**Housing after Randomization**

In the annals of undergraduate housing, the graduation of the class of 2001 marked the end of an era. My freshman year, the seniors weren’t “randomized”—they were the last class allowed to matriculate to their Houses according to some vestige of a choice system. Granted, we never lived in the Houses with them—but we heard tales of the grand old days when Adams was a haven for gays, when Kirkland (and later Mather) teemed with jocks, when Quincy was heavily Asian and the Quad was heavily black.

This report was written by Elizabeth Gudrais ’01, one of this magazine’s former Berta Greenwald Ledecby Undergraduate Fellows.

Randomization means little to today’s freshmen; in a population that replaces itself every four years, institutional memory is short. But whether or not today’s students realize it, the shift to randomization—taken in a series of gradual steps, each one moving further from the masters’-choice system of the Houses’ early days—has undeniably changed the undergraduate experience at Harvard. Now that the dust has settled, the concentrations of certain groups in certain Houses are gone and increasingly forgotten. Though many decry the loss of that kind of House identity, a new social dynamic has filled the vacuum after a few rough years. In fact, interhouse transfer applications have been steadily on the decline since the 1995-96 school year; senior survey numbers show significantly less dissatisfaction with the House system and the housing assignment process than before randomization (see chart on page 79).

Gone with the institutional memory are many champions of the old system. One of those champions is Loker professor of English and former Adams House master Robert Kiely, who voiced steadfast opposition to the new measure in the days when it was under consideration. The House he oversaw—and the one where I lived—had a particularly strong identity and faced major change with randomization. “Gay and lesbian students were scattered throughout the College, but Adams House became the place where they had their dances and the place where they had their weekly meetings. The first leaders lived there. I was one of the first faculty advisers,” says Kiely. “Students said to me over the years how important it was to have the feeling of support from the rest of...
the House.” Though he estimates that, even at its peak, the gay and lesbian population made up only 10 to 15 percent of the House, Kiely says Adams’s tolerance was its true trademark. “A lot of students who, for a whole variety of reasons, didn’t feel they belonged in whatever they perceived the rest of Harvard to be, found a haven in Adams House,” he says. “I felt very protective of that.”

Those who weren’t fans of randomization question its validity all the more because, they say, the legend that has developed far exceeds the reality. “Students now tend to romanticize the stereotypes, but I don’t think of the self-segregation as as stark as people are portraying it,” says Shirley Thompson ’92, Ph.D. ’01, who lived in Adams as an undergraduate and then observed it post-randomization in the four years she served as a resident tutor. Though she is black, Thompson says she didn’t even think of listing the Quad as one of her choices: “I didn’t want to have to walk that far.” Instead, she ended up in Adams House. “Just out of curiosity, I was glancing through an old House facebook, and there were actually quite a lot of black students in Adams—a lot more than there are now,” she says. What’s more, she adds, her blocking group was “very diverse nationally, racially, ethnically, gender-wise, sexual orientation, interests, you name it. There were a lot of other groups similar to mine. We had athletes as well as artists. Some people were both. The administration talks about these groups as if people are one thing or another and that’s it.”

But whether or not the Houses were diverse, stereotypes did exist—and were no doubt harmful. College administrators argued their case with the dissenters, but eventually pushed randomization through, to take effect in the spring of 1996.

That decision stands in the minds of my classmates as a turning point in the history of the College. But dean of the College Harry R. Lewis maintains that it was more a turn back toward the past: a fine-tuning of the housing policy to better reflect the original intent of the founders of Harvard’s residential college system. He points to the Reports of the president and treasurer of Harvard College for 1927-28, in which then-president A. Lawrence Lowell wrote that the Houses were places where “men interested in various fields of thought should be thrown together with a view of promoting a broad and humane culture.” Lowell made no bones about his attitude toward students’ tendency to associate with those of their own kind, writing, “So far as subjects of concentration, pecuniary means, and residence in different parts of the country are concerned, each House should be as nearly as possible a cross-section of the College.”

