

Final Report of the Neighborhood Review Committee

Part One
March 2, 2010

Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to outline and explain the recommendations of the Neighborhood Review Committee (NRC) for changes to the upper-class residential system that could be put into place for the 2010-2011 academic year. Because the NRC has also dedicated a great deal of thought and discussion to wider questions about residential life at Williams, we will follow up this report with one last report, sometime after spring break, recommending areas for further exploration in 2010-2011.

Our major recommendations for changes to be made in time for 2010-2011 are the following:

- There should be no room-draw penalties for any student who enters the Neighborhood Lottery;
- While students in the Class of 2013 will retain their Neighborhood affiliations (or choose to enter the Neighborhood Lottery), students in the incoming Class of 2014 should not be affiliated with a Neighborhood. Instead, they should be able to form groups in the spring and choose their Neighborhood through the Neighborhood Lottery;
- The Baxter Fellows program should be strengthened;
- The Neighborhood Governance Boards should be restructured to include two elected officials and Baxter Fellows;
- All-Campus Entertainment (ACE) should include representation from each of the Neighborhoods to delineate better the programming done by ACE and the Neighborhoods;
- The College should institute an option for students to apply to live in quiet housing;
- The College should adopt a gender-neutral housing policy for upper-class students;
- As part of further examination of residential life at Williams, the College should do a thorough review of the co-op system and should further analyze how the physical infrastructure of our housing shapes the opportunities and challenges for students' residential experiences.

Overview of the Neighborhood Review Committee Process

Over the last eleven months, the Neighborhood Review Committee (NRC) has both accomplished and gone beyond what its name indicates – that is, we have thoroughly reviewed the current state of the Neighborhood system, but we have also come to a place where we can make concrete recommendations for changes to upper-class residential life at Williams.

We hope that some of these recommended changes can be made in time for this spring's room draw. Other recommendations will require significantly more time to explore. For members of the community who expressed their wariness about dramatic changes, these two timelines will be reassuring. For students who have criticized the Neighborhood system and hoped our work would institute an entirely new model, our report will no doubt be disappointing at some level. But we believe that our strategy holds the best hope for both making improvements to the system for next year and also setting in motion a truly comprehensive approach to residential life.

The Committee began its work in April 2009 by understanding what the principles were that underlay the creation of the current system; we then surveyed students in May on their thoughts about, and experiences with, the Neighborhoods; mined existing data about student experiences in upper-class residential life; and reported back to the community on our findings in our First Interim Report in October. We then held two open forums in the fall – co-sponsored by the Committee on Undergraduate Life and College Council – and organized lunches with leaders of specific student groups on campus (MinCo, Neighborhood Governance Boards, JAs, captains of varsity teams, and ACE). We also solicited Web feedback in the fall from any individual student who wanted to provide comments to the NRC. After gathering all this feedback, we produced our Second Interim Report, reporting the major themes that we had heard from students.

At this point, the Committee could have concluded its work, since our charge was to finish in December 2009 (or thereabouts) with whatever set of recommendations we felt able to make. But we believed that we could make recommendations for more concrete proposals if we continued our work into Winter Study and the spring semester. Collaborating again with the CUL and College Council, we therefore sponsored a third public forum in January 2010 that gave students a chance to consider five different models to stimulate discussion about how our current upper-class residential life system could be restructured; these models ranged from those presenting modest modifications to the Neighborhood system to those that would mark significant departures from our current or past residential systems. The following evening, College Council conducted a straw poll to determine which proposals seemed to garner the most student interest. The NRC then followed up with three days of tabling in Paresky at the end of Winter Study, informing students about the different proposals and seeking input. Finally, the NRC invited students to fill out a very brief survey in January, in which we asked questions about the desirability of substance-free and quiet housing. The responses to those questions have informed our recommendations for change for next year. In this survey, we also asked just first-years and sophomores about the desirability of a sophomore housing option, which had been one of the models discussed in the previous public forum. The responses to those questions have informed the recommendations we want to make for continued examination of residential life at Williams.

After extensive discussion, the Committee has decided to make two sets of recommendations – those we believe should be instituted for next year, and those that will require further exploration by the College. Because of the time-sensitivity of the former, we are presenting them here in Part One of our report. Part Two of our report will address the

recommendations for long-term strategic planning that our Committee feels strongly should take place.

