

PROMISES & DOUBTS

Pericles Lewis wants to keep more juniors on campus, even if seniors head off

BY OLIVIA WOO
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At Yale-NUS College in Singapore, where Pericles Lewis was the president before he became Yale College’s dean, every unmarried undergraduate was required to stay on campus all four years. But in New Haven, juniors and seniors can opt to live outside of dormitories, and more chose to do so after the pandemic.

Lewis has implemented a series of policy changes to counteract the off-campus drift, in line with Yale College’s strategic plan for 2023 to 2028. The plan outlines potential ways to strengthen residential college communities, both by “encouraging students to live in the residential colleges while responding to their desired living arrangements” and by working on recruiting and retaining residential college heads and deans.

In September, Lewis said that newly-extended residential college dining hours and a meal plan with unlimited swipes would “make it easier to stay on campus.” In this spring’s housing process, upperclassmen who could not fit into their colleges were given more agency over where they would be annexed to live elsewhere next school year. And rising juniors now have priority over rising seniors in the housing draw.

The housing priority switch seems to be helping fill more beds in the residential colleges. For the current academic year, 63 percent of juniors chose to live on campus, up from 41 percent last year, according to associate dean of residential college life Ferentz Lafargue.

Lewis said last month that, in light of the percentage of on-campus beds that are expected to be occupied this fall, the proportion of juniors living on campus next year could be even larger.

“We expect that 95 percent of the beds will be full,” Lewis said about on-campus housing next year. “That’s been our goal.”

Yale College gave rising juniors first priority in the housing draw. It seems to be helping fill empty beds — at some cost to the oldest undergraduates.

students and alumni.

Lewis said in September that when half of the junior class lives off campus, few of them move back for their senior year. Lewis said his hope was that “almost all juniors would decide to stay on campus, and then maybe half of the seniors move off,” predicting that Yale College “could probably house everybody in that case.”

Yet Julien Amsellem ’27 said last month that he does not know of a single rising senior in his college, Silliman, who had not either been forced into annex housing or had their housing group disbanded as a result of the priority change.

Amsellem, who serves as the Junior Class Council president, called the change to housing draw priority “a little asinine.”

“As an administration, as a dean, you can make these claims that you’re student-focused and you want to bring back all these traditions and you want to make Yale, Yale,” Amsellem said. But he claimed the policy rollout created inequities among students, ensuring “that the class of 2027 and the class of 2026 would be the only two classes who actually never got to truly choose first.”

Last academic year, 59 percent of juniors lived off campus — a spike that Yale College Senior Associate Dean Burgwell Howard said was connected to changes in living trends induced by the pandemic.

“The pandemic was the real interesting breaking point in a lot of patterns,” Howard said in a February interview. “Students were like, ‘Well, I don’t want to go back to Nebraska if I have to be taking my classes on Zoom. Why don’t I just live with my buddies here in New Haven, and I’ll take my classes on Zoom?’ And so patterns kind of get established and so we’ve been kind of reconfiguring.”

process for next year, rising juniors have priority over rising seniors.

John Meeske ’74, who served as a College administrator from 1974 to 2014, said he was “quite shocked” to learn two years ago that rising seniors would lose housing priority.

“I thought, geez, times have really changed,” he said. “I realized they must be doing it for a reason, and I’m sure it must be a good reason, but I just was so shocked that it was so different from what it was in my time both as a student and working for Yale.”

Nancy Edwards ’88, an officer for her graduating class, told the News that alumni with whom she interacted were “really pissed off” by the change. She recalled that some wrote letters to Lewis demanding an explanation for the priority switch, asking, “What are you doing? What is happening here?”

“Basically people thought it was like, you’re treating seniors like second-class citizens,” Edwards added. She said that when she was a student, “seniors were guaranteed” singles, and lamented that her youngest son and his girlfriend — both current seniors — were denied that guarantee.

Several generations of Yale College students had the option to never live in their residential colleges at all, as they were permitted to live on their own after one year on Old Campus. In 1995, a sophomore on-campus requirement was implemented to ensure that students lived in their colleges at least one year. Lewis said last month that he had considered expanding the mandate by “making junior year on campus mandatory.”

He said that the policy initiative was dropped because “we only have so many beds. That would mean pushing a lot of seniors off campus.”

Though Amsellem said that he does not know of anyone who has been completely forced off campus, he said the majority of rising seniors he’s spoken to have had a “pretty miserable” housing draw. “It’s just been a battle of attrition trying to see who actually ends up staying on campus and who doesn’t,” he said.

Amsellem said that his group entered the Silliman housing draw as one of five groups vying for what appeared to be three quintets of singles. The group submitted its preferences, he said, under the understanding that, should they fail to draw one of the quintets, they would be given the chance to regroup and pick where they would be annexed through the new secondary housing draw.

But in a move that Amsellem said was “really disingenuous and manipulative,” Yale Housing made available a fourth

quintet, located in Arnold Hall, made up of two double rooms and a single. Amsellem said the suite was added to the housing draw process after his group had already submitted its preferences. Arnold Hall is located on Elm Street, adjacent to Davenport College.

Amsellem said his group was told that they could either accept the placement in annexed housing or move off campus.

“I was mind-boggled,” he said. “I never thought that my hand would be forced like this.”

Amsellem said he will be living off campus next year, after his group got “lucky” in quickly securing a lease. He said that he had always planned to stay on campus all four years, adding that he feels residential college life is a “pivotal part of the Yale experience.”

Lewis said last month that he preferred a situation in which at least two-thirds of the junior class chose to live on campus, instead of half of them moving off for both their junior and senior years, “even if that results in a few more seniors moving off.”

“That’s okay with me,” he continued. “I think when you’re a senior, you have a little bit more maturity, you’re getting ready for adult life. And so learning how to cook your own food or maybe clean your own apartment or whatever, that’s quite reasonable.”

Lewis said unsatisfactory housing draw results for seniors come as an “unfortunate side effect of the fact that we don’t quite have enough excellent rooms for every student to live on campus.”

Traugott Lawler, who was the master of Ezra Stiles College from 1986 to 1995 and acting master from 2002 to 2003 — before the title was changed to head of college in 2016 — has said he was “of two minds” regarding the choice to give rising juniors priority over rising seniors.

“I was talking about this with my wife, and she was saying that it can be good for a senior to live off campus to get used to what’s going to follow after they graduate,” Lawler said in an interview. “But that would be too bad if you don’t have a lot of seniors in the college. Because you need senior leaders.”

Lewis said last month he thought that “juniors actually provide a lot of leadership to student organizations, including in the residential colleges.”

For the 2026-27 school year, the cost of on-campus housing and food totals to \$21,600.

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The change to the housing draw priority — a centerpiece of Lewis’ efforts to keep students living in their colleges — has stripped seniors of their preferential treatment, prompting concerns among some

The priority switch, which was initially announced to students in November 2024, gave current juniors and seniors equal priority in picking their housing for this academic year. Beginning with the housing

Garrett Curtis / Photography Editor

