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Note to editors: The following is the third of four articles published in Duke University's faculty-staff weekly newspaper, *Dialogue*, examining key aspects of university life now under study at Duke. This article appeared in the April 15, 1994 issue.

DUKE TASK FORCE EXAMINES RESIDENTIAL ISSUES

by Virginia Boyd

As English Professor Ronald Butters sees it, Duke University has a rare opportunity to fundamentally change the way students live and interact on its campus.

A study of whether the university's housing system encourages a sense of community and intellectual discourse -- two essential components of a successful college experience -- is an integral part of the university's current process of self examination.

Butters is chair of the residential life committee that was given task force status earlier this year by President Nannerl O. Keohane and Janet Smith Dickerson, vice president for student affairs.

Comprised of 12 faculty, student and administration representatives, the Residential Life Task Force has joined three other panels in taking a thorough look at the "Duke experience." The other groups are assigned to overlapping topics that include intellectual climate, greek life and the future of East Campus.

Findings from each of these groups are due to be reported next month. After studying the recommendations this summer, the administration may act on some changes as early as next fall, particularly alterations to the multi-campus residential system for the following year.

While student life administrators have continuously studied and worked to improve the experience of Duke students, English Professor Reynolds Price and the Rev. William H. Willimon, dean of Duke Chapel, have been credited with attracting public attention for many of the critical issues that affect university life.

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Price has advocated the abolishment of the greek fraternity system in favor of living

arrangements based on a residential college model, a suggestion he made public during his December 1992 Founders' Day speech.

After conducting a five-month exploration of student life, Willimon reported concern about the "abandonment" of students who he said largely have been left to their own devices on a campus devoid of adult involvement and supervision, especially during weekend and late-night hours.

"This is a kind of unique moment," Butters said in an interview. "With the Willimon report and Price speech on one hand and a new president who is willing to give these issues serious study on the other, we have an opportunity for real change -- an opportunity to address issues that have been perking for 20 to 25 years."

Keohane noted that since Duke has historically described itself as providing residentially-based education for undergraduates, "it is particularly important for Duke to be sure that our residential system serves as many students well as we possibly can."

"At the moment, our residential system works quite well for many students, but not well enough for others," she said. "There is too much instability for many students, moving from one campus to another across the years, changing groups of friends and places and affiliations without the chance to develop a strong sense of residential life.

"The selective houses appear to satisfy the needs of many students; the lottery system works less well. Many students become nostalgic for the diverse and easy residential system of their freshman year, as former friends become parts of closed living groups that seem to exclude others."

"We can do a better job of linking other parts of Duke's life -- intellectual, social, intramural, extracurricular -- with aspects of our residential system, building on its strengths and dealing with its deficiencies," Keohane said.

Butters said he can remember only one time during his quarter century career at Duke when such broad and sweeping change was actually made to residential living — when the all-male West Campus and the all-female East Campus became coed in the early '70s.

It seems clear that the current analysis of residential life at the university could have a significant impact at Duke, and its ability to attract students, for years to come.

Director of Undergraduate Admissions Christoph Guttentag said, for example, that the four-year promise to provide on-campus housing for all undergraduates who want it, sets Duke apart from other universities its size.

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"The four-year housing guarantee is an important factor in providing the sense of community that the students have here and for parents' perceptions of the safety and security of their children," he said.

At the beginning of this academic year, 5,304 undergraduates were taking Duke up on its offer for on-campus housing, according to housing assignment coordinator William Burig. That means there were approximately 750 undergraduates who chose to live off campus and who weren't participating in a study abroad program, said Harry DeMik, associate university registrar.

Key Issues

Some of the topics the Residential Life Task Force has been discussing include:

- All first-year students living together;
- North Campus (a cluster of freshman dormitories that are isolated from West Campus by part of the Duke University Medical Center complex);
- Duke's four-year housing guarantee;
- Equity for women;
- Second-year student life;
- Selective housing, i.e. exclusivity;
- The concept of a residential college;
- The future of East Campus and the proposal that it become an all-freshmen campus;
- The future of Central Campus;
- Off-campus housing;
- Balancing minority and individual rights with the more general well-being of the student body.

"One of the problems with looking at these issues, is that the process is like the game of pick-up-sticks. If you touch one, they all want to move. So, it's very hard to isolate one issue," Butters said.

For instance, if you raise the question of an all-freshmen East Campus, he said, it touches on the issue of a residential college system and whether or not first-year students should be included in that type of living arrangement.

