

PUSHES & PULLS

Yale’s long battle to sway where students live

Administrators’ problem has often been overcrowding.

BY OLIVIA WOO
STAFF REPORTER

The residential college system at Yale College has been in place for nearly a century. It was initially implemented in 1933 “in order to encourage everybody to live on campus,” according to Yale College Dean Pericles Lewis — a goal that Lewis himself has embraced and repeatedly acted on during his tenure as dean.

But Lewis’ post-pandemic push to keep students on campus is only the latest in a long line of administrative efforts to influence students’ housing decisions. Since the inception of the residential college system, a motley assortment of wars, class size fluctuations and pandemics have pushed and pulled students on and off campus — trends which generations of Yale College administrators have addressed through different policy approaches.

A mandate that undergraduates reside on campus for all four years of college, which was implemented in 1962, led to a series of overcrowding crises in student dormitories. In 1964, after a consequent housing shortage on Old Campus was resolved, the News falsely predicted that overcrowding would “not be a problem after this year.”

But administrators would confront the issue again several times over the following decades. And in the mid-1990s, a countervailing trend coalesced in an off-campus exodus, already prompting the News to ask: Had Yale come upon the “end of the residential colleges?”

When demand exceeded supply

When the residential colleges opened to students in 1933, they attracted more students than they were able to hold.

Between 1850 and 1915, fewer than 55 percent of undergraduates had lived in Yale-owned buildings, according to data published by Yale historian George W. Pierson, who graduated from Yale College in 1926 and received a doctorate in 1933, in his 1976 “Yale Book of Numbers: Historical Statistics of the College, 1701-1976.”

The opening of the Harkness Memorial Quadrangle — which was later reconfigured into Saybrook and Branford Colleges — in 1917 gave seniors “wonderful and romantic accommodation” on campus, according to Pierson, but it wasn’t until the residential college system came about that Yale housed the vast majority of undergraduates.

The 10 residential colleges that opened in the 1930s, Pierson wrote, were “so attractive that by World War II almost 90 percent of Yale’s undergraduate students were housed and well housed in collegiate buildings.”

During the war, however, student quarters became more cramped. According to Pierson, the military had removed beds and installed double-decker bunks, which increased rooming capacity on campus.

Lewis said “a huge increase in enrollment” after World War II was accompanied by the conversion of single rooms to “doubles with bunk beds and that kind of thing.”

“I’ll rent you an apartment right across the street in the Taft apartments and it’d be a nice apartment, because we really need your room to put freshmen in.”

Pierson’s numbers indicate a jump in enrollment from 1,520 undergraduates during the 1940-41 academic year to 3,339 in 1947-48, though the figure soon dropped, hovering around 2,400 during the 1950s.

In 1960, overcrowding in residential colleges necessitated the conversion of some triple rooms into quadruples. A Timothy Dwight secretary, faced that year with the task of fitting 20 extra students in the residential college, reportedly sighed, “We’ll be fitting them in somewhere.”

A hard line drawn, then loosened

Overcrowding during those years led administrators to allow students to live off campus, but the opening of Morse and Ezra Stiles Colleges for the 1962-63 school year prompted them to crack down on the practice.

“Because of over-crowding in the existing ten colleges we have had a more liberal policy in permitting students to live off campus than heretofore, and than we will have,” then-Dean of Undergraduate Affairs Richard Carroll said in 1962. “Those who were given permission to live off campus because of crowding will be expected to return to their old colleges or apply to the new ones.”

Carroll’s hard line did not hold for long, however. In December 1965, the Executive Committee announced a policy allowing upperclassmen to petition to move off campus, though they would still “be expected to participate in their residential college life,” keep on “the minimum meal contract” and submit a “progress report” each semester on how their off-campus experiences helped them work toward a specific academic project.

Less than three years later, in May 1968, the Yale Corporation moved to further ease restrictions on off-campus housing for students after their freshman year.

In the three years following the relaxation of the housing policy, the number of off-campus dwellers increased by over 400, the News reported in 1971. That year, 20 to 25 percent of the senior class chose to move out of their colleges.

Administrators were not fully on board with the trend. In 1970, Yale levied a \$150 fee — \$1,257 in today’s dollars — on all students living off campus. Student protests soon prompted a removal of the fee.

In a 1971 interview, Dean of Undergraduate Affairs John Wilkinson shared a stance on seniors leaving campus that echoes the one Lewis now holds over 50 years later. “After three years of dormitories, I can see why they might want a change,” Wilkinson said.

Concern about on-campus overcrowding — worsened when the University overshot its undergraduate enrollment goal in 1975 — also led students to move off campus, according to an ad hoc committee convened that year to examine the effects of crowding on student life.

Overcrowding during those years forced administrators to annex students both to on-campus buildings like St. Elmo’s Annex — now Rosenfeld Hall — and off-campus apartments on streets including Howe, Prospect, Park and Temple.

Some students would also receive a “polite, or sometimes not so polite, shove” to move off campus, a dean said at the time.

John Meeske ’74 moved off campus during his senior year, but cited a reason other than escaping overcrowding: to live with his soon-to-be-wife.

