

Hamilton College Strategic Planning Subcommittee Report, Summer 2008
Residential Life & Co-Curricular Programming

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Introduction: students, faculty, the division of student life.

Hamilton folklore has it that, in former times, if a student was unruly in the village after hours, a phone call to the Hill would be placed, and, in short order, Sid Wertimer, professor of economics and associate dean, would arrive to escort the young man back to his fraternity house.

Much has changed in the past several decades.

The composition of the student body has reconfigured: this year Hamilton celebrates the 30th anniversary of the matriculation of its first co-ed class, the preparatory school/public school ratio has shifted, representation from diverse cultural backgrounds has widened, and the student body's academic profile has improved.

Faculty demographics have also changed. In the not-too-distant past, the faculty was predominantly men, for example, and the Trustee Room in Buttrick Hall afforded ample space as a meeting venue. Faculty members continue to be recruited and rewarded for their devotion to, and excellence in, undergraduate education, to be sure, but increasingly also for the quality and quantity of their research. Expectations of scholarly production have escalated, and scholarly pursuits are consuming more and more faculty time and energy.

Faculty members play a different role in students' lives outside of the classroom than they did decades ago. While some faculty members still routinely entertain students in their homes, for example, many others are part of two-income families, share child-rearing responsibilities, and/or maintain commuting relationships, and therefore entertain less frequently. Offices and student residential space have gradually displaced faculty and administrators from apartments on the south side of campus, on Griffin Road, and on Campus Road. When the legal drinking age in New York was raised to 21 in the mid-1980's, social life on campus was altered: parties involving alcohol now preclude the majority of students, and faculty freedom to socialize with underage students is curtailed. Gone, too, are the days of faculty socializing in pre-1995 fraternity houses over wine and cheese. No longer does the beer truck set up on the quad on Class and Charter Day.

Students arrive at college with more baggage – literally and figuratively. Old-fashioned, informal 'rap sessions' between students and faculty are still commonplace, but the increased prevalence and awareness of complex issues such as students' family and home dynamics, learning disabilities, and mental health issues, placed against a backdrop of a litigious society, requires more expertise than the typical faculty member – superbly trained in an academic discipline – can routinely effectively render. Students

need, and the college has responded, with a growing network of student life professionals.

The division of student life has grown significantly not only in number, but also in the scope of their work. The professional staff and the student resident advisors now assume roles formerly shouldered by faculty; phones no longer ring after hours and on weekends at professors' homes, but rather on the cell phones of on-call student life professionals, whose responses follow a prescribed protocol.

All this is not to say that our friendly, intimate campus of bygone years is lost, but the model of the last half-century is. It is possible to long for it, to yearn for it, to bemoan its passing, but it is not possible to recapture or re-engineer it. Rather, understanding the current state of affairs, anticipating and identifying future trends, to the extent possible, and outlining ways to thrive in the current environment, is the best strategy.

The missions of the offices of the Dean of the Faculty, Dean of Students, and Dean of Admission need to re-align in the face of the current reality. There need to be complementary, collaborative, interactive goals and expectations, as well as plans for successful implementation. Moreover, the Office of Communication needs to articulate an updated, re-fashioned message to external constituents, including alumni and prospective students.

This document is a summary and synthesis of five main areas that the sub-committee on residential life and co-curricular programming has identified for strategic planning focus over the next five years.

I. Orientation. The division of student life devotes an enormous amount of thought, energy, time, attention, and effort to making incoming students feel comfortable and at home during the critical first days that they spend at Hamilton College. Everybody's expectations of orientation are extraordinarily high. Indeed, expectations of these first days are unreasonably high. It is a period of raw and overwhelming transition for many students and their families, rendering it difficult to provide more than a cursory overview of the many mandatory and practical topics that are vital to the health, safety, and welfare of our students. While they are navigating course selection and enrollment in the open curriculum, students are briefed on fire-safety protocols, alcohol guidelines, and preventing sexual assault. The annual speaker on sexual orientation and diversity is always well-received, but Lisa Magnarelli states it simply: "Students are not ready psychologically and developmentally to do deep work."