Both our recommendations for immediate changes and our long-term vision for housing at Williams are crafted with three broad goals in mind: 1) increasing the flexibility of the student housing system; 2) improving the quality of students' interactions in their residential life, especially with the goal of creating socially inclusive residences; and 3) supporting a safe living environment for Williams students. These goals have been deeply informed both by institutional principles that the College has deemed important in a residential life system and the feedback that we heard from students about the current system.

Our short term recommendations aim to increase student choice in housing with a series of changes that can be expanded or altered in the future as new residential challenges emerge and as practice shows the strengths and weaknesses of each change. By removing penalties for changing Neighborhoods and ending first year affiliation with Neighborhoods (beginning with the Class of 2014), we have expanded the range of options available to all students. By introducing optional quiet housing, we hope to reduce tension between some students over lifestyles and sleep schedules, while also perhaps opening up a larger discussion on campus about the range of acceptable behavioral norms in student residences. And by re-organizing social planning, using a strengthened Baxter Fellows program to integrate campus-wide event-planning with dorm-level activities, we will address both the flaws of the current Baxter Fellows program and the awkward integration of Neighborhood and campus-level events. The stronger the adherence to balancing the values of choice and diversity and to supporting mutual respect in the Williams community, the more easily will future housing systems be adapted to student needs.

The following are our recommendations, with explanations, of the changes that we believe should be built into this spring's room draw and will require immediate planning:

Balancing Diversity and Choice: The Neighborhood Lottery and Room Draw

We went into our work last spring already knowing anecdotally that students were dissatisfied with the ways that the Neighborhood system restricted their choices about whom they could live with and where they could live, although some of those problems were addressed when the Office of Campus Life opened up the Neighborhood Lottery last year.¹ The

¹ In response to student input and based upon the experience of the Office of Campus Life with the previous Neighborhood Change application and placement process, the Neighborhood Lottery was implemented in the Spring of 2009, with the intention of increasing the process's transparency and giving students more choice. Students who opted into the Neighborhood Lottery could do so one time throughout their time at Williams without penalty in the subsequent room draw. Students who opted into the Neighborhood Lottery more than once would incur a penalty in the subsequent room draw.

quantitative responses and especially the qualitative responses to our survey in May confirmed the anecdotal evidence, as we noted in our first interim report, and students returned to these issues in the public discussions we held during the fall and Winter Study.

The Committee believes that relatively minor changes to the room-draw process can continue to balance the goals of creating student diversity within our upper-class residential housing, while also allowing for more student choice. We therefore recommend that, beginning this spring, there should no longer be room-draw penalties for students who change Neighborhoods. Also, while Neighborhood affiliations will remain in place for current first-year students, the incoming Class of 2014 will **not** be affiliated with any particular Neighborhood. For the 2011-2012 academic year, then, members of the Class of 2014 would form groups in the spring and choose their Neighborhood through the Neighborhood Lottery. The affiliation process should be reviewed with regard to the Class of 2015 and beyond.

The NRC considered erasing the affiliations for the Class of 2013 and having all rising sophomores go through the Neighborhood Lottery. However, because the affiliations are already in place, and many first-year students have built up housing expectations, the committee determined that it made the most sense to leave the affiliations in place for the Class of 2013. Students in the Class of 2013 are free to enter the Neighborhood lottery if they choose.

Finally, for the spring 2010 lotteries, pick-group size will remain at a maximum of six students. We believe that further consideration should be given to this number, in particular to whether a smaller number would create greater diversity within houses and dorms while also allowing students plenty of opportunity to live with their friends.

Do these changes run the risk of encouraging the formation of Neighborhoods with distinct identities associated with certain kinds of students? The NRC acknowledges this is a potential risk, but believes the risks are outweighed by the value of giving students more choice within the Neighborhood system and reducing some of the anxiety associated with room draw. Moreover, gender and class-year capping will also continue to frame the room-draw process. Finally, although some first-year students will not get their first-choice Neighborhood, many first-years will, and we believe this could create more positive feelings about the Neighborhoods and more opportunities for engaged programming.

Building a Better Baxter Fellows Program

Throughout our discussions with students in the fall, the Committee repeatedly heard a call to strengthen the Baxter Fellows program. Currently, Baxter Fellows are paid employees and are responsible for some house and dorm programming. They are the point people between the residents and offices at the College, especially Campus Life, and are also expected to collaborate with Neighborhood Governance Boards to encourage community building within the Neighborhoods. However, many students argued that the Fellows have insufficient institutional influence and unclear accountability, and they are under-utilized in the dorms and houses as

potential resources for student who would like to resolve minor residential problems between students without having to involve Campus Safety and Security or the Dean's Office.

