



## The State of the Residential College System at Yale

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[A Guide to Residential College Happy Hours](#)

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## BACKGROUND

The residential college system is a fundamental part of the Yale experience, providing social life, support, and community. In recent years, there has been growing concern about students' disengagement with their residential colleges. This disconnect from residential college life is evidenced by increasing numbers of students moving off campus and higher transfer rates among colleges. Concern about this issue has been marked by the Yale administration's focus on residential college life, coverage of transfers and off-campus moves in the YDN, and work on the residential college system being carried out by YCC through town halls, policy projects, and other avenues.

In light of this issue, we therefore set out to further investigate what factors are leading to this growing disengagement, in particular looking at why students choose to move off campus. Our hope is that the data we gathered in this report and the subsequent recommendations we have made will be useful for the Yale administration in thinking about how to best tackle this challenge at a high level, as well as helpful for individual residential college administrators and student leaders hoping to strengthen student involvement in their colleges.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

In an effort to better understand the complex factors at play in this larger issue, we collected a wealth of information in the form of student and administrator interviews as well as data gathered through the YCC Fall Survey<sup>1</sup>. In our conversations with students and administrators, as well as in our findings from a detailed statistical analysis of our survey data, we identified the following key themes:

### Dining

In all of our conversations, on-campus meal plans were the most cited issue leading to students' desire to move off campus. While dining halls are seen as social hubs and key components in residential college life, inflexible and expensive meal plans are seen by both college administrators and students as a principal point of frustration with on-campus living.

Some students are driven to purchase food outside of dining halls on a regular basis despite being on a required meal plan, citing disappointment with food options in particular compared with many cheap and "better" food options easily accessible in New Haven. Other students described their frustration with the surprising variability in food quality across colleges, with some students in particular colleges noting that this leads them to almost never eat in their own colleges, negating the benefit of a dining hall as a college social space. It should be noted that this disparity was not contained, as might have been expected, to differences between newly renovated and older dining halls, but was equally pronounced between well-established dining halls as well (particularly frequently cited was the difference in food quality between Branford and Silliman).

Overall, however, food quality was clearly less of a concern compared with the issue of flexibility and cost; nearly every student we spoke with noted how much money they could save by not being on a meal plan, and college administrators expressed concern that the expensive required meal plans were driving more and more students to leave on-campus housing. One Head of College noted that she was concerned about a "death spiral", in which as fewer and fewer students paid for on-campus meal plans, the plans continue to become more and more expensive, exacerbating the issue.

The observation that food and dining play a big role in determining student living choices was robustly verified by our observations on the YCC fall survey. Not only was food simply the most cited reason by students who already live off campus for their move, but also statistical modeling using a machine learning decision-tree approach demonstrated that among all students, dining options was the most likely of the options we presented to cause a student currently living on campus to end up moving off. For more information on this analysis, see the appendix, linked in the table of contents.

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<sup>1</sup> The 2018 Fall Survey had 3047 participants. Of those, 1002 (32.8%) were first-years, 841 (27.6%) were sophomores, 667 (21.89%) were juniors, and 519 (17.03%) were seniors. 1967 (64.55%) of those surveyed indicated being on some kind of a meal plan (Any-14, Anytime, Full, Off-Campus 150 Block, Off-camps 5 Block Plans). For more information, see the Appendix.

## Community Engagement

Some students noted that before coming to Yale, they expected to find a stronger sense of community in their residential colleges. While some students professed to have indeed found such community in their colleges, some noted that they had found community through extracurriculars or other activities, or had struggled to find community at all. A particular note was that some students felt frustrated by what they perceived as inequality in community strength across colleges, with some colleges seeming to have much stronger sense of community than others. This sentiment was especially felt by students in Pauli Murray and Ben Franklin. It seems likely that such a sense of disparity contributes to the high rates of students seeking to transfer colleges, and many students were quick to suggest that while sense of college community would be a main factor keeping them on campus, if they felt less connected they would be quick to seek off-campus housing.

Contributing to this sentiment in some colleges was a sense that students have little actual say or control in decisions made on a college level. In discussions with student heads of college councils/boards, it was noted that while some colleges provided their councils/boards with set budgets to be administered as students see fit, other colleges employed more indirect forms of funding, such as using an approval process for student requests. Student leaders in the latter colleges noted that they felt they would get significantly increased student buy-in if they had more direct control of funds. Tellingly, the college councils which have the most autonomy reported the highest numbers of student participation at council meetings—for example, on the order of 30 or 40 regular attendees, as compared with 10 or fewer in other colleges.

