

# **A Vision for Williams Housing: Community by Class Year**

by David Kane '88  
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After almost a decade of turmoil, the outlines of a better housing system for Williams are fairly obvious. 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 international students? 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 and continues for more than one year. The situation early this decade (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 housing construction projects are on the horizon. To the extent that there is money for housing, it should be spent on increasing the number of small senior houses 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. This is especially true when it comes to different rooming groups living near each other. It is better to allow the natural clustering rooming groups with similar preferences about noise and parties than too force groups with conflicting tastes into close proximity. Group that want to have a Thursday night keg should live near groups that either agree or don't mind.

## Davis Conjecture

Any of these assumptions might be challenged. Reasonable people may disagree. For example, Smith integrates first years into upper class housing. Stanford has theme housing. Yale has a radically different housing infrastructure. Perhaps such systems 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. 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 classroom. 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. Group the students by classes: sophomores in the Berkshire Quad, juniors in Greylock and seniors in the row houses and Dodd.

### **Reviving the Odd Quad**

Not all sophomores will want to live in the Berkshire Quad and not all juniors will seek Greylock. The great value of the Berkshire Quad during the previous 30 years (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. This was true both during Free Agency and during the Weak Houses era that preceded it. 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. The best place to try and recreate the Odd Quad is Tyler/Tyler Annex.(T/TA), with 79 beds.

If everyone understands the sort of students that T/TA is reserved for, than almost all Williams students will respect that precedent. (And the 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.) A few words from the coaches of certain mens' teams will probably prevent that problem from arising. We would not want T/TA to turn into theme housing.

It is hard to know whether or not seniors should be permitted in T/TA. Probably not. First, any group of seniors who wants to live quietly and/or outside the mainstream has a wide-range of options to choose from in senior housing. Second, with only 79 spots, there is some concern that T/TA is not big enough for the natural demand. (How many "Odd Quaders" were there?) Third, to the extent that a group of seniors wanted to maintain a connection to T/TA, the simplest option would be to select Thompson.

## **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.

My recommendation would be the Berkshire Quad (324), Morgan (104) and West (47). The total in this plan (475) is probably a too low because there are typically around 525 sophomores in residence. Given that this is sophomore housing, the College might turn some of the singles into doubles, especially given the recent rise in enrollment. Thirty to forty sophomores will probably end up in the revived Odd Quad in Tyler/Tyler Annex. Lehman, with 32 rooms, is another possibility. It is far from the rest of the class but the fact that it is all singles might make it somewhat popular. But the key is that we have at least 7 houses, each with a critical mass of students. It is almost impossible for any individual house to be dominated by one group or another.

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 7 houses having fair mix of all sorts of students even if the student groups themselves are self-selected. Gender capping would be reasonable. Yet allowing partiers to live next to partiers makes everyone happier. WSO plans --- the computer system which showed the specific rooms everyone ahead of you in the housing lottery had selected --- probably decreased the amount of intra-rooming group conflict because it allowed students to sort themselves

efficiently. Currier ballroom would naturally become a central location for sophomore class social events. Driscoll would become the sophomore dining hall.

## **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. Given patterns in study abroad, there are approximately 400 juniors in residence at any point in time, but 50 of those are JAs. This means that 50 or so juniors will need to live elsewhere. One option may be Lehman. Another might be to turn one of the close row houses with a decent party space into a juniors-only house, with students living there with the knowledge that it would be a center of class socializing. Most likely, at least 40 to 50 juniors, perhaps especially the juniors most likely to spend at least a semester abroad, will prefer Tyler/Tyler Annex. If so, the numbers work out almost perfectly.

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 in Susie Hopkins, then let them. If all the seniors in the Black Student Union want to live in Brooks 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. Allow seniors to sort themselves into senior houses so as to minimize conflict and maximize bonding.

Such freedom does not violate the restrictions (at least in spirit) against theme housing for two reasons. First, these are senior-only houses. No underclassmen are allowed to live there. So, even if group X is living together in an unhelpful fashion (from the point of view of the College), their decision does not necessarily leak down to other classes. Almost all the sophomores and juniors

in group X are still living in thoroughly integrated dorms in either the Berkshire Quad or Greylock. Second, even if Susie Hopkins is the soccer house one year, it will not be the soccer house next year. If every single year there is a house dominated by group X, then this is not so much a *problem* as a *signal* that Williams is doing something else wrong. With luck, this won't be an issue. But, if it becomes one, we are better off facing the problem squarely than averting our eyes via housing randomization.

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. Several houses (e.g., Dodd, Wood, Spencer, and others) 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 as "party houses," places where the residents are expected and encouraged to throw parties.