In the following, we have identified two broad areas connected with orientation. Each is an area of strength, on the one hand, while also posing questions and challenges, on the other. Planning surrounding Hamilton's first-year orientation program should concentrate on studying more carefully the appropriate mix within each of these areas.

Pre-orientation programs. Hamilton boasts popular and successful pre-orientation programs, such as Adirondack Adventure (AA) and the Urban Service Experience (USE). POSSE and the Opportunity Programs also afford students a chance to forge important and lasting relationships in advance of the official start of Hamilton orientation. Over half of Hamilton's incoming class participates in some pre-orientation experience.

Thus, a divide sometimes exists between those students who have completed a pre-orientation activity and those who have not. In fact, some suggest that the separation widens during orientation. Students have explicitly noted, for example, that despite the best efforts of the AA and USE programs to encourage socialization with non-AA and non-USE students, self-segregation and clumping inevitably occur, making it more difficult for non-AA or non-USE students to feel like equal members of New Student Orientation groups.

In a similar vein, the five weeks that Opportunity Program students spend at Hamilton in the summer preceding freshman year, and the extensive pre-Hamilton POSSE bonding, also induces self-segregation and clumping. By the time these groups begin to de-segregate themselves, many critical first impressions have already been formed, and students find it more difficult to re-group and get to know other students of dissimilar backgrounds, even if those dissimilarities are only one's identification (or lack thereof) with a pre-orientation program.

The next five years should include an analysis of this phenomenon to test the anecdotal evidence and to bring pre-matriculation experiences into equilibrium for all students.

Faculty involvement. Tension between student life administrators and the faculty is plainly apparent in the issue of the extent of the faculty's involvement in orientation.

The faculty demand that student life professionals do more with their allotted fraction of the now-four-day orientation to transform the young, uninitiated, immature high school girls and boys who arrive on the Hill into sophisticated, mature, socially-conscious, socially-responsible, substance non-abusing, non-sexist, diversity-minded, sustainability-aware college women and men, so that they are properly and appropriately prepared for the business of their academic education to begin.

The folks in student affairs look to the faculty for more buy-in, for more involvement in the education of the 'whole student.' The faculty prescribes the curriculum, they say; the faculty controls the currency. Orientation and, moreover, the entire four-year residential experience does not merely accessorize our students' education – it is a crucial part of their education. Until the faculty participates in this component of our students' education, it will have neither the gravity nor the effectiveness that it deserves.

For every sure-footed new student who desires or demands more interaction with faculty during orientation, there is another 17-year-old for whom even casual conversation with a college professor is frighteningly awkward at best, un-cool and bizarre at worst. For every faculty member who demands more time for orientation advising, as well as unstructured, social time with their first-year charges, there is another, perhaps less vocal faculty colleague, who finds these initial contacts – individual and group advising sessions and the manufactured social receptions – unproductive, non-engaging, forced, artificially engineered, and not the stuff from which meaningful relationships are created.

One suggestion might be to encourage faculty participation during the scheduled orientation service day. By interacting together with a common purpose, faculty and students would not necessarily feel compelled to exchange small-talk, but the exercise

would still demonstrate and emphasize that faculty and student interactions can move beyond the classroom.

II. Diversity. President Truman's 1946 Commission on Higher Education reported, "Colleges and universities have a unique opportunity to offer an experience in tolerance and understanding which grows out of democratic relations with students from various national and religious backgrounds ... To the extent that intolerant attitudes against members of minority groups are given support by our educational institutions, the fabric of our democratic life is endangered."

Education. Does Hamilton College "offer an experience in tolerance and understanding ... with students from various national and religious backgrounds?" To what extent are "intolerant attitudes against members of minority groups given support" by our own educational institution?