In the “real world,” said randomization’s opponents, individuals choose their associations and are free to segregate themselves in homogeneous communities if they wish to. “Randomization is unnatural!” they cried. Lewis has never denied that. His point is that this unnatural environment might effect some change, so that graduates aren’t as likely to segregate themselves after they get out. “It is not the objective of the residential system to make every student as comfortable as possible,” says Lewis. “A certain level of discomfort is part of our educational obligation.

“This is definitely an issue of individual freedom versus community good,” he continues. “It’s always been my belief that on matters of general community importance like this, you don’t make the decision based on a preponderance of student opinion.” In a self-segregated system, a student could conceivably spend four years without interacting in any significant way, outside the classroom, with someone from a different cultural background. And the very idea of a residential college is that learning continues outside the classroom. “The academic and non-academic halves of the undergraduate experience had grown increasingly distant from one another,” says Lewis.

But immediately following the implementation of randomization, a funny thing happened: students began using a different tool to self-segregate. The average blocking group size crept swiftly upward toward the maximum of 16. And for the first time, the blocking group became a central feature of Harvard undergraduate life. “When I was an undergraduate, ‘block-
JOHN HARVARD’S JOURNAL

A Divinity Activist

Father J. Bryan Hehir from the start was on loan to Harvard. When he came to teach at the Divinity School and be part of the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs in 1992, he also had an ecclesiastical assignment as pastor of St. Paul’s Church in Cambridge. When President Neil L. Rudenstine asked Hehir (pronounced here) to take on the leadership of the Divinity School in 1999, the diocesan priest was spending part of each week in Baltimore, providing policy analysis and advice to Catholic Relief Services, the relief and development agency of the Catholic bishops of the United States. To signal that he had responsibilities elsewhere, Hehir was not called dean, although he functioned as dean, but rather chair of the Divinity School executive committee, and in announcing his appointment, Rudenstine noted that Harvard might not have Father Hehir’s services for long. Now the church has called him to a new set of tasks, and on January 1, 2002, he will become president of Catholic Charities USA, a network of more than 1,400 social-service agencies with headquarters in Virginia.

The appointment of a Roman Catholic to lead Harvard’s divinity school was a first and seemed to some observers remarkably ecumenical. Hehir says today that he found dealing with the complex life of the school, with its multiple constituencies, challenging and stimulating, and through his contacts with the president and other deans, he came to sense what an extraordinary number of things go on at Harvard and how much people expect of it. Though brief, his time at the top was “very satisfying” and “a great experience.” From his perspective, the fact that he is Catholic was “neither a burden nor a problem,” and he encountered nothing but “openness and cooperation.”

The faculty of the school, he points out, is “very rich and diverse in its background and traditions.” He made it more so, overseeing the establishment of newly endowed professorships that will enhance the school’s work in Buddhist, Islamic, and women’s studies, and on the role of religion in international conflict. He also brought to fruition a campaign to raise $11 million to add two floors and a modern infrastructure to the Andover-Harvard Theological Library, and he saw through to completion the transformation of historic Divinity Hall from a down-at-heel dormitory to a spiffy new facility with many faculty offices.

Hehir has regularly taught “The Use of Force: Political and Moral Criteria,” a course offered both in the Divinity School and the Kennedy School. He explores the ethics of war and to that end looks at weapons of mass destruction, large-scale conventional war, and the problems of humanitarian interventions. With University Professor Stanley Hoffmann, he has taught a Core course in the College on ethics and international affairs. And he has taught about Catholic social ethics and bioethics.

What are his views about stem-cell research? “I’m a great believer that if you deal with the intersection of ethics and some field,” says Hehir, “you’ve got to be immersed in the nature of the problem. I don’t understand the science of stem-cell research and couldn’t offer any more than a layman’s view.”