Additionally, one Head of College noted a pattern in students increasingly seeking to transfer colleges to live with students with particular shared identities, whether those be related to shared interests or backgrounds, which she felt was detrimental to the idea of residential colleges as diverse communities in which students interact with students of all kinds.

The issue of community engagement was also investigated on the Fall Survey. Much like the issue of food, sense of community was very frequently cited as a reason off-campus students had left campus, and moreover, according to our analysis, poor sense of community was one of the main factors likely to drive on-campus students to move off campus. See appendix for more information.

## Social Life

Another form of disengagement with college life seems to be the issue of where and how students choose to socialize with other students. One head of college noted that it used to be much more common for students to host parties in on-campus locations, but that such events seem to have been largely (though far from entirely) supplanted by social events and parties occurring off-campus, particularly in houses belonging to Greek organizations, sports teams, and other groups. While certain colleges have made attempts to draw more students back to on-campus parties, concerns about the enforcement of underage drinking policies, the desire to keep suites

and rooms free from the dirtiness that comes with hosting parties, and the lack of available flexible non-living spaces to use for social events all seem to be barriers to such efforts. Perhaps as a result of this issue, or perhaps for separate reasons, students and administrators noted that colleges seem to serve less as the hub for social life than they would like to see; although, many students noted their satisfaction with the ability to have certain forms of socialization (e.g. conversations and games in butteries or common rooms) centered in their colleges, with partying happening more outside of the colleges.

We looked into social life on the Fall Survey as well; however, unlike some of the other factors that came up in interviews, all of our data and analyses suggest that concerns about social life are not as significant a factor contributing to students moving off campus. This is especially noteworthy, because much of administration discussions and efforts have been centered around bolstering the residential college social life and returning social spaces to the colleges. However, the data suggest that access to social spaces is not a motivation for moving off-campus, as students may well be satisfied with the current location of some social venues being off-campus.

## Facilities

Administrators and students alike cited facilities as a point of frustration and concern. Though Yale has a rotating renovation cycle in place, many felt that the buildings are in need of urgent renovations that the program does not account for. For example, students from several colleges described leaking and flooding in the winter that was not solved. Others described the actual renovations as unnoticeable or seemingly incomplete. For example, during Silliman's scheduled renovations, the college planned to repaint the rooms; however the job was left unfinished with none of the radiators and only some of the bathrooms painted.

Students also frequently brought up questions about the cleaning of facilities. There were concerns of bathrooms not being cleaned on a regular basis and also no sense of the actual cleaning schedule.

Though students and administrators expressed great concern over the conditions and upkeep of facilities, the data collected in the Fall Survey show that facilities were not a significant motivator for students to move off campus. Students living on and off campus were generally equally satisfied with the conditions of their residential college facilities. See appendix for more.

## Other Notes

Finally, we found a clear correlation between living off campus and reporting lower measures of overall satisfaction with college experience. One interpretation of this is that living off campus *leads* to decreased satisfaction. However, our data do not directly support this result, as we have no way to infer causality. Moreover, based on the qualitative data we have collected, laid out above, we believe it is much more likely the causality flows in the opposite direction, and the correlation is the result of the fact that students who are less satisfied with their experiences are more likely to move off campus.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the issues we have identified, we propose the following recommendations:

## Steps to be taken at a Yale-wide level

1. Address the inflexibility and expense of available meal plans, immediately
  - a. As is apparent from our research, meal plans are the single biggest contributor to students moving off campus. As meal plans get more and more expensive, this will only drive more students off campus. If this then leads to price increases for students remaining on campus, the problem will only become more pronounced. Based on our conversations with students, this issue particularly affects students from lower-income families or with fewer financial resources, who are more likely to seek the significant savings of moving off-campus to escape the meal plan. While there are clearly many obstacles to reducing the cost of on-campus meal plans and/or increasing flexibility, if this issue is not addressed soon, we believe no amount of stop-gap measures, no matter how well-intentioned, funded, or executed, will stop the off-campus flight, and Yale soon may find itself facing the need to require juniors or even seniors to live on campus just to keep the college system alive. While easy answers to the challenge of meal-plans are not readily clear, a few suggestions include:
    - i. Create at least one on-campus meal plan that reflects real flexibility and a cheaper price. A good starting place might be to price the existing 14 meals a week plan to not include extra dining points, but rather simply reflect the cost of 14 meals a week. Even just one additional price option would go a long way to increasing students' sense of choice in terms of how they spend money on food.
    - ii. Develop partnerships with local New Haven restaurants and stores to allow students to use swipes off-campus. This idea has been floated in the past, and based on student feedback, it is a very popular one. Again, even if it were a small change, such as allowing students to use one dinner swipe a week at select local businesses, it could go a long way to increasing the students' sense of choice in terms of how they spend money on food. This option could perhaps provide further benefit if tailored in such a way so as to relieve the pressure on particularly overcrowded dining halls. For example, while the Schwarzman center remains closed, finding partners in the area of Morse and Stiles could relieve some of the pressure on those dining halls during dinner. Lastly, if structured with enough care, such a partnership could help increase student interactions with New Haven in a positive way.
    - iii. Add a live food-rating/feedback system in the Yale Dining App. Such a system, perhaps as simple as allowing students to rate menu items from 1

