

Second Interim Report from the Neighborhood Review Committee
January 6, 2010

Introduction

The Neighborhood Review Committee (NRC) heard many things from students over the last six weeks of the fall semester; what follows below are the major themes that emerged – along with the themes that did not emerge – as students responded to the NRC’s first interim report.

We want to frame these themes with the following observation: as we noted near the conclusion of our first interim report, some of the problems attributed to the Neighborhood system are in fact relatively predictable points of conflict among students that would arise in any residential system. For instance, students at all residential colleges and universities must deal with the challenges of lifestyle conflicts in their dormitories and houses: study habits, sleeping patterns, alcohol consumption, tolerance for noise – these issues will exist in any residential housing system.

Likewise, the changing demographics of the student population have created new opportunities but also new challenges in residential life as heterogeneous groups of students learn to live together. So long as Williams has the entry system, the institution will always have to think hard about what residential life system will best facilitate continued interaction among different groups of students as they leave the Frosh Quad and Mission Park for upper-class housing. Whether Williams makes changes to the Neighborhood system or establishes another model, the NRC wants to emphasize that any residential life model will necessarily involve ideas about how a very diverse student body should dwell together in the “Purple Bubble.”

What We’ve Heard

1. Students underscored what the Committee found in its surveying: they want to live with their closest friends and want more freedom of choice. Many students also embrace the value of having demographic diversity within residences and hope that a system could be developed that would allow students full choice in whom they live with while also making sure that separate, homogeneous enclaves of students don’t take over houses and dorms. However, if students had to choose between these two goals – choice and diversity within their residential settings – most would prefer to live with their closest friends.

The NRC hopes that we can develop a set of recommendations that will allow the College to get past having to choose between these two goals in upper-class residential housing.

2. Students’ residences need to be places free of intimidation and disrespect, and students should not have to shoulder the burden of justifying their right to feel safe in their houses and dorms. The NRC also recognizes that there is a difference between this right to

feeling safe and the discomfort that, typically, is going to rise from time to time among students as they grapple with the challenges of living together.

3. As with the larger campus dialogue about diversity, the discussion with students indicated that the Neighborhood system has not, in its current structure, encouraged meaningful interaction among different groups of students. Many individuals also spoke of their frustrations in not even knowing their immediate neighbors. Students are not getting the full benefit of widening their friendship circles and, moreover, are living in environments that are not conducive to resolving low-level disputes in an informal manner.

4. As a way to address the problems outlined in #2 and #3, students in both forums, in the lunches, and in some of the comments submitted on the NRC website articulated the hope that the Baxter Fellows program could be strengthened – that a stronger program with more Fellows and greater accountability for the Fellows could help foster interaction among different students and provide avenues for handling internal disputes.

Analogous positions in the houses and dorms were tried before the Neighborhood system was established, and there were difficulties at that time. Nonetheless, because the Committee heard this theme so frequently in our public discussions, it will continue to explore this proposal. In addition, many students pointed out that the Neighborhood system, as it is currently structured, limits the options for students to choose quiet places in which to live, and the NRC will be explore the possibilities of how a residential system can incorporate such options.

5. Housing types in Neighborhoods vary substantially; students want more open access to their desired housing across campus.

While certainly the Neighborhood system constricts students' housing choices more than the "free agency" system did, the NRC want to remind students that there will always be some "winners" and "losers" in any year's room draw, no matter the residential system in place.

6. The Neighborhoods have added valuable social programming to student life on campus, but their programming roles have not been clearly defined in relation to each other and to ACE.

What We Haven't Heard

1. A call for strengthening connections between residential life and dining, since student choices in dining are not generally governed by where students live.

2. Support – beyond a handful of students – for strengthening students' sense of identification with their Neighborhoods.

3. Setting as a priority the mixing of class-years.
4. A desire to have more faculty-student interactions in residential life beyond what is currently being encouraged by the Neighborhood system.

Looking Ahead

Although its original charge was simply to work through the fall semester of 2009, the NRC wants to continue its work through Winter Study and the spring semester. Our goal is to outline recommendations for upper-class residential life at Williams by the spring both for what might be accomplished next year and for any more long-term goals. While we recognize that students would like a timeline for when they could anticipate these recommendations, and possible implementation of changes, the NRC wants to be thoughtful about this process and believes that offering up a timeline at this point would be premature.

That said, the NRC looks forward to co-sponsoring with College Council and the Committee on Undergraduate Life another public forum on Tuesday, January 12, at 7:30 p.m. in Paresky Great Hall. There, we will discuss a handful of concrete proposals for upper-class residential life as a way to focus our thoughts on the central issues that have been raised over the last several months. We encourage you all to attend!

Neighborhood Review Committee Members, Fall 2009

Colin Adams, Mathematics and CUL Chair
 Jonathan Carroll, '11
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 Lisa Melendy, Athletics
 Diana Prideaux-Brune, Facilities
 Joel Revill, History
 Doug Schiazza, Campus Life
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