Interviewed for this article in late August, he was asked what he thought of the Bush administration’s stance in the world, which at the time seemed noninterventionist. “It’s part of a much larger debate that has been going on since the end of the Cold War about how the United States should understand its place in the world,” says Hehir. “One argument is that the U.S. is a great power and should act like one, and what great powers do is to deal with other great powers and not get involved in situations like Somalia, Rwanda, even Kosovo. The alternative argument says that the U.S. ought to be something else in addition to a great power: that it ought to be willing to expend time, treasure, talent, money, and lives in situations where there are mas-
They had meetings in places that were lighted and accessible. Murphy and her cochair changed things even more a year later: they advertised meetings, putting up posters and sending out announcements over the House e-mail list. House-wide parties filled the Molotov Café, drawing in students who’d previously feared that shadowy, candle-lit basement lair. The new master and co-master, Judith Palfrey and Sean Palfrey, coordinated a series of “Life Seminars,” inviting experts to give presentations and lead discussions on such useful topics as cooking the basics, fixing a bicycle, and preparing one’s taxes. Immediately post-randomization, attendance at traditional House events—not just Drag Night or the masquerade, but also the Winter Swing and the Spring Waltz—dropped severely. Since then, House chairs have been working to bring the crowds back. “We had a tough time trying to dispel this image of the House as gay, black-wearing, and artsy,” says Murphy.

But the loss of that image, and the move toward mainstream, inclusive events, means that something real is also lost. Drag Night and the masquerade, for instance, live on, but the culture that went with them is relegated to further reaches of the College. “Drag night started as a celebration of being out,” says Ciocco, who dressed up in a peach-colored, floor-length bridesmaid’s gown and matching dyed satin pumps to sing a song entitled “Bridesmaid Blues” for last year’s Drag Night. “It was much more of an activist event. Now, for better or for worse, it’s become kind of campy, and it’s become a lot safer for straight students.”

So where exactly has the gay community gone? And for that matter, the black community, the Asian community, the white-collar aristocratic community? The groups needed other means for associating with one another and distributing needed information—and the Internet appeared on the scene at just the right time. Now all that the head of such a group must do is send out an announcement on its e-mail list; most members will likely know about the event within minutes. Still, extracurricular groups can’t always fill the void left when a space-based community is removed. “When you join [the Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, Transgen-
Beyond the Transcript

**Last year**, Harvard’s senior admissions officers urged applicants to the College—and their parents—to relax a little, lest the rising generation of undergraduates pursue achievement so relentlessly that they end up burning out prematurely (“Harvard to Applicants: Chill!” March-April, page 68). Now the dean of the College, Harry R. Lewis, has extended that message. During the welcoming class of 2005, selected from those eager thoroughbreds, with what he calls a “pastoral letter” titled “Slow Down: Getting more out of Harvard by doing less.” (The full text is available at www.college.harvard.edu/dean/slow_down.html.)

Lewis cautions the baby Harvardians that “some habits acquired in anticipation of applying to college may not serve you as well while you are here.” Their success, he suggests, may depend on approaching college “with an open mind about the possibilities available to you” and a gradual focus on “fewer things you discover you truly love”—among them, activities pursued for fun, “rather than to achieve a leadership role that you hope might be a distinctive credential for postgraduate employment.”

To these ends, Lewis urges students to give themselves flexibility in planning their courses of study, to think carefully before pursuing advanced standing (“The one irrefutable fact about graduating in three years is that it saves money,” but at the cost of enjoying the intellectual, extracurricular, and personal riches to be had here), and to consider taking a term or a year off before graduation. He suggests how to make choices: don’t commit to two major extracurricular activities at once, for example, and find ways to accommodate multiple academic interests without committing to an inflexible joint or special concentration.

In its broadest context, Lewis’s letter aims to empower students, to change their life rhythms from the grade- and high-school years to the many more decades beyond college. In high school, he writes, academic choices were more limited, and most Harvard students “have taken the most demanding choice available where there was any choice at all,” as well as loading up on impressive-sounding activities. “Yet in later life most of what we do outside our jobs we do because we want to do it, not because we are in any way rewarded for doing it.”

The years between he sees as a transition: “[W]e will certainly give you a diploma and grades and transcripts attesting to some of the things you have done here, but much of what you do, including many of the most important and rewarding and formative things you do”—such as the relationships formed with roommates and friends—“will be recorded on no piece of paper you take with you, but only as imprints on your mind and soul!” Using the choices they really have—and making a sensible commitment to “relax, exercise, eat well, and most of all, sleep” (on the latter point, see page 83)—the dean concludes, will help the students realize that “It’s your life, even at Harvard.”

