

Colleagues,

This email is a follow up on our last meeting. I want to communicate my concerns with both our process and (more importantly) our recommendations with the hope that I can persuade you to reconsider certain aspects of the report. Based on discussions both inside and outside of our meetings, I am confident that I am not the only member of the committee who has these concerns.

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First, regarding the recommendations:

Although each one of these things has merit/grounding and will have direct impact on students and/or the institution, there are only two that will dominate the debate surrounding the recommendations. Those two are:

*(1) Assign West Campus housing, in concert with the opening of Central Campus and the creation of additional social spaces on West, through a policy that enables the non-contiguous blocking of up to 12 students and discontinue the practice of assigning housing to selective living groups and social/affinity/interest groups.*

*(2) Clarify alcohol regulations and enforce these regulations consistently. Specifically, target disorderly and disrespectful behavior and dangerous drinking; and enforce strictly the University's existing prohibitions to under-aged drinking, particularly at outdoor events*

Speaking generally, the sections justifying these recommendations, lack clear argumentation and leave us open to criticism from those on either side of the issues at hand (as does much of the rest of the report). The following is my best shot at a series of clear arguments against these recommendations. At the very least, you should take notice that these arguments will likely be presented by me and by others once the report is made public:

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Considering recommendation (1):

*(1) Assign West Campus housing, in concert with the opening of Central Campus and the creation of additional social spaces on West, through a policy that enables the non-contiguous blocking of up to 12 students and discontinue the practice of assigning housing to selective living groups and social/affinity/interest groups.*

First and foremost, we have to articulate what this means. As was discussed at the last meeting, the word "non-contiguous" is particularly problematic and will have to be clarified. One of the things that President Brodhead has consistently underscored is that the best way to proceed is to articulate a vision for student interaction/residential life and fit specific actions and policy changes into that vision--something that we have not done. With this recommendation and the argumentation preceding it, we have only pointed out "problematic" areas and suggested an especially unoriginal solution.

Articulated vision notwithstanding, I am not comfortable with the recommendation itself. My understanding, based on the report and our discussions, is that the reasons for doing this are as follows:

*(a) To address the inequities in the housing assignments system*

*(b) To prevent the use of the dorms as social space*

*(c) To promote interaction between students by "mixing" students up*

Considering (a) [inequities in the housing assignments system]:

We have correctly identified that the groups who are granted the privilege of a housing section are predominately male. Our current practice allows these groups to exert a greater influence over the Duke culture than perhaps is warranted. Although I don't feel "oppressed" by the current situation, I believe that 30 or so of my friends should have just as much a right to live together as any fraternity or selective living group. We are right to recommend that Duke "equalize" access to selective housing sections and housing in general.

That said, equalizing access to housing does not necessitate actively preventing large groups of students from living together if they desire to do so; equalizing access to housing merely means equalizing access to housing. If any student wishes to join a group of students (however large -- even upwards of 30-50) in a semi-contiguous housing block, they should have the ability to do so. If we can find a system that is equal, then we have satisfied the goal we articulated and removed any institutional barriers to a more inclusive, diverse social atmosphere.

One possible option is to increase or uncap the block size (the current number in the report is 12). Everyone would have equal access to housing and any group who wanted some semblance of a "section" could have the equal chance of getting one. There are likely numerous other alternatives that would allow for students to have equal access to housing and still maintain groups' right to contiguous housing, and thus the recommendation as it stands is not necessary to achieve this goal.

Considering (b) [To prevent the use of the dorms as social space]:

Although they are not apparent in the report, there have been legitimate arguments presented for trying to move social events out of residential space. There are aspects of the current situation that are unsafe and problematic, and almost all of the problems the committee has associated with selective living groups are somehow tied to members socializing in section. Since dorm rooms are not conducive to programming, many section parties only feature alcohol. The main contributor to the use of dorms as social space is not the existence of sections, but that housing sections are the only viable locations to host any social event on West Campus.

Groups with on-campus sections often choose to rent out off-campus clubs and bars at a very high cost, precisely because housing sections do not provide the desired environment or capacity for a successful social event. For that reason, providing more on-campus venues that are

accessible and functional will have a significant impact on the number and nature of social events that take place in the dorms—and indeed, this is considered by the committee to be a prerequisite for the elimination of selective sections. By adding a wide array of social venues on West Campus through the West Union, we will achieve our goal and help move drinking and partying out of residential space.

At the very least, nothing is lost by constructing social venues—which will inevitably draw students out of the dorms and evaluating the selective living sections at a later date. As it stands, we are recommending the most disruptive and heavy-handed policy without evaluating more palatable options.