In an effort to rectify problems with the Baxter Fellows program, while using the Fellows to improve dorm life and social programming, we are recommending that the college expand and strengthen the Baxter Fellows Program over time. While we will leave it to the Office of Campus Life, the Dean's Office, and interested students to create a strategic plan for such a strengthened program, we would hope that it would include 1) improved training for Baxter Fellows to make them an effective first line of conflict resolution within student residences; and 2) clear guidelines about expectations and accountability for the position. We acknowledge that this shift in the role of Baxter Fellows will not happen overnight, but we believe that it should be a priority, given the impact that Baxter Fellows could have in creating positive change in the culture of houses and dorms.

We also recommend that Baxter Fellows become an integral part of Neighborhood governance, facilitating communication between houses and dorms and Neighborhoods. The new roles for Baxter Fellows will, we hope, provide an avenue for more campus discussion of residential issues and will provide a structured link between individual residences and Neighborhood social planning.

Social Programming & Programmatic Infrastructure: From Neighborhood Governance Boards to Neighborhood Councils

Structurally speaking, the current system puts the Neighborhood Governance Boards (NGBs) in an awkward position, sandwiched between house-level programming and all-campus programming. Instead of effectively promoting meaningful Neighborhood-level community-building, the large budgets and board sizes have encouraged the NGBs to program on a campus-wide level, often conflicting with or duplicating the work of student groups like All Campus Entertainment (ACE) or administrative offices like Campus Life. The term "governance board" is also a bit of a misnomer, as NGBs have tended to function more like programming bodies than genuine governing boards structured to collectively discuss and address the issues arising in all of a given Neighborhood's dorms. Finally, given the limited number of students genuinely engaged in residential life leadership, staffing the current 6-10 member NGBs and the Baxter Fellow Program – which places 1-2 Baxter Fellows in most student residences – has been difficult in most of the Neighborhoods: we believe there may simply not be enough human capital to effectively staff all these positions.

The NRC therefore recommends that the current NGBs be replaced by new kinds of boards (perhaps called Neighborhood Councils), consisting of the following positions: a President with financial control over the Neighborhood funds; a Program Coordinator who will work specifically on Neighborhood-level events; and the Baxter Fellows from the houses within the Neighborhood (or some functional equivalent of these roles, giving future Neighborhood Councils and Campus Life the ability to add additional positions if needed). The President will serve as the Neighborhood Representative to the College Council and the Program Coordinator

will function as a part of ACE. The Neighborhood residents will elect the President and Program Coordinator, and the Baxter Fellows will continue to be hired by Campus Life.

The NRC also recommends that faculty no longer be affiliated with a specific Neighborhood, as many faculty already attend events in Neighborhoods other than the one with which they're affiliated, and we believe that the Neighborhoods can best encourage faculty participation if we remove affiliations. Although the Faculty Program Director (FPD) positions are relatively new (they are only in their second year), we recommend that they be continued next year, as the FPDs have not only helped support student-faculty programming but have also served to provide valuable advice to Neighborhood leaders. We will, however, present a more extended discussion of how to structure faculty presence/engagement in housing in Part Two of our report.

Building Connections between Baxter Fellows and Neighborhood Councils

Currently, the NGBs are all structured differently and have varied ways of incorporating Baxter Fellows into their activities. Since the Neighborhoods were implemented, many varieties of NGB-Baxter Fellow² relationships have been explored. These relations have ranged from having Baxter Fellows serve as de facto board members, as members on NGB committees or as a separate body that collaborated occasionally with the NGBs. A consistent challenge has been getting the group of paid Baxter Fellows and elected, unpaid NGB members to collaborate well and have consistent goals and expectations.

The expanded purpose of the Baxter Fellow role proposed by the NRC requires Baxter Fellows to serve as leaders within their own houses and within the larger Neighborhood. This will require Baxter Fellows to balance a dual role of working within their house to build community while at the same time coordinating with other members of the Neighborhood Council to build the larger Neighborhood community between houses. The structure of the Neighborhood Council will facilitate increased coordination and communication between the house-level and the Neighborhood-level and give more structure and accountability to the Baxter Fellows, naturally leading them to take a more active and involved role in their houses.