Can we do even better? Can we move beyond mere tolerance to appreciation of difference of all kinds? Hamilton carries the responsibility to promote a truly inclusive residential environment for all students and to prepare all students to work in a global society. Therefore, time, care, and resources should be invested in helping all students learn how to cross uncomfortable and unfamiliar boundaries. This includes teaching students about, among many other things: white privilege, dismantling racism, and learning what it means to be an ally.

Many students focused on a need to stimulate discussions about diversity not only in the classroom, but also outside the classroom. It was also noted that there should be a formalized and supported structure for these discussions on diversity. Discussion should not burden multicultural students to become the representative voice for all multicultural students. All students have their own experiences, they are individuals, but multicultural students tend to be grouped together because of their differences.

The strategic planning sub-committee on residential life and co-curricular programming has received input from various students regarding multicultural adjustment to Hamilton. The very notion of 'multicultural adjustment' is a troubling one in that it suggests that there is an established Hamilton norm in place to which 'others' and 'outsiders' need to adjust and conform in order to 'fit in' and survive, let alone thrive. Our goal should be that all students feel confident -- before they even arrive on campus -- that they will be on equal standing at Hamilton, with equal access and entitlement to all of the opportunities that Hamilton offers. Students should know that they will be required, by the very nature of Hamilton's demographics, to stretch in their understanding of, and interaction with, people different from themselves, and that, hopefully, an outcome of the experience will be to advance beyond mere 'tolerance' of others to valuing others.

Access and support. As discussed above, Adirondack Adventure is an example of a popular and successful pre-matriculation program. But many students are not taking part due to various factors: a desire to spend time at home since many are involved in the summer opportunity program, inexperience and anxiety surrounding the outdoors, insecurity due to lack of expertise relative to classmates, and financial pressures,

including not only the cost of the program, but also the need to work during the week preceding orientation.

When students of color establish links or bonds with faculty members, they are reportedly more satisfied with their college experience. Multicultural students stay at Hamilton because they value the education, but they confront a variety of ongoing transition and adjustment issues. Faculty research projects keep students involved in the academic subjects that interest them, but more importantly, give them the chance to connect with a faculty member.

Certain simple, practical measures would improve the general experience for many multicultural students.

- More publicity early in the year for events such as “Late Night” and the Adler Conference;
- Greater access to off-campus opportunities (downtown, malls, movies, etc.) to help lessen the feeling of isolation;
- Multicultural students are uncomfortable discussing certain issues with “white” counselors. They have repeatedly mentioned that there should be a counselor who is a person of color.
- Residence hall access during school breaks for students who cannot go home and also for graduation for low-income students’ families.

III. The residential life staff. According to its most recent self-review, the Office of Residential Life “is responsible for housing each student and has various procedures and programs in place to provide a socially and intellectually stimulating environment.” The office thus functions on two main fronts: the physical/logistical and the educational/programmatic. The first includes such critical functions as coordination of the housing lotteries and assessing student damages to residence halls. The second involves co-curricular, educational programming that enhances personal growth and accountability, campus climate, and community.

The reality is that, after the Office of Residential Life handles its logistical demands, a third component presents itself: responding and reacting to situations that arise on campus. With the current staffing and organizational structure, dealing with logistics and responses leaves little time for concerted, front-end, pro-active educational programming. Residential Life reports devoting all of its resources to responding and reacting to issues of one-third of the student body, while effectively ignoring the other two-thirds. Perhaps the most important goal in this area for the next five years is addressing and changing this ratio so that the residential life staff is able to devote more of its resources to its educational mission. The residential program should have a thoughtful, intentional, prescribed curriculum. It should be sequential, so that, just as in academic courses, first-year content differs from material covered by seniors. Programming should be sustained, so that, in fact, seniors are involved as much as first-years, sophomores, and juniors. Co-curricular programs should explicitly state learning outcomes and should be assessed.

Currently, RA programming consists of somewhat ad hoc events, conceived and tailored individually by the RA’s. Preferably, these co-curricular programs would feature more structure, accountability, and professional oversight.