Considering (c) [To promote interaction between students by "mixing" students up]:

The belief that this goal will be realized through the elimination of selective sections is grounded in student experiences on East Campus. The basic argument is that the “inclusive community” feel on East Campus is the result of East’s randomly assigned, non-contiguous housing. As the argument goes, exporting the East Campus model to West Campus will generate a similarly inclusive community on West.

That argument is based on an assumption we simply cannot make, however. There are numerous other factors that contribute to the community on East but are unique to the first-year experience. First and foremost, students who are new to Duke do not have established social networks and are eager to meet new people and, as a result, are amenable to the type of social interactions that the committee is trying to foster. Second, the size of the dorms and nature of the common spaces on East Campus further contribute to the community in ways that that current West Campus architecture cannot. Finally, we have not established that strangers living in close proximity on West, once they have established their social circles, will have meaningful interactions with one another. Upper-class students with established majors and social networks could easily opt to visit old friends rather than make new ones.

Moreover, students may find this policy socially isolating, frustrating, and inconvenient. That this recommendation will achieve this goal has not been established to the extent that it would justify depriving students of the clear communal and social benefits associated with contiguous housing. This recommendation should meet a much higher burden of proof before it goes into the report.

In addition to this recommendation not being necessary to attain our goals, it will also have numerous side effects that have been largely ignored in the report:

First, the main (and indeed only) incentive for fraternities to retain their affiliation with the University is the benefit associated with on-campus, contiguous housing. By removing sections and thus dissolving that incentive structure, we have every reason to believe that most fraternities will move off-campus and exist as a number of groups whose sections have been revoked or forfeited exist now. Those groups do not participate in similar service projects as on-campus

fraternities and contribute almost nothing to the on-campus community; they mainly drink, off-campus, in situations that are far more problematic than some of what the committee has associated with on-campus sections. This limits the University's ability to oversee such groups and, again, is incompatible with our vision of the ideal Duke social scene.

Second, in its current form, this will be perceived (particularly by Greeks and Greek alumni) as a direct assault on fraternities. Right now, the only consolation offered to the Greeks is our statement that "the Committee recognizes the need to foster Greek and other social groups that promote the development of friendships, camaraderie, common purpose and social networks." We provided no elaboration on how exactly the institution would continue to "foster" these groups. Many will highlight the lack of any IFC-affiliated student in arguing that, in making this recommendation, the committee is completely ignoring the interests of the Greeks. Greeks make up a significant proportion of our students and alumni, and we have a responsibility to consider their interests and weigh them appropriately with those of other students.

Third, our willingness to eliminate any form of large-scale, contiguous housing precludes any potential contributions to the campus community and social life that current and possible future groups bring or might bring. Having semi-contiguous housing gives groups a presence; it empowers them, either socially or otherwise, and brings that group numerous benefits. In the course of making housing "equal," however, the current recommendation does not seek to empower everyone, but disempower those who currently have access to contiguous housing (including widely respected groups such as the Baldwin Scholars, Roundtable, and others). This is incompatible with our mission as a University and antithetical to our desire for "alternative" and non-Greek student groups to have a prominent presence in the on-campus social scene.

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Considering recommendation (2):

*(2) Clarify alcohol regulations and enforce these regulations consistently. Specifically, target disorderly and disrespectful behavior and dangerous drinking; and enforce strictly the University's existing prohibitions to under-aged drinking, particularly at outdoor events.*

The reasons thus far articulated for this recommendation are:

- (a) Decrease alcohol consumption and the harms associated with it*
- (b) Make a clear statement to students about what is and is not acceptable by enforcing the law*
- (c) Provide operational clarity to those enforcing the alcohol policy*

Considering (a) [decrease alcohol consumption and the harms associated with it]:

As evidenced by survey data that indicate that upwards of 80% of students drink and the realization that not nearly that many are of legal drinking age, current enforcement efforts are not particularly effective. Data from Dean Bryan has shown no positive correlation (indeed, some of it has demonstrated a negative correlation) between increased enforcement and safer behavior.

Some data indicated that transports to the ER have risen over the years as Duke has increased enforcement of the alcohol policy. That is not a legitimate justification for loosening enforcement, but it raises serious doubts about the efficacy of the recommendation.

Strict enforcement of the alcohol policy will, however, induce a shift from safer, public consumption towards forms of drinking that are outside the purview of the University, namely drinking off-campus and inside closed dorm rooms. Dean Bryan and others observed that trend with previous increases in alcohol policy enforcement, and it has led to both unsafe behavior and behavior that is disruptive to the surrounding community. Coupled with the proposal to eliminate on-campus housing sections, this shift would seem to exacerbate, not ameliorate, the problematic situation described in the report.