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 wants to 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. Once this new plan is in place, thereby allowing seniors to live with their friends, I expect the demand for co-ops to plummet.

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 senior 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. For reference, here are the senior-only houses:

#### **Senior Housing (413)**

Dodd Area (124): Dodd (58), Hubell (27), Dodd Annex (12), Goodrich (9), Parsons (8) and Sewall (10).

Row Houses (176): Spencer (25), Brooks (28), Perry (28), Garfield (37), Wood (28), and Agard (31).

Other (112): Thompson (31), Doughty (11), Lambert (8), Milham (9), The Rectory (8), Susie Hopkins (9) and Poker Flats (36).

With around 100 students living off campus, the numbers work out almost perfectly. Some adjustments might be made to decrease the number of doubles, at least once the recent spike in admissions moves through the system. Imagine a Williams in which 58 friends and acquaintances who both want to live together and enjoy throwing parties take over Dodd.

Wouldn't that make for a dramatic improvement in social life at Williams? Imagine the same for 25 friends in Spencer or 28 in Wood. The secret to a successful social scene is to empower those students who want to throw parties with the means of doing so.

### **Process**

1. Treat all senior houses the same. There is no point in distinguishing between co-ops and non co-ops. Some senior houses have kitchens. Some do not. Some require basic maintenance/cleaning from their residents. Some do not. As long as seniors know the rules and regulations associated with each house, there is no problem, and no added expense to the school.
2. Establish a Senior Housing Committee, run by students and modeled on the Junior Adviser Selection Committee.
3. This Committee would determine, with input from the Deans Office, the best mechanism for assigning seniors to houses.
4. The process would probably aim to solicit "bids" from large groups in the first round. A group of 58 might make a bid for Dodd. (It is unlikely, but not impossible that there would be more than one bid.). If there were no bid for Dodd as a whole, then Dodd would be split into two parts, with each half accepting bids in the next round.
5. Garfield and Poker Flats might also be handled in this round as well, depending on how things go with Dodd.
6. Once Dodd had been filled, there would be a second round in which groups of 25-30 would bid for mid-sized houses like Hubell, Spencer, Brooks, Thompson and Perry. Any houses that were not filled would be, like Dodd, split into parts and passed in to the next round.
7. Once all the mid-sized houses were filled. The third round would take care of all the small houses.
8. Throughout, houses would be filled with a group of students who had decided, among themselves, that they wanted to live together.

There will be a fair amount of turmoil associated with this process. It would not be easy to get a group of 58 students together. Dealing with friends aboard is time consuming. Feelings would be hurt as groups came together and split apart. But such is life. Williams would, at a stroke, become the only college in the world at which all the seniors lived together in groups of their own choosing spread among a housing stock that, in its quality and variety, is second to none.

Over time, the College could continue to convert other small buildings to senior housing, thereby moving to a situation in which every senior is guaranteed a single. (It is not clear if the numbers work out for that happy state right now.) If the College ever decided that the small amount of theme-lite housing were unacceptable, it would have a simple solution to the problem: Require senior housing groups to be "diverse enough." That is, the College would just not allow all the women soccer players to live together and with no one else. There would be no need to define this phrase ahead of time. Conversations between the Administration and the Senior Housing

Committee would make the standards fairly clear and, over the course of a few years, a common law-like understanding would naturally emerge.

## Specific Policies

Although the exact policies needed to achieve these goals are subject to further discussion and refinement, consider this rough draft. In essence, we want to return to the days of Free Agency, but with specific restrictions about who can pick where and strong-prohibitions against cross-class rooming groups.

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 or some other mechanism.
2. Seniors may only either live off campus or in senior housing.
3. No junior may pick into the Berkshire Quad.
4. Senior housing process governed by a student committee modeled on the Junior Adviser Selection Committee.
5. The stock of small houses should be increased with special focus on current administration space.
6. Room draw should be more spread out, perhaps with one or two weeks per class. Most of the stress from housing comes from the rush and uncertainty.
7. Reinstate WSO Plans: allow 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 at Williams*. Free agency with class-based housing groups is the best solution.

## Summary

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. Moreover, the more that students are bound to their classmates, the more likely they are to continue their connection to Williams for the rest of their lives. Post-Williams, almost everything works via the class. Stronger inter-class bonds lead to more alumni



giving, greater reunion attendance and more volunteer efforts. Connecting seniors to each other connects them all to Williams. Require Williams students to live with their classmates in certain parts of campus and, without further interference from the College, the resulting patterns will encourage the mixing of Williams students from all backgrounds while simultaneously minimizing the amount and intensity of student conflict.