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West Vs. East

Many universities are designed with multi-campus, but Duke's clearly separate and distinguishable East and West campuses are not typical, said Gary Schwarzmuller, executive director of the Association of College and University Housing Officers.

And one of the continual sources of tension concerning campus housing is the administration's inability to satisfy the large number of students who want to live on West Campus or to alter their preference, officials said. Despite efforts to improve the facilities on East, living on West remains the ultimate goal of a large proportion of undergraduate Blue Devils.

What's so great about West? "It seems like West is the city and East is the suburbs," explained Duke senior Christina Wang in summing up a perception that is shared by many of her peers.

Convenience -- to classes, dining, athletics, the main university library, speakers, cultural events, movies, parties, meetings and the student activities center (called the Bryan Center) -- is one of the biggest attractions for living on West, students say.

"The distance between East and West is only about a mile. Other schools have even bigger and more sprawling campuses but they don't have this problem. I guess it's more of a psychological barrier we have to get over," Wang said.

A task force study in the early 1980s stimulated some changes in the division of living groups on East and West campuses, said William Griffith, vice president emeritus of student affairs. "Up to that point, main West Campus was a fraternity housing enclave," he said.

However, the redistribution of living groups was done on a percentage basis at that time, so there is now a mixture of housing on both campuses that is more evenly divided. This is a point that Interfraternity Council President Michael Bown has made clear in responding to criticisms that fraternities dominate West Campus housing.

He said that fraternities have approximately 23 percent of the housing on West Campus and represent about 23 percent of the student population.

Wang has participated this year in one of three new selective living groups that have been added to West Campus to increase the diversity of the student body living there. She and another student, Sarah Dodds, became co-founders of Spectrum House, which Wang describes as "an experiment in multicultural living."

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"I wish I had lived here earlier," Wang said. "I've met so many people and formed many new friendships. This has become a place where ideas are challenged. We talk and debate about a lot of our beliefs and ideas and I think we've all grown as people as a result. This was something I really wanted from college and it definitely happened this year."

Senior Lesley Berson, president of Cleland, the new all-women's selective dorm, said her motivation for co-founding the group was to act as a "counterforce" in the "male-dominated" social scene of West Campus.

Berson said she also was interested in being active in a residential community where people have chosen to live together rather than randomly assigned to a space through the housing lottery. "It's nice to feel that you're going home at the end of the day, not just going to your room and closing the door," she explained. "Living in lottery housing can be depressing. You can end up brushing your teeth next to someone for four months and never speaking to each other."

Senior Nathaniel Turner, vice president of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, said he has enjoyed living with a group of close friends this year. This is the first year a black fraternity has had group housing on campus.

Before moving to West, Turner lived on Central Campus, a site that is popular with many of Duke's black students who have expressed disinterest in participating in the West Campus social scene, which is largely focused on keg parties. "My perception was that if you live on West there are kegs and drunk people walking around all the time, but for me it has been relatively quiet," he said.

Turner said he no longer feels as if he is "missing out on anything" that is happening on campus.

The fraternity has provided alternative programming on West which frequently focuses on an African-American theme. With a prominent location on West, Turner said more students have become more aware of their programs and have taken part in them.

"During the final four tournament (men's national basketball competition), the bonfire was in the quad right in front of my dorm. I had come over to West before to watch bonfires, but this was different. Before we'd just stand around and watch," he said. "But this time there was a place where I felt I belonged, where I could just hang out. Now there's a place where all the black students can feel comfortable and accepted on West Campus."

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Butters said the task force members have listened to the opinions of many individuals and campus groups. The task force also conducted a telephone survey of 241 students in February and March. Completed by 224 students living on-campus and 17 off-campus, the survey included questions regarding student satisfaction with their Duke housing including such factors as location, space, privacy, cost, security, and opportunity for socializing. Students also were asked to rate the desirability of housing types as well as their experience with the housing assignment process. The results of the survey will be incorporated in the Residential Life task force's recommendations, Butters said.

Selective and Lottery

Housing at Duke is varied. The keys are the selective and non-selective living groups of which there are a total of 65.

Karen Steinour, dean of students and a member of the Residential Life Task Force, said selective houses include theme houses such as the Anne Firor Scott House, which focuses on women's studies, and the Round Table, which focuses on community building and service. The fraternities who live together are an example of selective houses that are not theme related (sororities do not live together at Duke). Others include Epworth on East Campus and House CC on West.

Residence hall assignments are made with a fairly complex lottery system each spring, said Burig, the housing coordinator. Those students who are not joining or already members of a selective living group, can either request a Central Campus apartment, move off campus, remain in their current non-selective house (if it's not a freshman dorm), or go through the lottery for placement in a new non-selective or "lottery" house.

