



## Strengthening Residential Life

Depending on when they graduated, alumni have experienced different systems of residential life, which most of them recall fondly. They should, since each system had its strengths, though each also had its weaknesses.

This year's Committee on Undergraduate Life (CUL) has identified four recent eras. The Fraternity Era lasted until the 1960s. Most students joined one of the frats, which were self-selecting. During the Strong House Era, which lasted until the early '80s, small groups of friends were assigned to a house where they lived through graduation. Student government and intramurals were house-based. Each house had faculty members associated with it and funds for cultural programming. In the Weak House Era, which lasted until the early '90s, a growing number of students shifted house affiliation, often to avoid spending three years in less desirable residences. The steadily increasing number of transfers ultimately led to the Free Agent Era that exists today. Each year, small groups of friends choose rooms wherever on campus seems most desirable when their number comes up in the housing lottery.

A strength of the current system is that no student has to face three years in a building he or she dislikes. Maximizing this freedom, however, has had unintended consequences. Students don't really identify with their house (it's just where they're living this year) and therefore tend not to build relationships with their housemates. This has resulted in fewer interactions among students of different backgrounds, interests and class years.

Perhaps, then, we shouldn't have been surprised when surveys showed that only half of our graduating seniors reported that Williams had done much to help them relate better to people of different races, nations or religions, a number well below most of our peer institutions.

For these reasons we made residential life a focus of the strategic planning process that began a few years ago and asked for a full review of the matter by the faculty/student/staff CUL, chaired at the time by history professor Charles Dew '58. The committee recommended moving toward a

house system to be designed to retain the best of the current arrangement while recapturing the best of the former models.

This year's CUL, under the leadership of philosophy professor Will Dudley '89, consulted widely, thought hard and produced a wonderful, detailed report that proposed the adoption of just such a system. You can find the report at [www.williams.edu/go/cul/](http://www.williams.edu/go/cul/).

With the enthusiastic endorsement of the Board of Trustees and administration, work is now under way to launch the new house system in fall 2006.

At the end of their first year, students in self-selected groups of up to six will be randomly assigned for their subsequent three years to one of five "houses." Each house will comprise a geographic cluster of residences, so students will experience increasingly more desirable accommodations with seniority. The five houses will average 275 members.

The goal, according to the CUL's report, is to create "an environment in which upperclass houses are not merely places to live, but are genuine and lively communities to which students feel a real attachment."

Each house will have a governance structure, faculty associates and funds for programming. Intramurals will again be organized by house. College Council is thinking of how best to structure itself to reflect the new system.

Many students embrace this change, but, not surprisingly, many feel deeply the loss of the soon-to-pass opportunity to pick a room each year anywhere on campus. Some also fear that the social makeup of the houses will feel contrived.

But our own experience here on campus in the recent past shows that a vibrant house system can enrich students' lives by encouraging the kinds of interactions across barriers of age, background and interest that are the lifeblood of a residential liberal arts college.

I am pleased that Williams is about to right its course in this direction and applaud all who are working hard to make it happen, to the benefit of countless students.

—Morty Schapiro