Defining Roles: Neighborhood-ACE Relations

From the beginning, ACE and the Neighborhoods were never able to define easily their programming roles in conjunction with one another. We believe that event-planning could be significantly improved by reorganizing the links between ACE, the Neighborhoods, and the Baxter Fellows, while respecting the autonomy of these important constituencies. Specifically, the NRC proposes the addition of a committee for Neighborhood Programming to ACE's

² The Baxter Fellow Program began in Fall 2007; its predecessor was the House Life Coordinator Program, which was not officially affiliated with the NGBs. Due to significant clashes and vaguely defined programmatic responsibilities between the NGBs and the House Life Coordinators, the Baxter Fellows program was implemented to officially unite house and Neighborhood-level leadership.

organization. The four Program Coordinators of the Neighborhood Councils together would constitute this Neighborhood Committee within ACE. ACE's current structure includes a president, treasurer, First Fridays Chair/Co-chairs, Stressbusters Chair/Co-chairs, and Concerts Chair/Co-chairs. We feel that money should be allocated to each Neighborhood to be used by the Program Coordinator for Neighborhood-wide events so as not to require ACE to reallocate its existing resources to accommodate funding Neighborhood-level events.

Even before the Neighborhoods were implemented, ACE was not the sole programming body on campus, as CC and Campus Life had begun to share event funding and co-sponsorship responsibilities. The Neighborhoods provided the first well funded programming alternative to ACE. But the relationship between ACE and Neighborhoods has been rocky, especially during big programming weekends like Homecoming, Winter Carnival, and Spring Fling when all programming bodies unite both funds and effort, further blurring the lines between Neighborhood and all-campus events. In addition, efforts to have the four NGBs and ACE coordinate throughout the semester to ensure that events are well-distributed throughout the year and do not excessively compete for attendance have largely failed. Having the Neighborhood Program Coordinators incorporated into ACE will facilitate better event-planning on campus.

Instituting Quiet Housing

In collecting feedback on the current Neighborhood system, the NRC heard from a number of students who were having great difficulties with their living situation because of noise and disruptions at all hours of the night. Some students reported noise continuing after 2 a.m. up to seven nights a week. One student said she slept in a friend's room every night because of all the noise around her own room. We were disturbed to hear how these situations were interfering with students' ability to thrive academically or to count on having a decent night's sleep before an athletic event. A substantial number of students reported to us that they would like to have a quiet housing option, which is available at many other schools. We heard, too, of student interest in substance-free housing, also provided as a residential option at other institutions.

To obtain a better sense of student interest in these kinds of housing options, we surveyed students in January 2010, and found that 10% of the 368 students who took the survey responded that they would definitely sign up for quiet housing or substance-free housing. Another 16% reported that they would probably sign up for such housing. Of those that responded with a "definite yes" or a "probable yes," 45% said quiet housing would be the most appealing, 23% chose substance-free housing and 31% chose housing that was both quiet AND substance-free.

After discussing these three possibilities, the NRC came to the conclusion that it made the most sense to institute quiet housing. This was the category that the greatest number of students expressed interest in. Moreover, substance-free housing can be difficult to police. We believe that quiet housing achieves most of the goals of substance-free housing with a minimum of intrusion into students' lives.

We therefore recommend the institution of quiet housing on campus. But what does “quiet housing” mean? At most of the campuses with quiet housing, students agree to abide by a set of rules when they apply for the housing. That might mean quiet hours between 10:00 p.m. and 7:00 a.m., for instance. But those details can be worked out. Students accepted into quiet housing might sign a contract, for instance.

In order to determine who gets into quiet housing, we suggest a procedure wherein students fill out an application, explaining their reasons for requesting quiet housing. The Office of Campus Life then considers those applications and makes a determination of who should get into a seniority-based lottery for the rooms within the quiet building(s). This would all occur before the Neighborhood lottery and housing draw for all other students. Normally, this process would run at the same time as the co-op process, although for this year it will likely be done closer to spring break.

We strongly believe that an individual building or buildings should be designated as quiet housing rather than portions of larger buildings. Other schools that have experimented with the second option report that it can be difficult to manage. For this first year, we recommend designating West College as quiet housing. It contains 54 beds, in 36 singles and 9 doubles. It is near to the academic buildings, which may appeal to many students. It also contains an equitable mix of room styles and sizes. If the number of applications is dramatically larger than 54, the College could consider designating a second building to be quiet housing as well. If this occurred, each of the applicants would then decide whether or not they wished to be considered for one or both of these buildings. It is important to note that quiet housing will only be comprised of students who have selected this option; students who don’t want this type of housing will never be required to live in the designated building(s).

