Most funding is centralized, but disparities linger

BY ISOBEL McCLURE
STAFF REPORTER

Sixteen years after Yale College moved to equalize funding across its residential colleges, the College administration is central in overseeing college finances and opportunities. But the legacy of college-specific donations continues to linger in parts of undergraduates' residential college life.

Today, roughly $250,000 in base discretionary funds are allocated to each residential college, Yale College Dean Pericles Lewis told the News, although the amount varies slightly depending on the number of students. According to Lewis, the $250,000 is supplemented by other program funding, such as for Creative and Performing Arts, or CPA, awards, which lands at a budget of around $500,000 for a "typical residential college head."

"It's an ongoing conversation about what's best to be done centrally and what's best to be done in the 14 different colleges," Lewis said last month.

Before the centralization of college funding mechanisms in 2010, some colleges managed their own separate endowments, according to Steven Smith, a political science professor who was Branford College's master, the equivalent of a head of college, from 1996 to 2011.

"There was increasingly a push to bring about more equalization, and with equalization comes centralization," Smith said. "And I think the University basically wanted to control the money too."

A move to centralize, and equalize

The College moved to centralize residential college funding following the 2008 financial crisis, when the University navigated a "serious blow" to its endowment and severe budget cuts, former University President Peter Salovey GRD '83 '84 '86, who was Yale's provost at the time, wrote to the News.

Salovey wrote that the decision aimed to equalize students' access to resources across the colleges. Existing disparities across the colleges, with older colleges often having greater resources, were seen as unfair to undergraduates "randomly assigned" to their college, Salovey wrote.

In 2010, the University announced the equalization of residential colleges' funding. The three wealthiest colleges' budgets were reduced, while the others' were raised or remained level to match the others, the News reported at the time.

"We did what students have been clamoring for for years," then President Richard Levin GRD '72 '74 told the News in 2010. "We made funding more equitable." The 2010 change arrived around the time when eight operations managers started working with the colleges.

Smith recalled financial disparities between the colleges had increased "pretty dramatically," including during the time when he led Branford.

"Two or three of them were enormously wealthy, private endowments and all kinds of things, and some were kind of just barely treading water," Smith said. He recalled one residential college, which Smith declined to name, taking a group of seniors to Europe on a paid-for spring break trip.

The University encouraged donations not specific to particular residential colleges, Salovey wrote, and altered the discretionary funds colleges received so that funds were fairly equal.

In 2010, Jonathan Holloway GRD '91 '95, then the master of Calhoun College — a role now called head of Grace Hopper College — and the chair of the Council of Masters, said "a decade of incredible endowment growth" had exacerbated differences across the colleges, which were once negligible, as college-specific endowed donations grew.

"That was leading to a difference in opportunities for students," Holloway said.

Residential college finances in 2026

Lewis said "a lot of factors" contribute to whether funding opportunities are administered at the residential college or Yale College level.

He noted that processing candidates' applications for funding through colleges creates greater proximity between the people reviewing applicants and the students.

"But it's also a lot of work, and so some fellowships that used to be managed in 14 different residential colleges are now managed more centrally," Lewis said. "It does help with that question, well, maybe Hopper had a lot of applicants, but Trumbull didn't, and so you can even things out a little bit more."

The CPA, the Richter Summer Fellowship and the Mellon Senior Research Grant are administered through the residential colleges and are consistent across the colleges, with a little variation, according to Lewis.

"Every residential college receives the same amount of funding to support art in the college, and they use the fund to make CPA awards," Associate Dean for the Arts Kate Krier DRA '07 wrote. She noted that the funding also went toward art spaces in the colleges and activities such as trips to see Broadway shows.

Yet donors can still support "residential college activities" and "support specific capital projects," such as renovations to a college, according to Joan O'Neill, the University's vice president for alumni affairs and development.

Lewis told the News that donors may also contribute to a particular residential college by funding events and book purchases — money that must be spent immediately.

An exception to the rule is the Jonathan Edwards Trust — established in 1966 by alumni and faculty affiliated with Jonathan Edwards College and not overseen by the dean's office.

The trust is "an independent organization, incorporated separately from Yale," Miko McGinty '93 ART '98, its chair, wrote.

"Over many years it has supported a small number of programs within the College, primarily through 'culture draw,' a lottery through which small groups of students attend cultural events, mostly in New York, with a fellow of the college," McGinty wrote.

McGinty cited upgrades to the JE dining hall's sound system as an example of projects that the trust was involved in.

J. Frederick Berg Jr. '66, a current Saybrook College fellow, noted that he supported projects including renovating the Saybrook dining hall and enlarging the gym — each of which are examples of "capital items."

When asked about alumni's reactions to the centralization of college funds, Berg described some "pushback," particularly among graduates of Jonathan Edwards and Pierson.

However, Edward Silberman '65 told the News that he was unaware that donating to specific colleges was ever a possibility.

