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Students in Residence

The Residential Collage

By [BRUCE WEBER](#)

Published: July 29, 2007 Correction Appended

On a Monday in April, a dozen or so [Cornell](#) students living at the Alice Cook House had dinner with the legendary White House reporter Helen Thomas. They had been invited by Ross Brann, a professor of Judeo-Islamic studies, who also happens to be dean of Cook House, where his apartment has a spacious room meant specifically for this kind of entertaining.

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Meanwhile, a university vice provost was holding an open meeting, on the subject of diversity at Cornell, in the Cook common room, the setting the next night for a panel discussion on “Women in Islam.” Before it began, in the seminar room next door, Cook residents studying Middle Eastern languages held their weekly “Jeopardy” competition in Arabic; then, two graduate fellows led a study session for students seeking help in chemistry.

On Wednesday, all 350 or so residents — students and graduate fellows — had dinner together. (The food was Southwestern.) On Thursday, Jewish and Muslim students met for their weekly discussion group, and on Friday, Professor Brann was the host of a tea, where Dr. Stephen Ajl, a pediatrics professor with the [State University of New York](#), held forth on the politics of health care. At the same time, Cornell’s director of undergraduate studies in French joined students in a seminar room for their weekly viewing of “X-Files” reruns.

All in all, it was only a moderately busy week at Cook, where the fusion of academic and residential life represents something of a revolution, not just at Cornell but across the country.

Since the mid-’90s, amid concerns about the marginalization of undergraduates, universities have sought ways to keep upperclassmen from moving off campus while providing more faculty interaction and supervision. Dozens have turned to the residential college, a system intended to dissolve the borders between the social and academic elements of campus life by gathering many of them under the same roof — literally.

Cook House, like its counterpart next door, Carl Becker House, is equipped with its own [library](#), computer lab, music practice rooms and dining hall; each is administered by a senior faculty member who lives there, as do half a dozen graduate student mentors. Another 30 faculty and administrative fellows volunteer to lead seminars, study groups and group excursions.

It’s all aimed at making a campus of 13,000 feel more manageable, less like an intimidating institution and more like, well, home.

“It’s the philosophy that a big university need not alienate students from faculty and that a learning atmosphere will be better if students feel a sense of belonging to the campus,” explains David C. Hardesty Jr., the departing president of [West Virginia University](#), which last August opened the first new student residence to be built on the Morgantown campus since the 1960s. The residence, Lincoln Hall, provides 350 first-year students with their own multimedia theater, library, resident faculty members and seminars that fulfill general course requirements.

“It’s the idea that to improve in the classroom we have to improve outside the classroom,” he says.

A rash of projects now under way, from Middlebury College in Vermont to Willamette University in Oregon, suggests the trend is expanding. At Cornell, in fact, Cook and Becker are only the first pieces of the \$200 million West Campus Initiative; three more houses will be operating by 2010. Louisiana State will open its first residential college in the fall, and [Michigan State](#) its third. Vanderbilt’s \$150 million campus-within-a-campus — 10 houses, dean’s residence, dining center and public square — should be ready in 2008.

The paradigm, of course, is the English college, which dates back to the 13th century. The 31 colleges that constitute Cambridge and the 39 at Oxford are self-governing units responsible for admitting, housing and feeding students and, to a significant degree, teaching them — the university is a unifying administrator that determines course offerings and degrees.

Variations were first imported by [Yale](#) and [Harvard](#) in the 1930s. Both assign students (freshmen at Yale; sophomores at Harvard) to a college they will be affiliated with throughout their stay. But the systems that have evolved in this country reveal the ambiguity of the terms “college” and “residential college.” Such colleges may or may not offer their own curriculums; they may or may not grant degrees. (Avoiding this ambiguity is one reason Cornell, like Harvard, uses the word “house,” and

Vanderbilt and Middlebury refer to theirs as “commons.”)

Yale’s colleges offer classes for credit; Harvard’s don’t. At [Rice University](#), which established its residential college system 50 years ago, entering students eat, sleep and socialize at one of nine colleges but attend classes outside its auspices. The [University of Michigan](#), on the other hand, carved its residential college from the College of Literature, Science and the Arts in 1967, giving it its own faculty, its own interdisciplinary curriculum and its own academic requirements.