**The main change since randomization** has been another attempt at fine-tuning. Discouraged by students’ tendency to form large blocking groups and frustrated by the way these mammoth groups tipped the demographic balances within Houses, the College in September 1999 slashed the allowable blocking-group size in half, to eight. The theory was that without large networks of close friends within their House, students would be more likely to branch out and meet others. This change, coupled with efforts to provide activities that mirror the diverse demographics of each House, has helped facilitate mixing between blocking groups.

At Adams House, for example, tutors and students organized a Chinese New Year celebration in the dining hall; masters’ teas included a Southeast Asian and a Central American tea, with food and drink to reflect each cultural tradition. “We invite students to come and meet a group that’s doing something different,” says Judith Palfrey. “Tomorrow night, they might sit at a different table in the dining hall.”

At the same time, the Palfreys have tried to guard against losing the old Adams spirit altogether: last spring, they appeared as a cross-dressing couple in a theatrical production of a French farce staged in Adams’s Pool Theater. “We still do struggle to maintain a little of the old character,” says Judith Palfrey. “Even if it’s just at intramural sports, what’s the way that Adams House plays? We come in black T-shirts, we’re a little ragtag, we...
don’t always do things by the rules. For masters’ teas, we don’t get a fancy caterer; we just bake cookies. Even though it’s not all the black turtlenecks, I would hope we’re still seen as a little bit, in an odd way, counterculture.”

The one exception to the supposed loss of community, according to modern folklore of the College, has been the Quad, because of its isolation. Geography encourages Quad solidarity, and Quad denizens commonly boast that life there most closely resembles “life at a real college,” something Harvard obviously is not. “There’s something very special about being up at the Quad,” says James Ware, who began his term as master of Cabot House in the fall of 1996. “It’s more distinctive. There’s more identity at the Quad; you feel more bonding. In the end, it turns out OK, but there’s still a lot of [initial] apprehension and anxiety.”

Before randomization, those placed in the Quad were often even less apt to accept their fate positively. J. Woodland “Woody” and Hanna Hastings served as master and co-master of North House from 1975 to 1996. In that capacity, they were charged with the job of generating enthusiasm about a House that routinely placed last, in terms of the number of students listing it as a choice, in rankings published annually by the Crimson. “People threatened suicide if they were assigned to the Quad,” says Woody Hastings.

Athletes in particular objected to facing a 30-minute walk before a 6 A.M. practice across the river. The introduction of general shuttle-bus service and the athletic department’s new policy of offering athletes cab vouchers have largely alleviated the issue. Renovations to North and Cabot Houses in the late 1980s have also helped, and perks such as the beautiful Radcliffe Quad, a quieter and less hectic setting for study, and a warm, welcoming community (strengthened, in fact, by its distance from the rest of the campus) won most students over. “After a few months, they became fiercely loyal and wouldn’t live anywhere else and loved it,” says Hanna Hastings.

But that took longer for some students than for others. Precluding that waiting period was a major goal of randomization, says Harry Lewis. “Psychologically, there’s an enormous difference between asking people where they want to go and then telling them they can’t go there, and just having everyone know it’s going to be the luck of the draw.”

Whether things are better or worse than they were seven years ago, it’s clear that they are different. Though the policy of choice has been lost entirely, its defenders’ legacy lives on through conscientious House masters’ and tutors’ efforts to forge new communities that remain distinctive while embracing diversity.

Happy about Housing
Each year, seniors are surveyed about their Harvard experience. Mean scores for the question about housing indicate rising satisfaction as randomization phased in.

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The “Nicest Building in the Yard”
For almost three centuries, Massachusetts Hall has stood quietly at the entrance of Harvard Yard. It is perhaps more quintessentially Harvard than any other building, for as a central part of the Yard and as the oldest building on campus, it has over time come to represent the University on everything from postcards to banners to china plates. (The only older American college building is the Christopher Wren administration building at William and Mary.) “It’s a friendly, kindly old building,” recalls William C. “Burriss” Young ’55, who lived in Mass Hall for 35 years as an assistant dean of freshmen.

Administrators and students hold the building in special regard. For within its thick brick walls, for more than six decades, the University administration has coexisted peacefully with the College’s youngest and newest students. Over the years, those who have lived within Mass Hall have formed a special bond with one another—a bond that stretches back through generations of Harvard alumni and includes such fa-