous alumni and seniors who were interested in my project, took the time to help me, and provided me with very interesting stories and opinions about Hamilton and Kirkland Colleges.

References

Myers, D.G. (2002). *Social psychology* (7th ed.). New York: McGraw Hill.

Appendix: Survey

Hamilton College Campus Questionnaire

1. How would you describe the Hamilton college campus? (physical aspects)

2. What words or terms do you use to describe or label the Kirkland and Hamilton sides of campus?

3. When and where did you first hear these words or terms used? By who?

4. What do these terms mean? (What do they mean to you? Do they have any kind of significance?)

5. Do you associate different buildings with these terms? If so, indicate what term or terms go with each of the following residential buildings (if any): Babbitt, Bundy, Campus Road apartments (houses by New Lot), Carnegie, 3 College Hill Road, DKE, Dunham, Eells, Farmhouse, Ferguson, Griffin Road, Keehn, Kirkland, Major, McIntosh, Milbank, Minor, North, Rogers, Root, Saunders, South, Wally J, Woollcott)

6. How would you describe the students at Hamilton College? (i.e. academic ability, sociability, socioeconomic status, etc.)

7. What kind of students live on each side of campus?

8. What kind of students generally eat at...

a. Commons?

b. McEwen?

9. Where do you currently live on campus?

10. Why do you live there?

11. Have you lived on both sides of campus? Why or why not?

a. Why did you decide to move from one side of campus to the other (or stay on one side or move off campus?)

i. If you moved, was it easy to move from one side to the other (or off campus)?

Demographic Information:

1. Age: _____
2. Gender: Male _____ Female _____

3. Race: Latino/Latina _____ Asian _____ White _____ Black/African-American _____
Native American _____ Other _____

4. My family's socio-economic status: Working class _____ Middle Class _____
Upper-Middle class _____ Wealthy _____

5. Greek affiliation: yes _____ no _____ Society: _____

6. Major _____ Minor _____

7. Political Party: Democrat _____ Independent _____ Republican _____ Other _____

8. Strength of Affiliation: 1 2 3 4 5
Weak Strong

9. Conservative or Liberal: 1 2 3 4 5
Conservative Liberal

Figure 1: When and where students learned of the “light side” and “dark side” terms.

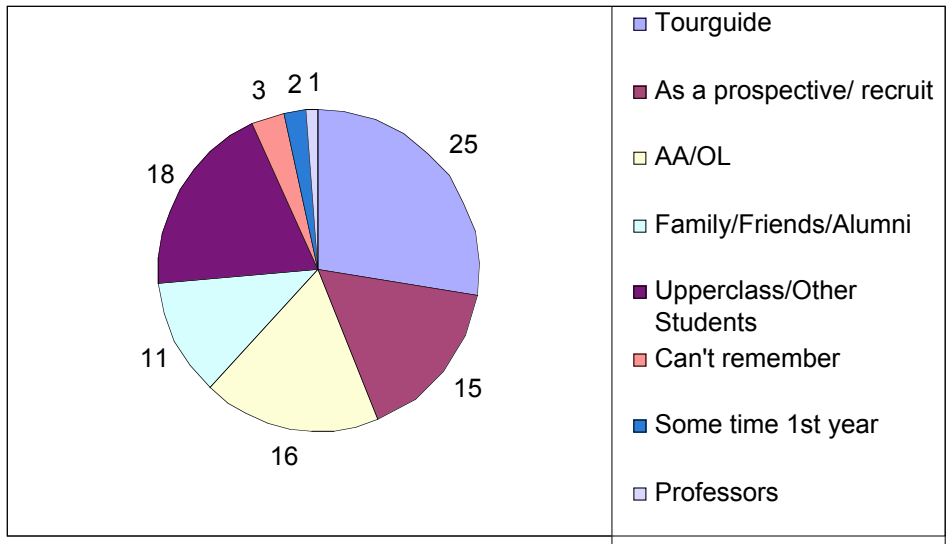


Figure 2: Meaning of terms.