As I have repeatedly said, real change will only come through changes in the situations in which students drink. Changes in social venues, increased programming funding and other recommendations have significant potential to change the manner of student alcohol consumption. But again, as with the recommendation on selective housing sections, we are already advocating the extreme next step.

Considering (b) [making a statement and enforcing the law]:

The statement that this recommendation makes is "don't drink if you're under 21." The law notwithstanding, this is something that almost every administrator, staff member and student has somehow violated. It upholds a law that almost none of us actually agree with, putting us in the "predicament" cited in the alcohol subcommittee report. In making this somewhat absurd statement, we lose all credibility with the students and undermine other more important, positive recommendations in the report.

In addition, we should not make a statement and uphold the law unilaterally at the expense of our efforts to bring real change to the on-campus alcohol culture. In the end, if we can change the undergraduate drinking culture, it will be because we have provided students a variety of social environments in which to experience the "ideal" vision of Duke social life that we all share. Improved publicity will follow this change, not precede it, and thus we should not allow concerns about our message and publicity to undermine the aspects of our report that will bring about real, positive change.

Considering (c) [operational clarity]:

It has not been established that operational clarity necessitates strict enforcement. As noted in the report, "the right balance in terms of individual and community well-being needs to be determined through systematic study." An "evidence-based approach to alcohol policy" can bring about operational clarity, but we are already taking the next step by establishing "operational clarity" through stringent enforcement of the drinking age. If this argument is to be made, it needs to be significantly more developed--right now it is inconsistent with other alcohol recommendations.

In addition to failing to achieve our goals (and having several side effects that were previously mentioned), this recommendation would have several other consequences:

First, the aforementioned shift towards unsafe, off-campus drinking that would inevitably follow the implementation of this recommendation would significantly undermine our efforts to foster more inclusive events that feature alcohol in an ancillary capacity. It is the unfortunate truth that such safe, inclusive, on-campus events simply will not be attended by students (or at least the students we wish to reach) if they cannot get or bring some form of alcohol. Thus, there must be some allowance for responsible consumption by underage students.

Second, as noted in the report, we seek to "promote a more responsible approach to the culture of campus drinking." A strict enforcement of the drinking age by the University is inconsistent with our message encouraging a responsible drinking culture based on student self-regulation.

Third, this would put University officials in an uncomfortable, purely punitive role. It would unduly burden them with addressing something that a vast majority of students regularly engage in and something that they themselves probably engaged in as undergraduates. Moreover, it would undermine their more important roles of building community and ensuring student safety. Any benefit derived from the increased "operational clarity" that might arise from such a policy would be outweighed by these two very important considerations.

A more complete and nuanced argument was articulated in both the student report on alcohol and my recent column in Duke magazine [<http://www.dukemagazine.duke.edu/dukemag/issues/111206/depGAR.html>]; the main conclusion is that we need to foster events that are not focused solely on alcohol and safe situations that are not centered around getting drunk—without necessarily ridding students of alcohol.

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Second, my concerns on our process:

I hinted at this in previous emails and said this in several meetings, but I want to be clear: Tangible recommendations should have been part of our efforts to gain input from the community, particularly from the students. Although many of them were formed prior to both the President's Council meeting and the December 7th Trustee meeting, none of them were conveyed—as far as I could tell—in any concrete form. This is markedly different than the actions of the curriculum committee during considerations about Curriculum 2000, when the committee made recommendations, publicly vetted some of them, and made changes to the recommendations in direct response to community concerns.

How we have proceeded will have/has had two critical implications: (1) It will make students and others resent the process because they were not given a chance to respond to the actual recommendations—the meat of the report and likely the only thing that observers will care about—before the report was presented, and (2) It has severely limited student and other interest in the process. Students are not apt to respond to nebulous questions about campus culture or simply voice their concerns with little or no idea as to what ends their comments might be used.

Indeed, had we gotten a clear response from students based on tangible recommendations, I am confident that you would have heard the aforementioned arguments from more students than just myself.

As soon as the report is released and tangible recommendations are publicly discussed, students will take a keen interest in the CCI—an interest that we should have cultivated a long time ago.

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Although the CCI report is slated for public release shortly after the February Board of Trustees meeting, we still have much to consider. I send this one final plea in the hopes that we might change some of our recommendations and revisit some of our process; the original charge does not require us to report until May.

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