Available space in lottery houses is divided for even class distribution. Students are given a random numerical order and matched according to the availability of the choices they listed. Once a student is placed in a dorm, he or she again goes through a type of lottery for room placement within the building which is based on both class and residential seniority.

This past fall, Burig said there were 1,408 students living in selective housing, 1,427 living in lottery housing, 1,574 living in first-year dorms, and 895 living in Central Campus apartments.

While the freshman dorm Hanes Annex on North Campus is being closed at the end of this semester and the Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity has been dissolved following a decision of the undergraduate judicial system and its West Campus space will be used next year for an upperclassmen coed dormitory, most of the housing in terms of location will remain the same for next fall, Steinour said.

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"Two things that will be different for next year are the block housing option for upperclassmen choosing to live together on East Campus and the uncrowding of residence halls due to the addition of two new buildings on East. This means rooms that could be expanded from double occupancy to triple, won't be," she said. Steinour said some students are frustrated because they would rather live on West Campus in a triple than on East in a double.

The location of their housing remains an important concern for Duke students, Steinour said. She stressed that in talking about housing it is important not just to talk about facilities but also about community.

University Architect John Pearce, who is in charge of the design for the new dorms currently under construction on East Campus, agrees that community is a major consideration in residential life at Duke.

"In the end, an architect can design anything. The places we build and live in shape our lives, yet here we have the unique opportunity to shape the buildings. I think we can improve the experience of the students who live in these residential buildings," he said.

Burig said 181 first-year students will live in one of the new East Campus buildings, while 187 upperclassmen will live in the other. Each building will have a faculty member in residence and will be divided into two houses.

While the new buildings are designed according to the "Duke tradition" of placing rooms on long halls punctuated with large "gang-style bathrooms," Pearce said there are some differences in their design. The entrances to most of the buildings on East Campus are centrally located in the front. This is not the case for the new dorms, which will have corner entrances for each house where commons room, kitchen and laundry facilities will be centrally located.

Even though there are some infrastructure differences between the campuses, Pearce said the cost of building on East, West and Central campuses is pretty much equal unless there are some unusual site restrictions. Materials for the facade can become a cost consideration, he added, since stone which is typically used for buildings on West Campus is much more expensive than the brick used for buildings on East.

Pearce said he believes most schools are foregoing the "old style" of dormitory space design which Duke continues to favor. While many perceive this style to be the most cost effective, most colleges and universities are choosing to build apartments or dormitories based on an arrangement of rooms in clusters or suites. In the last decade before coming to Duke in 1992 from the architectural firm The Hillier Group of Princeton, N.J., Pearce said he designed more than 10,000 dorm rooms for campuses across the country and almost all of them were in the suite room style.

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Schwarzmueller, of the Association of College and University Housing Officers, suggested some colleges and universities may be choosing apartments and suites over the old style of dormitories because they already have a lot of the old style dormitories and want to increase their students' on-campus housing options.

Mixed housing arrangements for fraternities and sororities -- where most Duke fraternities have housing and sororities don't -- is also not unusual, Schwarzmueller said. However, it is unusual for greek groups to live in space that is owned and operated by the school rather than houses that are provided by funding from the national greek organizations.

Residential Colleges

Similar to the growing concern for improving the first-year experience, Schwarzmueller said there is widespread interest in the idea of residential colleges. He said that while the definition of a residential college is broad, the whole issue of integrating the academic into a residential setting is gaining popularity.

This is not the first time in Duke's history that the idea of a residential college system has been explored. Donald Fluke, professor emeritus of zoology, headed-up the most recent attempt to start a residential college at Duke in 1987.

Fluke said those who were part of the effort, including faculty, administrators and a committee of the student government, studied a number of residential college models. Schools implementing such systems include Yale, Harvard, Rice and The University of Virginia. Fluke described the residential college system as being based on the grouping of several hundred students in clusters of dormitories or quadrangles. The students typically share eating facilities and benefit from close associations with faculty members.

Plans were made for converting Bassett and Brown houses on East Campus into a residential college with space for 245 students. The idea was that there would be a college dining hall in the East Campus Union which is adjacent to Brown House and that a senior faculty residence would be established in the structure linking Brown House and the union, Fluke said.

With his wife's support, Fluke had agreed to be the resident senior faculty leader, but the college failed to attract enough student interest in the 1987 housing lottery and wasn't pursued further.

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