“We became a couple as students, and then we got married right after senior year, essentially, but my wife had accelerated by one year and she went into the Yale Divinity School, and because of that, she and I moved off campus in what became my senior year,” Meeske said in an interview in February.

Shortly after his graduation, Meeske began working in the Yale College Registrar’s Office, and then in the dean’s office. In his role as an administrator, Meeske would

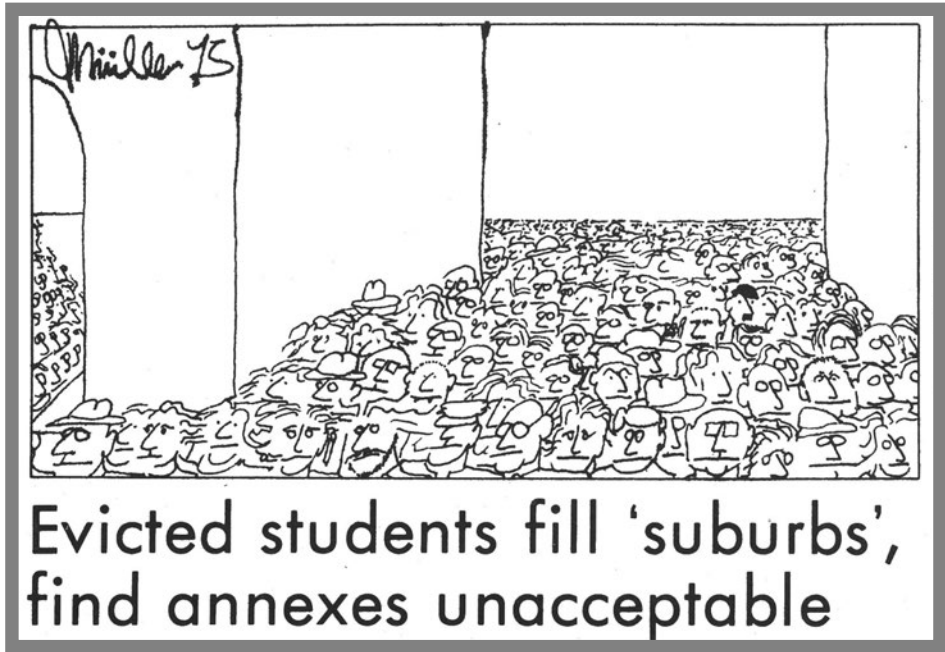
grapple with what he described as the worst moment of overcrowding yet seen in the College’s history.

‘Students are isolating themselves’

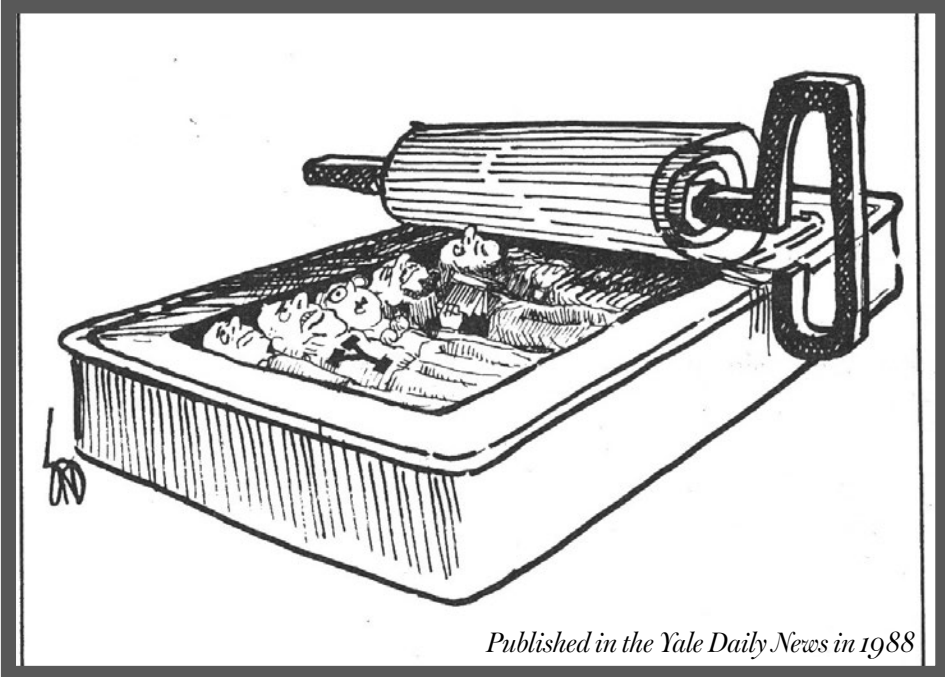
As the 1980s came to an end, administrative concerns and student complaints regarding overcrowding returned. In the middle of the 1990s, an off-campus exodus prompted the biggest housing policy change in recent memory — forcing sophomores to stay on campus.

By 1995, off-campus living had gained such popularity that 17.4 percent of students had opted to leave their residential colleges, citing reasons such as overpriced, low-quality food and run-down, crowded dormitories.