What unites these programs is the utopian notion of an academic community. And while associated with the elite by reputation, the latest institutions to embrace the model are distinguished by their variety, which is a matter of some pride for Robert J. O’Hara, an evolutionary biologist and education consultant from Fitchburg, Mass. Mr. O’Hara is probably the leading advocate of what he calls “the residential college movement.”

His encyclopedic Web site, [collegiateway.org](#), provides links to hundreds of resources and lists campuses in 14 countries (including Ghana, New Zealand and Malaysia) with residential colleges, which he explicitly defines as “permanent, cross-sectional, faculty-led societies that provide the advantages of a small college in the environment of a large university.” The “cross-sectional” requirement eliminates houses with themes or, as at the [University of Vermont](#), places reserved for honor students. Such segregating elements conflict, in his view, with the fundamentally democratic nature of the residential college.

Correction: August 2, 2007

An article in the special Education Life section on Sunday about residential colleges misstated the number of such colleges at Michigan State University. The residential college that is to open in the fall is Michigan State’s third, not its first. Also, a chart showing large colleges and universities misstated the location of Grand Valley State University. It is in Michigan, not Missouri.

The Residential Collage

Mr. O’Hara, who studied zoology at the [University of Massachusetts](#), became a convert to the way of life as a graduate student in biology at Harvard, living at Dudley House. His experience sounds precisely like the one the deans at Cornell, Vanderbilt and West Virginia envision for their future undergraduates.

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“At UMass, I lived in one of those 1960-era cinderblock dormitories that had sprouted all over the country at the same time,” Mr. O’Hara says. “I got a good education, but as far as campus living, it was not there. Harvard opened my eyes. At Dudley House, I’d have lunch with grad students in English, play pool with grads in philosophy, have dinner with people in engineering and the arts. It was a cross-section of the institution in miniature, and it got me thinking: ‘Why doesn’t everybody have something like this?’”

The trend now, Mr. O’Hara says, is a “generational shift” that amounts to nothing less than “the reform of campus life and undergraduate education” — a view echoed by administrators. If, in the 1960s, students were reacting to the campus strictures of earlier decades, things like parietal hours and the doctrine of *in loco parentis*, what happened in later decades was that students got what they wished for. Ever-larger and more crowded dorms, essentially unsupervised, came to feel like student warehouses. Fraternity houses and other residences with self-selecting populations added to social and racial divisions. Classes, especially introductory lecture courses, dwarfed the individual.

An influential 1995 book, “The Abandoned Generations: Rethinking Higher Education,” by William H. Willimon and Thomas H. Naylor, captured the moment succinctly. In it, the authors argued that lax parenting and increased social permissiveness had changed the kinds of students arriving at colleges. They were inadequately prepared for college, and when they got there, they found that administrators and faculty had largely turned their backs on teaching in favor of publishing and research. The result, they wrote, was a campus culture whose primary characteristics were “substance abuse, indolence and excessive careerism.”

The current changes are in many ways a response to those observations; administrators acknowledge an element of social engineering: they hope that keeping students more academically engaged for more of their time will keep them out of trouble.

“We went in the ’50s with *in loco parentis*,” says Gordon Gee, the departing chancellor of Vanderbilt, “and then after the Vietnam War we went to *in loco deny-us*, that is, ‘We don’t want anything to do with these kids because they’re crazy.’ I call what we’re doing now *in loco amicus*. We’re going to create an environment in which the students and faculty are friends.”

Advocates of the new programs often use the word “holistic” to describe the experience they are hoping to provide, and they talk about effecting monumental change. “The distinction between curricular

and extracurricular is a distinction we’re trying to eliminate altogether,” says Frank Wcislo, a Vanderbilt history professor who has been named the first dean of the new Commons, the first stage in a two-decade, campuswide conversion to a residential college system.

“There is a kind of chemistry at work here,” Mr. Wcislo says. “We’re very much aware that in taking on the project of undergraduate education, we’re not simply influencing students. We’re going to begin to affect the way our faculty teaches and the way our faculty learns. As the students become qualitatively different, they’ll then begin to make different demands on the part of the university. So the undergrads become agents. There’s a lot more student agency being envisioned here.”