to 5 stars, would provide useful information for students about where they might want to go for a particular meal, and could provide invaluable information for Yale Dining about what items are most popular. While disappointment with food quality seems to be less of a concern than the expense, having options more precisely catered to student tastes could only be an improvement. Yale Dining could also use this feedback to place more popular items in otherwise less crowded dining halls, to better distribute the load on each dining hall.

- iv. Finally, continue to have multiple parties further investigate solutions to the challenge of inflexible meal plans. It is clear that while this issue is unavoidable, solutions are less than abundant, so perhaps more so than for any other issue addressed in this document, more research needs to be done, whether by the YCC, the YCDO, Yale Hospitality, or all parties.
2. Build college community through competition and group-bonding events
- a. Intercollege Challenge Cup
    - i. Building off the success of the Tyng Cup in bringing college communities together, we believe a higher level competition, with a broader focus than athletics only, could further ignite college spirit. We suggest including, to some degree, the existing Tyng Cup and Academic Cup, but adding various areas of competition that are relevant and interesting to the broader student body. These could include existing challenges, such as the sustainability-focused Carbon Challenge, and could be an opportunity to promote additional initiatives. The YCC could also host additional one-off events such as inter-college trivia nights, an idea piloted this year, and tie in events such as First-Year Olympics and participation in the Dwight Hall Day of Service. We suggest also considering including a challenge around fundraising for charity and, possibly, attendance at shows or sports games.
    - ii. Additionally, we suggest attaching a winning condition beyond “bragging rights,” such as a celebratory party for the college. This would be something that provides both real benefit and pride, such as a significantly funded party for members of the winning college, a physical college improvement project, or perhaps even a gift of additional money to be spent at the discretion of the winning college’s college council.
    - iii. In implementing such a challenge, we think it would be useful to establish Intercollege Challenge Cup Coordinators, modeled after IM Secretaries, to help organize the events and build college spirit. An alternative model could be to have YCC senators take on this role; however, there is the possibility that this could dilute the YCC senators’ focus on policy-making at a level above their own colleges, and moreover, we believe the more the enthusiasm for such a challenge comes from students working only on behalf of their own colleges (and not part of a Yale-wide body), the more it would garner positive college-specific community.

- iv. Lastly, we imagine that if organizing a coordinated “Intercollege Challenge” proves too difficult, one-off competitions could still be useful on their own—however, in the same way the Tyng Cup race does more than just the IM soccer season to build college pride, community, and cross-class bonds, and the IM soccer season does more than one IM soccer game, a well-structured high-level challenge would be more successful than a handful of unconnected events.
  - b. Sophomore Retreat
    - i. We strongly recommend establishing programs in the spirit of first-year pre-orientation trips to foster closer bonds among residential college communities. One approach to this would be having pre-orientation trip-style group-bonding activities during first-year orientation, perhaps in groups of first-years from the same college but different suites. However, we believe that even more promising is the possibility of having such events for sophomores (or even older upperclassmen). Sophomore year is the year many students who move off campus decide to leave, and the Dean’s Office has already demonstrated a clear desire to have more support for sophomore life. Having a one-night off-campus retreat for sophomores (or even on-campus to lower costs) in which students have the opportunity to share deeply with one another, strengthen existing friendships, and build new ones could extend the power of pre-orientation trips and bring those bonds to residential college communities. Having such retreats headed up by juniors or seniors from the same college could additionally further encourage cross-class college community and help build college leaders.
- 3. Support Yale College-wide social events to supplant the role of off-campus spaces in social life
  - a. We suggest the continued administrative support for the implementation of college-wide events, in order to recenter student social life on campus. The potential options for functions are endless. However, we note Bulldog Bash as a particularly successful example in bringing together upper and underclassmen in a fun and exciting way on an on-campus location.
- 4. Facilities
  - a. While students expressed dissatisfaction with certain facilities issues in our qualitative research, our data suggest that next to other issues, facilities are actually a less significant concern. That being said, we think student frustration could still be addressed by making additional funding available for college-directed facilities improvements on a more regular basis than the current rotating renovation cycle, so that students can see non-emergency but still significant facilities concerns (such as rundown basement spaces or broken common room furniture) addressed in a timely manner.
- 5. Employ additional low-cost strategies to better understand student motivations
  - a. We encourage Yale to continue the work of understanding what drives students off campus. One simple measure we would propose is utilizing the fact that all