Meeske said at the time that administrators were “certainly very concerned that



Published in the Yale Daily News in 1988



Published in the Yale Daily News in 1988

students are isolating themselves from this diverse community” on campus. He added that the University had been pursuing a “carrot” policy, encouraging students to choose on-campus living on their own.

For the 1994-95 school year, administrators decided to reduce a typical \$200 to \$300 increase in the room-and-board fee to a bump of only \$30. But the tactic failed to incentivize students to stay on campus, the News reported in 1995. A year later, several students maintained that their expenses off campus were still lower than they would have been had they stayed in their colleges.

Administrators ultimately drew a hard line: In March 1995, off-campus privileges were revoked for sophomores, beginning with the class of 1999.

“If sophomores are moving off campus, they may not even be experiencing living in a residential college,” Meeske said in February this year when asked to describe the rationale behind the decision, although he noted that the change was made before he was involved in housing policy. “The feeling was that students should at least have that experience, and then, if they decide to move off campus, at least they’re choosing from a position of knowledge.”

Only around 10 percent of undergraduates who lived off campus at the time were sophomores. Some students protested the decision as overreach by the administration, but administrators characterized it instead as a return to a norm — in which sophomores lived on campus — that had only been disrupted in the prior decade.

However, Meeske noted in a 1995 interview with the News that there was not enough space for every off-campus student to move back on.

Sending students to the Taft

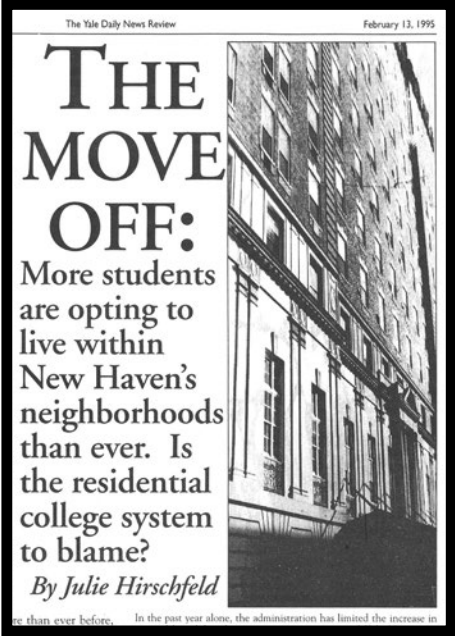
One year after the sophomore policy was instated, an abnormally large class of 2000 matriculated to Yale, forcing administrators to contend both with an unexpected influx of first years and a fully on-campus class of sophomores. Flooding on Old Campus only compounded the resulting housing shortage, and Meeske, now an associate Yale College dean, had to think outside the box — of campus.

“I had to negotiate to rent some apartments that were in the Taft apartments,” Meeske recalled in February, referring to the building at the corner of College and Chapel Streets. “We had a few upperclassmen who were annexed to the Old Campus, and I had to convince those students, ‘I’ll rent you an apartment right across the street in the Taft apartments and it’d be a nice apartment, because we really need your room to put freshmen in.’”

“Obviously we can’t put freshmen by themselves in the Taft apartments and not be part of a community,” Meeske said. “That wouldn’t make any sense.”

In addition to moving those students — two juniors in Calhoun College, which has since been renamed as Grace Hopper — to the Taft, the University also moved two suites of Saybrook first years into the college proper and forced a Yale official out of their York Square quarters to accommodate Morse students, the News reported.

Around this time, Meeske said last month, alterations were made to Bingham, Vanderbilt and Welch Halls to repurpose extra spaces into proper rooms and turn existing



Published in the Yale Daily News in 1995

singles into doubles.

“In the top of Vanderbilt, those very big suites under the eaves on the fifth floor, there were a couple of rooms that had very large spaces,” Meeske recalled. “We took off one of those spaces in each of several suites and made them into a double bedroom.”

Meeske said he devised plans for these alterations by poring over floor plans of campus buildings and offering his suggestions to architects. He had studied architecture as an undergraduate at Yale, and said he “was a great student of these floor plans.”

In an interview with the News in 2002, Meeske characterized the 1996 housing squeeze as “the closest we ever came” to forcing students off campus.

The lure of renovated colleges

In the two decades after Meeske’s 1996 negotiations, demand for off-campus living peaked and dipped, leading to — and often resulting from — students being sent to live outside of their colleges.

As colleges underwent renovations, beginning with Berkeley in 1999, it became evident that the condition of a student’s residential college factored into their decision-making calculus. Reports by the News between 1999 and 2009 suggested that upperclassmen were more likely to stay on campus if their colleges had been renovated.

Meeske told the News last month that his own experience as an undergraduate informed his recommendations for renovations during that period.

“I was trying to push them to create as many single bedrooms as possible. The architects weren’t necessarily inclined to do that,” Meeske said, adding that he wanted to prioritize guaranteeing singles for seniors. “That push kind of came back from my student days and seeing how that was seen as desirable in those times.”

While much of the Yale undergraduate experience may have changed since Meeske was a student, the prevailing preference for single rooms has not.

Yale has 14 residential colleges.

Contact
OLIVIA WOO
at olivia.woo@yale.edu.