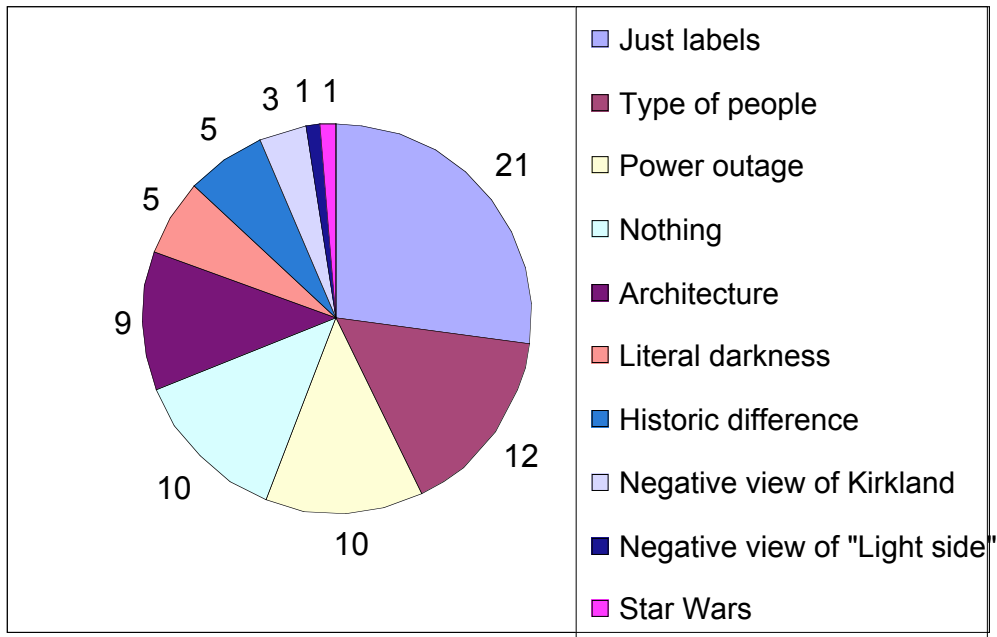


Figure 3: Labels of 3 College Hill Road.

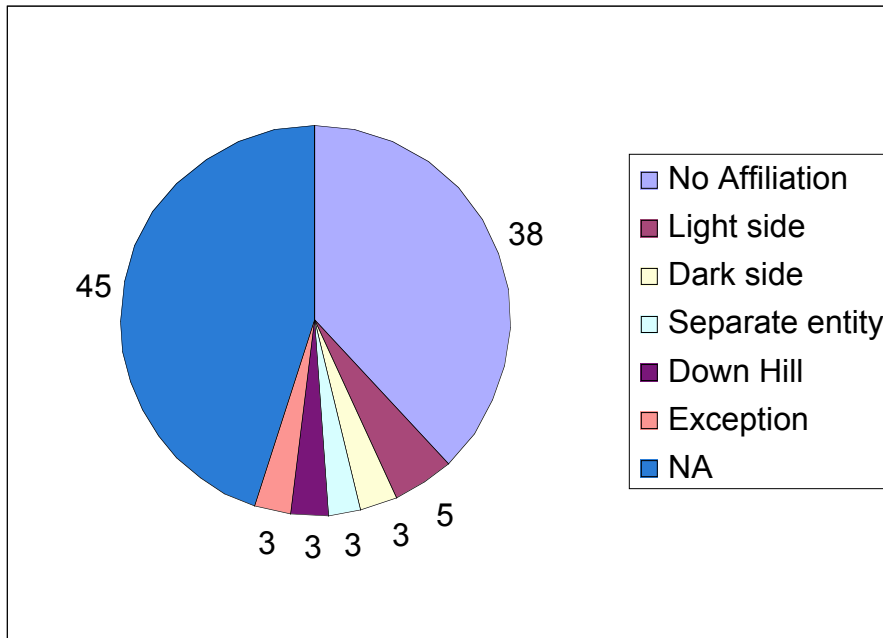


Figure 4: Labels of Milbank

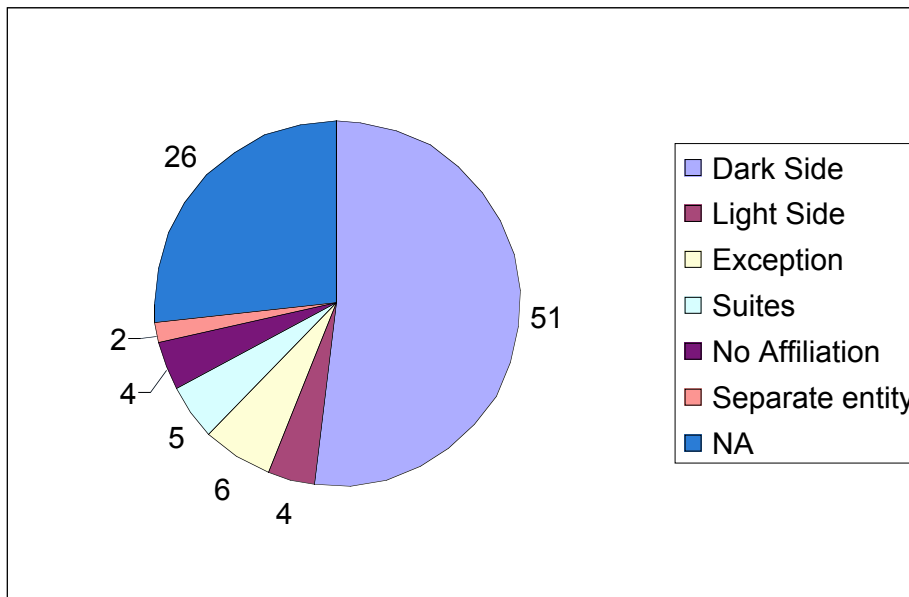


Figure 5: Breakdown of senior housing and major locations