"I can't even remember getting any specific outreach from Pierson, which was my college," Silberman said. He donated annually to Yale over several decades, he noted. However, Silberman decided to stop contributing following the 2021 decision to end alumni petitions for nominations to the Yale Corporation.

"In my ecosystem of alums, I've not heard anyone ever talk about the importance of donating to their residential college. I know that it happened. I've never heard my classmates or people I overlap with suggest that that's particularly important to them," Stephen Bumbaugh '88 told the News.

He noted that while Yale should be "careful" when regulating how alumni can contribute, "maintaining the equality of the experience for students who come from all over the world and come from this vast tapestry of background," which he noted was central to the college system, was "critically important."

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Maia Wilson / Staff Illustrator

Counselor position, 88 years old, is in high demand

BY OLIVIA CYRUS
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On fall Monday nights in Timothy Dwight College, first-year counselor Scott Darling '94 wasn't enforcing rules, but instead was crowding eight first-year athletes into a single common room to watch Monday Night Football.

Darling used his budget as a first-year counselor, or FroCo, to be a "big brother" figure and become more involved with the college, he said in an interview.

In 1938, Yale began its resident counselor program. At the time, the program included 24 counselors. Today, Yale College has 132 first-year counselors after 358 people applied for the job. Throughout its history, the program has provided varying levels of funding for counselors, which can draw seniors to stay on campus as paid mentors.

Victoria Mnatsakanyan '27 is an incoming first-year counselor for Timothy Dwight, more than 30 years after Darling's tenure. For Mnstsakanyan, the allure of being a FroCo lies in her ardor for her residential college. Though she lives off campus now, the junior said she is looking forward to mentoring first years and building her college's community.

"I was excited to be connected to my residential college community again," Mnatsakanyan said in a phone interview. "I still go back there every Sunday night for family dinner and meetings with the college council, but I do miss that collegiate feel that you don't really get off campus."

As a member of Timothy Dwight, where FroCos live in the residential college rather than Old Campus, Mnatsakanyan said that "instilling that sense of pride" in the University and the residential college system was all the more important.

Over the last four years, interest in the FroCo position has climbed from 183 applicants in spring 2023 to 358 for both the 2025 and 2026 application cycles. In 2024, Yale began providing FroCos with a pay increase that would cover the full costs of room and board.

When asked if the financial support is an incentive to maintain interest in the role, Yale College Dean Pericles Lewis said that demand for the role of FroCo has not been a problem.

"We have had lots of demand for the position," Lewis said. "The decision to make it full room and board was just based on a sense of what is fair compensation for the amount of work involved and the nature of that work."

In May 2023, the incoming counselor class launched a petition demanding that Yale provide stipends grand enough to cover full room and board. By June, the petition accumulated 653 signatures. Although administrators obliged the following month to increase wages by about $1,000 for each counselor, none of the salaries were sufficient to cover total living expenses, which were $19,180 at the time.

"Paying FroCos fairly increases the number of people willing to do this job," Matthew Merritt '24, who was a Branford College FroCo, wrote to the News in 2023. "Paying FroCos fairly decreases the need to hold a second job, allowing FroCos to be more available to their first years."

Yale increased FroCo compensation in response to a petition signed by more than 600 students — some of whom were first-year counselors — in 2023. Following the petition, counselors were given a stipend of $19,900, which was set to the value of room and board fees.

In the midst of the petition for increased funding, Cynthia Sutanto '24 posed that the increased stipend would assist FroCos in their duties and help diversify future counselor classes.

"While Yale likes to boast that they have diverse FroCo cohorts, the inadequate pay dissuades many students, especially low-income students, from applying," Sutanto said. "If the petition's requests are granted, I think we'd see a more diverse class of FroCos, which will better serve first years."

The program's original compensation entailed free housing, 110 free meals per year and an allowance to host events of $225 dollars, according to the News' archives.

In 1978, though, FroCos' allowance was cut down to $75 dollars and their meals to just 90 per year. The changes also came as rooming fees increased by $75 dollars for the following school year.

Then Silliman-counselor Tim Delaney '79 wrote that the new $75 budget disturbed him and would make it difficult for counselors to establish strong relationships with first years.

Today, incoming FroCos said the compensation was not a leading factor in their decision to apply for the role.

Taylor Burke '27, a rising counselor, said that he knew he wanted to be a FroCo as early as his first year due to the impact of his own first-year counselor.

He said he is interested in the role for "the love of the game" instead of for the financial incentive.

Others, like Erin Hu '27, a rising FroCo in Branford, said the benefits matter. She said that many rising seniors, in a crunch to find housing, begin to look for off-campus housing in January. However, in her case, she knew that by being a FroCo she could bet on both financial and housing stability.

"$20,000 is a lot of money, regardless of how much aid you receive or not," Hu said. "Not only am I getting this $21,600, but I also don't have to think about moving off campus, which is extra time and effort, money, logistical planning and whatnot."

This year, Benjamin Franklin College had the most first-year counselor applications of all 14 colleges, with 34 applicants.

Olivia Woo contributed reporting.

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