IV. Housing. As discussed in the previous section, conversations about the integration of residential and academic life inevitably occur on two related fronts: physical and programmatic. In considering housing, questions that arise include: should the boundaries between classrooms and student residential space be blurred so that there are academic courses, lectures, and presentations in the lounges, common areas, or other dedicated spaces within the residence halls? Should academic programming be intentionally centered around, or tailored to, residents of particular housing units? The REAL program in Wertimer house is a model, as is academic theme housing. One of the original visions of the Rogers Estate was for academic departments to host scholars-in-residence, artists-in-residence, and other distinguished guests in a residential setting with student hosts. This aspect of the residential life decision of 1995 never came to full fruition.

The committee's work in this area tended to focus on first-year housing and senior housing.

The notion of first year housing has come up in numerous conversations over at least the past six years. Most, if not all of these conversations have centered on the idea of housing first year students together, combined with a first year transition program.

First-year housing. There are many benefits of first year housing, including:

- The prospect of coupling residency with academic programming;
- Targeting programs to a group that is geographically connected;
- All first-years living in the same area will help first years meet their peers and begin to develop relationships;
- Focus resources to this area – more RAs who are trained to deal with first-year experiences and issues;
- Ability to continue orientation into the academic year;
- Easier for faculty to interact with this group of students;
- Class bonding – the notion of “we are all in this together;”
- Stronger class identity.

There are also some significant challenges to this idea:

- Expensive and complicated to modify residence halls;
- Creating/modifying residence halls with few singles;
- Taking prime upper-class housing off-line;
- Losing the benefit of upper-class students mentoring first-years in their shared residence hall.

Middlebury College provides additional support to new students by employing recent alumni as live-in assistants in first-year residence halls. This is a practice that Hamilton might consider. These advisors would be paraprofessionals who could complement the work of the RA's by offering another layer of guidance and counseling to first-years, without any disciplinary responsibilities. The position would serve as an apprenticeship for recent Hamilton graduates considering careers in student life administration, paralleling comparable opportunities in the offices of admission and C&D.

A chicken-and-egg issue requiring further study is the order of physical/programmatic implementation. On the one hand, it appears that, to be successful, an all-first-year-housing model has to be a component of a pre-conceived and pre-existing first-year academic/residential program; on the other hand, the Student Affairs Leadership Team, composed of all of the department heads and deans in the division, believes that, even in the absence of a viable first year program, many positive things could be accomplished with the homogeneity of first-year residence halls.

Senior housing. Senior housing is a relatively new idea that seems to have many positive outcomes. Two concepts have emerged from our committee. The first involves building a townhouse complex on campus. A second idea, which emerged from the committee's meeting with Andrew Jillings of the facilities committee, envisions a village model with mixed housing.

Building a townhouse complex addresses several issues facing residential life:

- We currently have forty-five seniors (forty-eight for fall '08) living in the village due to a lack of available on-campus housing in the fall semester.
 - There are mixed feelings within the Hamilton and Clinton communities about students living off-campus. Some see it as a way for seniors to begin the transition of living on their own; others believe that we need to be true to the decision made in 1995 to be 100% residential.
- Currently there are five wood-frame houses that students occupy. These houses were brought on-line six years ago as temporary housing to accommodate and unusually large first year class. Building a new complex would allow us to take these houses off-line.
- A townhouse complex on the edge of campus would give the seniors living in this complex more of a feeling of independence compared to living in a traditional residence hall.
- Residents of this facility would have access to internet, cable tv, etc., compared to living in the Village where these services cost extra or may not be available.
- Townhouses or apartment-style living would no doubt be very popular for seniors, but would also be an attraction to prospective students and a selling point for the College.
- Senior housing would ease the transition, as well as preserve the acquired living independence, of students returning from junior year abroad.
- Townhouse-style accommodations would offer an attractive option for alumni on reunion weekend and for other summer conference visitors.

