

# Vision for Williams Housing

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After almost a decade of turmoil, the outlines of a better housing system for Williams are fairly obvious. Let us begin with a series of assumptions, widely held in the College community.

## Assumptions

1. The First Year entry system with Junior Advisers in the Freshmen Quad and Mission Park works well. First Years should be engineered into entries and rooming groups that are as diverse as the admissions office can make them. Never had an opportunity to interact with football players or non-US citizens? Now is your chance.
2. Co-op housing for seniors works well and should be expanded. There is something magical about the opportunity to live communally with your closest friends senior year. It is a good thing that Williams has exposed you to a wide diversity of Ephs in your first three years. Senior year is the time to enhance and solidify the very special bonds that, if you are lucky, will last a lifetime. Co-ops do that.
3. Senior-only housing is special and should be encouraged and facilitated, even for those who do not want to live as co-ops. All the good aspects of co-ops apply here as well, but there is no reason to prevent those who want to eat in the dining hall from enjoying an intimate housing experience with close friends during their senior year.
4. During sophomore and junior year, it is good to live with both close friends in your suite and Ephs different from and/or unknown to you in your house. The time for the extreme social engineering of freshman year is over, but the importance being exposed to a diverse group of Ephs remains. It is best that the serendipitous relationships that will arise from these interactions have as many years as possible to develop and deepen.
5. There shall be no theme or special interest housing. The College will not allow significant student self-segregation, especially segregation that crosses class lines. The situation around the year 2000 (with certain houses dominated by African-American students or by male helmet-sport athletes) will not be permitted again.
6. It is hard to know ahead of time who your friends will be or where your most meaningful Eph connections will occur. It is just as likely as not that your relationships will be with people who came to Williams from very different backgrounds. If anything, the opposite is true. The more different you are from your fellow Eph, the more likely you both are to get something out of the relationship. But those relationships take time to develop and flower.
7. The flexibility and possibilities of junior year should be retained. It is a good thing that more than 50% of juniors do something different — from being a JA to Williams-in-Oxford — that takes them away from upperclass housing.
8. The physical infrastructure of Williams is a given. No major student construction projects are on the horizon. None are needed. To the extent that there is money for

housing, it should be spent on increasing the number of senior co-ops and decreasing the number of doubles.

9. The spaces on campus — Dodd, Spencer, Currier and so on — capable of supporting large parties are held in common for all students. The College plans on holding a certain number of parties in those spaces each year, even if the residents of those houses are not a part of the party. Students who do not like living in such houses should not pick into them.
10. No housing system is perfect. There will always be students who are dissatisfied. But misery should be decreased whenever possible. A housing system in which 30% are very happy and 3% are miserable is much better than a system in which the breakdown is 50% and 10%.
11. Student choice in housing is a good thing. It is not the most important thing but, as long as the other goals of housing policy are met, it is best to let students choose where to live.

## Davis Conjecture

Now, any of these assumptions might be challenged. Reasonable people may disagree. For example, Smith integrates first years into upper class housing. Perhaps such a system would make Williams better. But it certainly seems like the vast majority of Ephs, including current and past members of the Committee on Undergraduate Life, concur with almost all of these assumptions. If anything, I have stacked the deck in favor of the use of social engineering. My argument is that, once these assumptions are accepted, the optimal housing arrangement for Williams follows quite naturally.

**The Davis Conjecture:** The fundamental unit of social life at Williams should be the academic class, not the physical house. Students from the same class who want to live together should be allowed and encouraged to do so. The more that students interact with a wide variety of fellow Ephs, and the more years that this interaction is allowed to occur, the better off everyone will be.

Note that the Davis Conjecture asserts nothing negative about, say, the interaction between seniors and sophomores. Plenty of such cross-class interaction will continue to occur, especially within the student organizations that transcend academic class: sports teams, singing groups, literary publications, student government and so on. But the reality is that a given Eph will only have the opportunity to make  $X$  number of friends, have  $Y$  number of meaningful conversations, share  $Z$  meals in the dining hall during her four years.

Consider a sophomore sitting down to lunch in April with a senior that she has never met before, someone from a very different background. Such lunches are, potentially, a big part of the

learning that goes on outside the class room. The problem with this lunch is not so much the event itself, but the fact that this relationship may not really develop since, in two months, the senior graduates. These two Ephs, from different backgrounds, don't have enough opportunity to interact. The real problem, then, is with *the lunch that did not happen*, the lunch between this sophomore and her fellow sophomore from that very different background. If the sophomore had lunch with a senior, she did not have lunch with her classmate, she did not start a relationship which could then develop over the next two years instead of being still-born over the next two months.