The building or buildings chosen for quiet housing will retain their Neighborhood affiliations, and the students who reside in those buildings would become members of those Neighborhoods for the year. However, for the sake of housing placement the subsequent year, students would utilize their Neighborhood affiliation from the previous year. Sophomores, who after this next year will not have a Neighborhood affiliation as first year students, would use their quiet house Neighborhood affiliation for housing placement the subsequent year.

Gender Neutral Housing

Following the proposal by the Committee on Undergraduate Life and the resolution by College Council in fall 2009, the NRC recommends that the College adopt a gender-neutral housing policy.

Up to now, same-sex students have the right to request to live together in a double with no assumptions made about the relationship between the students. It seems fair that opposite-sex students have that same right. A variety of other schools have already gone to such a system, and indeed the Office of Campus Life supports this change. It will not affect gender balancing in houses; it provides flexibility for those students who are interested in this housing; and it allows for more residential support for students who need it (especially LGBT students). We expect that

most of the pairs of students involved would in fact be friends rather than in a romantic relationship.

Historically this option has been sought after by very few people each year (Campus Life typically hears of one or two pairs who would consider requesting it). We might anticipate more with the new policy, although the experience at other institutions that have a gender-neutral housing policy suggests that the numbers will remain small.

There are enough singles for all juniors and seniors to have them, and a number of sophomores, too, so we don't anticipate more than a few juniors and seniors who would choose this option over choosing a single. Moreover, this arrangement would never be imposed on anyone. Rather, it would strictly be the choice of the students who would live in the room together.

There would be no questions about the nature of the relationship between the roommates, just as there are now no questions of the relationship between same-sex roommates. However, some wording in the room draw procedures could be included that advises that if a potential roommate pair is in a relationship, they should consider carefully before deciding to live together, given the potential difficulties if a break-up occurred.

Co-op Housing

Although we initially sought to make a recommendation about co-op housing, we have decided that, despite student requests to expand the co-op system in its current form, we do not have sufficient information to make a recommendation on this topic. In all of the proposals that we have discussed, the idea of a co-op system has remained an integral feature, but before the college considers expanding the co-op system we think that it would be prudent to fully reexamine the co-op system and establish a more concrete definition of what constitutes co-op housing. Currently, co-ops are premium senior housing that is “cooperative” in name only. Co-op residents are required to participate in a limited meal plan but otherwise face little incentive or encouragement to engage in a truly cooperative living environment, similar to those that exist at other institutions. Therefore, the NRC proposes that a full-scale review of the co-op system be done.

Physical Infrastructure

In terms of the College's physical infrastructure, the Committee has identified a number of challenges and opportunities. The variety of housing types gives students a wide range of choices, but makes grouping equitable housing into each Neighborhood difficult. With the planned increase in student enrollment, the College will also undoubtedly have to convert many singles into doubles. Although perception of what represents the “best” or “most desirable” housing differs from student to student, we hope that no one Neighborhood will become flush with doubles and that all four Neighborhoods will have a fairly equal allocation of housing.

The geographic location of residence halls appears to have less to do with Neighborhood preference than housing type and opportunities for social interaction. Residence halls located further from campus center (most notably Tyler and Tyler Annex) do pose a psychological barrier to community building. However, rearranging Neighborhood boundaries does little to address that perceived isolation and is unlikely to improve satisfaction with housing assignments.

The division of the campus into residential Neighborhoods does add a level of complexity to the planning of improvements or expansion of the housing stock. Any campus planning should pay particular attention to the configuration of Neighborhoods, the equitable distribution of housing type (singles to doubles, corridor layouts to suite-type housing, small to large buildings), the location and variety of communal space types, and how students move to and from their houses.

Conclusion

As noted at the beginning of the report, the NRC will follow up this report with one that outlines our recommendations for longer term, strategic planning for residential life on campus. We hope to have that report completed sometime after spring break.

The NRC has informed Interim President Bill Wagner and President-Elect Adam Falk all along about the Committee's work. No formal decisions have been made, but they are in support of the recommendations outlined here; they will now work together to make decisions in consultation with the Dean of the College and other colleagues among faculty, students, and administration. We recognize that we are working with a very tight timeline for formal decisions about most of our recommendations, given the preparations that Campus Life needs to make for the Neighborhood Lottery and room draw. Nonetheless, we welcome student input and have set up another Web drop box for comments which can be accessed at www.williams.edu/dean/. We encourage you to send us your thoughts.

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