

PROMISES & DOUBTS

Tours tout the colleges as a Yale selling point. Does the luster fade by graduation?

Seniors said the feeling of community in their residential colleges, which Yale promotes as the “heart of the Yale experience,” diminished as more classmates left them.

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STAFF REPORTERS

The residential college system is the “heart of the Yale experience,” according to the Yale undergraduate admissions website. Tour guides emphasize that each college is its own community. High schoolers planning to apply say that the amenities of the colleges stand out.

But Yale College seniors told the News that while the cohesive nature of the residential college system does foster social interactions, that sense of community fades throughout their four years at Yale as older students move off campus.

“I was really under the impression that, similar to Harvard, the vast majority of students remained on campus all four years,” senior Debbie Lilly ’26 said in a phone interview. “But that’s definitely not the case. And I think, as someone who did stay on campus through senior year, it definitely has negatively impacted how close I feel to the community.”

In the 2024–2025 academic year, nearly 26 percent of undergraduates lived off campus — a share that has steadily increased over the past two decades. This figure has nearly doubled since 2004, when about 13 percent of students lived off campus.

Great expectations

According to a Yale website, approximately 85,000 visitors pass through the Yale Visitor Center every year. Another website calls the residential college system “the cornerstone of Yale College’s mission.”

“I think coming in, I had this idea that residential colleges were kind of the main community that you make a lot of friends in,” Sarah Jacobs ’26 said. “It seemed like something that was very unique compared to other schools, where community might be a little bit harder to find.”

Tours offered by Yale’s Visitor Center include those aimed at high school students and those for the general public. All touch on details about residential life and aspects of the colleges, from butteries to gyms to the Pierson-Davenport printing press.

Tour guides emphasize the support structures within the colleges, detailing the college-specific resources available to students. Guides outline the ways that students can seek both academic and personal help from members of their residential college communities, from first-year counselors to academic advisors.

While high schoolers visiting Yale had varying levels of familiarity with the college system before their tours, many said that the colleges’ unique amenities caught their attention.

Allison Guo, a high school junior from New Jersey, said she hadn’t heard about the residential college system before going on a tour. She said she thought it sounded “interesting” and liked hearing about specific amenities like Silliflicks, the movie theater in the basement of Silliman College.

Devi Simons, a high school sophomore from Philadelphia, said she knew the basics of the system before her tour — the 14 colleges and most first years living on Old Campus — but said she was drawn to fun facts like Berkeley being split between North Court and South Court and having

“I figured it would play a large role in my social life based on what I’d heard from students in the past,” Lilly said. If anything, she was concerned that it would be difficult for her to branch out beyond her college community.

Zane Glick ’26 said his impression of the system from the beginning was that “it’s a marketing tactic to present a sort of social life at school.”

“I mean, it’s just what Yale puts out,” he said. “People are excited to go to Yale,” he added, but “aren’t necessarily excited to be in” a particular college.

A ‘very communal aspect’

When he arrived at Yale, Joshua Rodriguez ’26 said that he found “a really good group of people” in his residential college.

“It was much easier to make friends with people who were living right downstairs from you,” he said.

But he added that his residential college faded into the background of his Yale experience as he became an upperclassman.

“For me, it was definitely the cornerstone my first year and halfway through my sophomore year. And it made a big part of my life,” Rodriguez said. “But once you get more into your academics and once you start finding your groups, it starts becoming like a background thing.”

While most seniors told the News that they found a social community in their residential colleges, they acknowledged that the cohesion lost its effect throughout their time at Yale as they and their peers moved off campus.

But, many still touted the benefits of the system.

Alicia Shen ’26 said that the physical proximity of the residential college has been its “greatest value” to her. Living in one place and seeing the same faces around provides “a sense of comfort,” and she will miss her college, including the familiar basement, where she knows “where everything is,” she added.

“Your friendship and the social belonging you feel from that are heightened or enhanced by the fact that you live in the same space, or you live at least in the same college, where you can pop over and come by like any time,” she said. “I think there’s a very communal aspect to that.”

Lilly said it was “nice” to have had the “constant through line” of her residential college during her four years, and to have gotten to know the faculty and staff in her college. It’s also comforting to know that she can live in the same building if she wanted to, especially considering that students at other universities have more limited housing options, she added.

Jacobs, however, said that even after she moved off campus her junior year, it was nice to visit her friends in Silliman and “go into their suites without really asking.” It felt like home, she said, even after she moved off campus.

Shubh Gupta ’26 said that he also enjoyed the social aspect of his college.

“I just remember freshman year, so many great memories running into people in entryways and the buttery, in the courtyards, spontaneous volleyball sessions in the courtyard that just made me essentially think, ‘Yeah, I’m never going to leave the residential college, I’m going

“kind of felt like a stranger.”

“It was really hard for me to be persuaded to stay on campus senior year because the community that I once knew, first year and sophomore year, had kind of disappeared, which was really disappointing,” she said.

Lilly added that she was surprised to see “half or maybe of half” her class move off campus junior year. But she said she doesn’t blame those who have chosen to move off campus to pay less rent.