Challenges to building a townhouse complex:

- In order to remove the five wood frame houses from our current stock and bring all students back on-campus the complex would have to house at least 100 students.
- To ease housing pressure in other halls, the building should house at least 150 students.
- The cost of building a complex of this size would be approximately \$15 million dollars.

A variation of this plan was introduced by Andrew Jillings on behalf of the Resources, Facilities, and Environment Committee and involved a village model. In this plan townhouses, apartments and houses would be built to house students, faculty, and staff, although not necessarily in the same building. This plan addresses all of the issues outlined above and also reduces the carbon footprint of the campus by housing more employees closer to campus. An additional benefit, and perhaps the most significant to students, would be the natural and casual interaction of older students with faculty/staff that live in close proximity.

The Student Affairs Leadership Team uniformly supports housing first-years together (in as few halls as possible) and senior townhouse-style living.

V. The role of faculty. Hamilton values greatly, and takes great pride in, its entrenched tradition of close student-faculty relationships. Student and faculty connections, rooted in the academic arena, grow and blossom on our small, residential campus. A blending of the academic and social lives of both factions has been normal, natural, and positive for generations of Hamilton students. The president reports that, in her travels around the country, alumni continually remind her of the influential role the faculty has played in their lives and the value they place on the relations they forged with faculty during their years on the Hill.

Two major trends over recent decades demand that we study, scrutinize and, perhaps, re-define the nature and expectations of these interactions. The first of these – faculty demographics – was detailed in the introduction.

Secondly, the last several years have witnessed a steady and pronounced – perhaps even accelerated – drift towards increased emphasis on faculty scholarship. The distinction between liberal arts colleges as ‘teaching colleges’ and universities as ‘research centers’ is blurring. The teaching load of Hamilton’s faculty decreased from 6 to 5 courses per year to free faculty for more research time, and the sabbatical leave program for faculty research developed generously. The Dean’s office compiles faculty scholarship with care and attention and features it prominently on the college web page. Procurement of external grants to support faculty research is more actively sought and encouraged. The Dean launched annual Scholarly Achievement Awards paralleling the existing teaching awards. Standards for scholarly productivity for tenure, promotion, and salary considerations have risen.

Finally, irresponsible use of alcohol continues to be the source of a disproportionate number of the problems that the division of student life confronts. It is a complex, deeply-rooted, and nuanced predicament that neither Hamilton nor other NESCAC schools has been able to satisfactorily resolve, but it is a problem that the sub-committee believes requires the college’s continued attention and diligence. We offer some questions that we considered, with the recommendation that these be confronted further.

- What role does the faculty have in efforts to address Hamilton’s drinking culture?
- Is there such a thing as modeling appropriate drinking behavior? Who in the Hamilton community are the role models?
- Do pub happy hours sponsored by academic departments implicitly endorse and promote a drinking culture?

- Are faculty/student events with alcohol antithetical to the cultures and backgrounds of some of our students? Does it matter?
- Is the ratio of faculty/student events with alcohol to those without alcohol appropriate?
- Can students learn that alcohol can be part, but not the sole purpose, of a social -- and even intellectual -- gathering?
- Is a middle ground possible? Can alcohol be understood as a symbol of adulthood, with its consumption viewed as one adult activity, albeit not the defining activity of adults?
- What effect does an alcohol-friendly campus climate have on students suffering from alcoholism?

Conclusion

There could be no education that was not at once for use in earning a living and for use in living a life.

W.E.B. Du Bois

As Bowen, Kurzweil, and Tobin note in *Equity and Excellence in American Higher Education*, “This emphasis on learning to ‘live a life’ is one of the hallmarks of American higher education, and one of the reasons why residential experiences have been so highly valued here and elsewhere.”

The values ascribed to Hamilton’s residential experience derive from more than accidental interactions between undergraduates selected to inhabit this hilltop for four years. The residential component needs to be elevated to a position alongside and intermingled with the academic component to realize fully the opportunity that our residential liberal arts college can offer.