One of the goals of Williams housing policy is that these friendships and conversations represent a fair cross-section of Williams students. The more time that a student spends with others in her class, the more likely the most (stereotypically) unlikely of relationships are to develop. Senior/sophomore interaction is not a bad thing in itself. It is a bad thing because it takes the place of greater sophomore/sophomore interaction.

## **Recommendations**

The exact details should be left to the Committee on Undergraduate Life, but the broad outlines of an optimal housing policy are fairly obvious, given the assumptions above and the Davis Conjecture.

### **Sophomores**

We want the sophomore class to live together, just as they sought to live together in Mission during the era of Free Agency. We are happy to let them have large pick groups and for those pick groups to congregate to some extent, especially if that congregation is along the party/quiet dimension. The Berkshire Quad, with 324 beds, is the natural (and historical) home for the sophomore class. We might try grouping the rest of the class together as well, perhaps in Morgan (104), West (47), Spencer (25) and Brooks (28) or perhaps in Dodd and its associated houses (134). The key is that sophomores live with other sophomores. The nice thing about having most of the class in 5 largish buildings is that it still leads to extensive student mixing. Students have already met scores of their classmates in Mission and the Freshmen Quad. Now they will meet scores more. In an ideal world, you would want every sophomore to know the name of every student in her house. They might not be best buddies, but if they had shared a meal at least once during the year, that would go some distance toward providing exposure to a wide cross-section of the Williams community.

How much freedom should sophomores have in their room draw? More than they had as first years, but less than juniors and seniors have. There is nothing wrong with the Administration insisting on the 5 or so houses having fair mix of all sorts of students even if the student groups themselves are self-selected. Yet allowing partiers to live next to partiers makes everyone happier. WSO plans probably decreased the amount of intra-rooming group conflict because it

allowed students to sort themselves efficiently. Carrier ballroom would naturally become a central location for sophomore class social events.

## **Juniors**

We want the junior class to live together, just as they sought to live together in Greylock during the era of Free Agency. The same reasoning for sophomores applies here. Greylock, with 297 beds, is the solution. In any given year, a few non-juniors will end up in Greylock or a few juniors will end up elsewhere. But given the usual patterns of study abroad, this is a good arrangement for the class as a whole.

The marvelous convenience of the Berkshire Quad and Greylock is that all the houses are large enough that — if classes are segregated and gender balance is kept roughly equal in each house — it is almost impossible for any house to not be diverse, regardless of pick group size. That is, it is highly unlikely that any Berkshire or Greylock house, under this regime, could develop into anything that looked like theme housing. Because most sorts of theme housing involve, by definition, gathering a specific subset of Ephs together, any successful attempt at theme housing requires cross-class housing. Prevent/discourage that and theme housing largely disappears.

Because rooms are of mostly uniform quality, housing in Greylock also minimizes the disruption caused by junior year aboard. Students can come and go without worrying too much about the quality of their rooms or the distance from their friends.

## **Seniors**

Seniors want to live together, especially in small groups with their closest friends. Moreover, after three years of social engineering by Williams, it is time to let them make their own choices. If all the senior women on the soccer team want to live together, then let them. If all the seniors in the Black Student Union want to share the same house for their last year at Williams, then give them this freedom. Williams has done everything it can possibly do to convince these students that they should be close friends with Ephs from a variety of backgrounds and that their living arrangements should reflect that cross-section. If, for whatever reason, these students disagree, then let them be. Williams, as an institution, should not try to force seniors into being something that they are not. Instead, we should focus on binding those seniors to each other, and to Williams, for the rest of their lives.

Turn all co-ops and, potentially, all row houses into senior-only housing. Allow seniors to sort themselves into these houses so as to minimize conflict and maximize bonding.

One aspect of senior housing involves the social scene. Williams should do a better job of matching Ephs who like to throw parties with housing that makes throwing parties easy. Williams has a variety of houses that make for great parties. Right now, we make no effort to ensure that the students living in those houses want to throw parties. We should reserve specific houses (e.g., Wood (28), Perry (28), Garfield (37), Agard (31), Spencer (25) and Brooks (28)) as "party houses," places where the residents are expected and encouraged to throw parties.