students are required to declare their intent to live on or off campus during the housing process. While this is now done through Vesta, the Dean's Office could easily reintroduce the old one-question form, and consider adding a single second question for those students moving off campus: "Why?" with either checkboxes or an open-ended response. This would be a simple and powerful way of collecting data from every single off-campus student, a task that proves difficult with YCC's voluntary surveying methods.

## Suggestions for Individual Colleges

1. Build pride through traditions and Yale-wide events unique to individual colleges
  - a. Colleges should consider following the model of events like Pierson Inferno, the Silliman Haunted House, and this year, the "Trumball", in hosting campus-wide events particular to individual colleges. Both student leaders and Heads of College thought such events helped generate a stronger sense of college pride, and simultaneously built both college community and broader Yale-wide community, while again providing alternatives to off-campus social spaces.
  - b. Traditions (of all stripes) also play an important role in building individual colleges' sense of community. Traditions like the Saybrook initiation of first-years, TD's TDDDD, and even simpler traditions like college chants are important community builders. We particularly recommend that the new colleges, and any college which feels like it could have a stronger sense of community, consider establishing new traditions to build college spirit.
2. Try cross-class college events to build community
  - a. We suggest that colleges run events that bring together members of residential college communities from all classes, so that friendships can form beyond the bounds of academic year. To help make this as easy as possible, we have the following recommended events, which were piloted with success in some residential colleges this year, and should be easy to replicate and implement.
    - i. Duty Night for Upperclassmen
      1. Froco Duty Nights provide a space for shared food, conversation, and relaxation and are immensely popular among the first-years to whom the program is targeted. In following that model, we suggest the creation of an Upperclassmen Duty night through which Sophomore, Junior, and Senior students would offer up their suites and open them up to all classes, including first-years. Not only does this offer the opportunity for different classes to bond and get to know one another better, it also provides an alternative to off-campus parties.
    - ii. Residential College Happy Hour
      1. Building on a style of event that has been successful at some peer institutions, the YCC has developed a simple outline to provide a novel way for students to socialize. See the attached "Happy Hour Handbook" for more information.

3. Increase student engagement through more student control of funding and projects
  - a. We recommend colleges consider how they can create more opportunity for student-directed projects and events. Colleges with more direct student control of funding saw more participation in college council meetings, and students in those colleges reported, in interviews, strong sense of community ownership. Examples of ways to implement this recommendation, pulled from suggestions made by student leaders and Heads of College, include:
    - i. Organize or help to organize projects which harness student energy for community benefit, but which cost little money. One particular example of this is the Silliman textbook library, which received over 700 donations.
    - ii. Put together student committees to oversee one-time projects like rotational renovation funding. One Head of College reported particular success with this approach.
    - iii. Ensure college boards/councils have ownership of designated student activities funding. Leaders from the Hopper College Council, one of the councils lacking direct student control of designated funds, expressed frustration at a meeting of college student leaders over having to make requests for all events and activities, and were hindered in their ability to deliver on student requests in a way that student leaders in colleges like Saybrook, with direct control of designated funds, were not.
    - iv. Advertise college councils and boards as spaces to share new ideas, and follow through on student ideas. Heads of College noted that the best way to engage students in residential college communities was to make sure they had easy access to having their ideas heard and their ideas carried out.
    - v. Have college leaders directly seek out student input beyond college council/board meetings. While council/board meetings provide one avenue for engagement, the same students who might never attend such meetings are also very likely the students who may consider moving off campus. Thus it is important that college leaders (student and administrators) especially seek to engage those students who do not participate in public forums, and ensure their ideas are heard and desires met. This could be accomplished by means as simple (and cost-effective, although potentially time-intensive) as the Head of College aiming to host each and every suite in the house for snacks at some point during the academic year.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

While the work we have done cannot be truly called comprehensive, we hope that the act of gathering the above information into one document proves useful for students and administrators alike. In providing the above recommendations, we hope to have laid out some easy and concrete steps to help move Yale's residential college system forward. Should any questions about this report arise, or should any students or administrators be interested in hearing more, please contact us at [ellie.oldroyd@yale.edu](mailto:ellie.oldroyd@yale.edu) and [eli.swab@yale.edu](mailto:eli.swab@yale.edu).