The West Campus Initiative at Cornell is emblematic of how residential life shapes a campus. It began under Hunter R. Rawlings III, the university’s president from 1995 to 2003. Mr. Rawlings arrived to find what he called “a divided campus.” The dorms then on West Campus, undistinguished buildings popularly known as U-halls, were located near many fraternity houses, and tended to attract white suburban students interested in a “pre-fraternity experience,” Mr. Rawlings says. Most minority students gravitated to the dorms on North Campus. Seeing an opportunity both to cross-pollinate the campus and to provide incoming students with greater supervision during their first year, Mr. Rawlings herded all the freshmen to North Campus. Then he embarked on the West Campus project, which he saw as a way of combating another tradition at Cornell — very hard work offset by very hard partying.

“That struck me as not the healthiest of models,” says Mr. Rawlings, who is now a classics professor. “So I thought, if we could set up residential colleges, where students were living not only with their peers, but faculty and graduate fellows, we’d create a different atmosphere, one where residences are not so divorced from the classroom and the library.”

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His view was informed by having himself attended Haverford, which had some 450 students at the time. “Because I knew everyone,” he recalls, “it made me feel I was part of the academic institution.”

In fact, the idea had already been proposed by a committee on residential life led by Isaac Kramnick, a professor of government who had long noted students’ disengagement from campus life.

“It had become clear that there was a 4:30 p.m. cutoff at the university, after which many students entered an intellect-free zone,” says Mr. Kramnick, who was named

the first vice provost for undergraduate education in 2001. Cornell, he adds, prided itself on giving students independence in their choice of housing, “but for some students, better students who were looking for more intellectually oriented living arrangements, we didn’t have it.”

Cornell’s housing situation had long been debated. Proposals to stem the tide of students fleeing to off-campus apartments were so frequent as to be a campus joke. “Before I got here we had something like 21 housing studies in 25 years,” Mr. Rawlings says, “and the recommendations were either ignored or opposed by students, who insisted on choice.”

With Mr. Rawlings as its champion, the West Campus project got its start; it didn’t hurt that the university received a gift of \$100 million for the purpose from an anonymous donor.

Since then, the issues that have surfaced have been both practical — the first year, students at Cook House nearly staged a revolt over the limited choices at meals — and philosophical. Entrenched in a system that rewards research, publishing and public speaking more than it does undergraduate teaching, faculty members have slowly come to back the project, Professor Brann says. The 30 fellow positions for Cook, Becker and Hans Bethe House, a third residence to open next month, have been filled for the fall semester. There is some concern that the five deanships, which will rotate every few years, will be difficult to fill because of the 24-hour responsibility.

“The part that’s challenging is getting people to make the commitment to live in,” Professor Brann says. “People are understandably cautious. We’re looking for senior faculty, but those who are energetic and eager to be knee-deep in working with undergrads.”

Michele M. Moody-Adams, a professor of philosophy who has succeeded Mr. Kramnick as vice provost, explains: “This kind of interaction with students hasn’t been so valued here. It’s a culture change we’re trying to bring about here. But we’re not having a problem with the student side of it.”

Indeed, interviews with a dozen students at Cornell would indicate that *in loco amicus* is thriving. They don’t think the West Campus houses have changed campus life — not yet — and most students see them not so much as a new learning philosophy as a snazzy new place to live.

“What attracts you initially is that the facilities are so nice and new,” says Lauren Trakimas, a 21-year-old human biology major who lived in Cook before graduating in May. “People say it’s like living in a

hotel.” But students are amazed to find out how much is going on, she adds, and though some come and go as if Cook were a regular dorm, many “attend every program.”

Gregory N. Mezey, 21, a sophomore who transferred from the Culinary Institute of America to Cornell’s school of hotel administration, spent the first semester in a traditional dorm. In January he moved into Becker. “I’ve seen a dramatic difference,” he says. “Cornell is so big, it has so much, and to be in an environment that emphasizes experiencing different things with other people has really been beneficial.”

“I love coming home every day, having meals and learning more about campus. The minute I got here, it was like I was part of the family.”

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