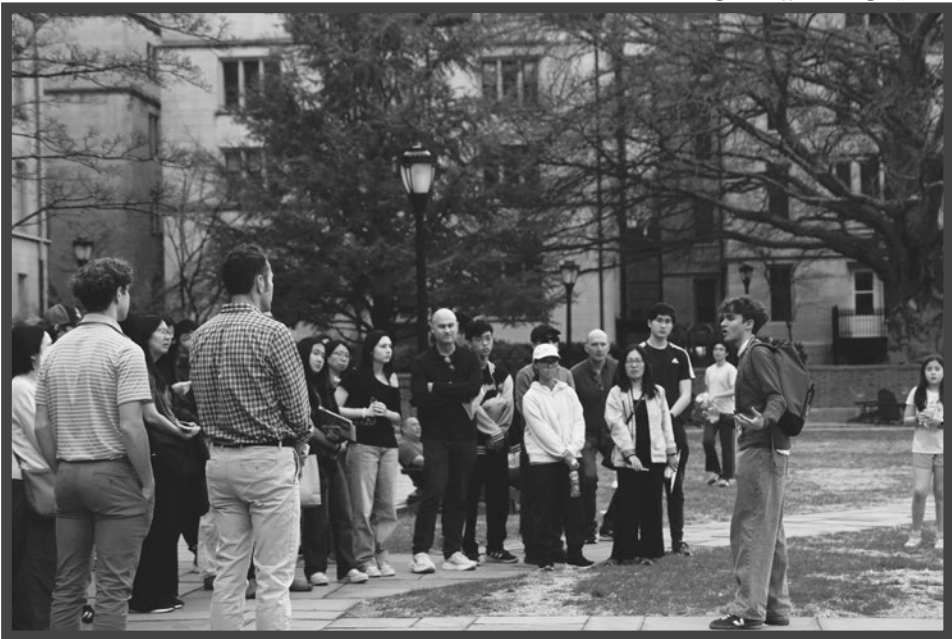
“I really cannot blame people for mov-

tinctive, tight-knit community in his college because it is such a big college. During his first year, he found his closest friends not in Silliman but in the orientation program hosted by the Office of International Students & Scholars, as well as in his classes, he said.

Moving off campus — because he wanted a kitchen and his own space — did not bring Chen closer to his residential college community.

“I oddly don’t have a lot of close friends

Alex Hong / Staff Photographer



ing off campus because of just how incredibly expensive it is to remain on campus and how unreasonably priced it is,” she said.

Glick said the residential college is more conducive to getting physically close to people, but “not exactly” to getting socially close to people. He lived next to a girl in Ezra Stiles College in both their sophomore and junior years, he said, but he has never had a conversation with her.

“Yale doesn’t really care, nor does the residential college system really care, about whether or not you’re able to find a community within your residential college,” Glick said. “That’s really all just pure advertising and marketing.”

“For the most part, Yale disappears after freshman year,” he added. Many support systems and social spaces that students are automatically a part of — most notably the FroCo system — disappear, and while Yale “kind of makes up for that fact” by moving students into residential colleges, he said that alone does not make students close to each other.

Yale College Dean Pericles Lewis said in an interview this month that for many students, the residential college system is still a “very, very big part of the Yale experience.”

That was especially evident at his recent announcement ceremonies of new heads of colleges, Lewis said, where he saw “hundreds of students applauding with great vigor” for outgoing and incoming heads.

“Probably some of the students who move off campus have not as strong an attachment to their residential colleges, but I really think that, for the most part, people have a very strong connection to their residential colleges,” Lewis said.

While Lewis recognized that the College’s peer mentorship programs have been “mostly focused” on first years, he added that Yale has “done a lot in the last few years” to expand academic advising programs for sophomores.

Koby Chen ’26, who is in Silliman College, said that he didn’t find much of a dis-

in Silliman anymore,” he said. “Maybe I have, like, two.”

Gupta said he moved off campus also because he wanted to save money on meal plans and rent. Even on campus, he always felt “a little bit jaded” that he was paying the same price for a smaller room in Timothy Dwight College that students pay for larger rooms in Franklin or Murray.

Gupta added that the shift in his sense of community was “not bad” when he moved off campus, adding that although most of the “quantity” of his social interactions came from within his college, he always felt like his closest friends were outside.

“A lot of the quality of my social interaction was coming outside of TD anyways,” he said, adding that “So it didn’t even feel like that large of a shock.”

Rodriguez, who also said his “only motivation” to move off campus was financial reasons, said that he “definitely lost that connection to JE in a sense” when he moved out of Jonathan Edwards College.

He feels “a little disconnected” from his college because he no longer bumps into people on the stairs or in his suite, he said. He said he tried his best to come back for meals in the dining hall, but he slowly stopped going.

Mandy Zhang ’26 said “there’s something very special” about sharing facilities and eating breakfast and dinner every day with familiar faces, as well as seeing her college’s dean and head walk around in the same grounds.

But Zhang said she lost this communal connection — “just by nature of proximity” — when she moved off campus. Now that she is off Yale’s meal plan, Zhang added, she only goes to the Pierson dining hall when a friend is willing to provide a guest meal swipe for her.

About 62 percent of undergraduates lived off campus in 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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underground facilities.

Yasmine Weinberger, a high school junior from Washington, D.C., also said that the specific amenities stood out. She particularly liked how her tour guide mentioned the various college traditions, highlighting the Silliman movie theater.

Seniors told the News that they expected the residential college community to be a big part of their lives throughout their four years.

Lilly said that the residential college system is one of the things that made Yale stand out to her, and that while many high schoolers are intimidated by the social life in college, the idea of having a “microcosm of the greater university” was appealing.

to be in TD all four years,” Gupta said.

Gupta, however, acknowledged that his experience was not the case for everyone. A lot of students simply end up in situations where “they just don’t like the people around them” or don’t have many overlapping interests, he said.

Gupta himself moved off campus to ensure he had a single.

A fade over four years

Lilly, who stayed in Franklin, said that even as someone who stayed on campus, her sense of community diminished as her friends moved off campus. While she used to walk into the dining hall and recognize many faces, by junior year, she said she