Needless to say, there will be conflict among seniors over housing. A key aspect of that conflict will revolve around actual (and fake) preferences. Why should students who want to live in a co-op have receive an advantage in getting, say, Milham, over seniors that want to eat in the dining halls? And, to the extent that the College should meet that preference, what is to prevent students from lying, from saying that they want a co-op when all they actually want is Milham? More than 300 students in the class of 2010 applied for co-ops. The vast majority have no particular interest in cooking for themselves or shoveling their own sidewalks.

The same difficulty arises with party houses. Here, at least, the College has an incentive to place students who want to throw parties into houses that make parties fun because the parties themselves contribute to the social life of everyone on campus. Yet not wanting to throw parties should not doom a group of seniors to sub-standard housing. And, again, there will be fakes, students who claim that they will throw parties but who either don't really mean it or don't follow through.

There is no magic bullet for these problems. The best plan is to establish a Senior Housing Committee, staffed by students and modelled on the Junior Adviser Selection Committee. It would be staffed by non-seniors and charged with administrating the process by which seniors are placed in houses. Details left as an assignment for CUL.

### **Reviving the Odd Quad**

Not all sophomores will want to live in the Berkshire Quad, not all juniors will seek Greylock, not all seniors desire a co-op/row house for them and their friends. The great value of the Berkshire Quad (the so-called "Odd Quad") was that it provided a home for students outside of the mainstream of Williams social life, a place where students could find a place of their own. One of the reasons why free agency was so successful was that the Berkshire Quad provided a critical mass for Williams students who see themselves, correctly or not, as very different from the mainstream and who celebrated that difference. Forcing such students to live in Berkshire/Greylock can only harm them. One possible home for such students is Dodd. Another is Tyler/Tyler Annex.

If everyone understands the sort of students that Tyler/Annex is reserved for, than almost all Williams students will respect that precedent. (And general undesirability of such a distant housing will only help matters.) The trick will be to prevent other groups from taking over this refuge. (There was a great confrontation between Odd Quad types and athletes over T/TA a decade ago during the Free Agency era.) A few words from the coaches of certain mens' teams will probably prevent that problem from arising.

The Davis Conjecture leads to a system not-dissimilar from what free agency naturally evolved into, but it grounds that outcome in a coherent theory of why class-based interaction is better than house-based interaction. If Eph A and Eph B, from very different backgrounds, meet and become friendly, we want to provide that friendship with years to flourish. If both are in the

same class, this happens naturally. If they are in different classes, it may still happen, but not as often and not as thoroughly.

## Specific Policies

Although the exact policies needed to achieve these goals are subject to further discussion and refinement, these rules seem like a good start. In essence, we want to return to the days of Free Agency, but with specific restrictions about who can pick where.

1. All students in a pick group must be from the same class. Groups pick by class (seniors first) and then, within class, via lottery, except for special procedures for senior housing.
2. No senior may pick into Greylock.
3. No senior or junior may pick into the Berkshire Quad.
4. Seniors should be encouraged and/or have the opportunity to form groups large enough to pick entire (small) houses. A system not-dissimilar to the co-op process might be employed. Such special “house picks” would be restricted to seniors only. A student group, similar to the Junior Adviser Selection Committee, would supervise the process. Many details need to be worked out. But allowing hundreds of seniors to live in a house with their closest friends would be the biggest improvement in the Williams experience in decades.
5. The stock of co-op housing should be doubled. Houses like Hubbell and Dodd Annex are natural targets. Conversion should focus on the more distant, less desirable and smaller campus houses.
6. Room draw should be more spread out, perhaps with one week per class. Co-op housing for seniors would go first, as now, followed by senior whole-house picks (which might involve several rounds), followed by other senior picks, followed by juniors and then sophomores. Most of the stress from housing comes from the rush and uncertainty.
7. Reinstate WSO Plans: allowing all students to see, before they pick, which students have selected which rooms.

There are, obviously, a great many details to work. But, once you accept the assumptions above, it becomes clear that no system like Neighborhood Housing will work because — with first years and seniors largely cut-off from the neighborhoods, a housing infrastructure without close housing/food connections, and a junior class missing more than 50% of its members over the course of the year — *there is no way that meaningful neighborhood identity will ever develop.* Free agency with class-based housing groups is the best solution for Williams.