

## **Residential Colleges at Princeton University**

*A statement by President Christopher L. Eisgruber, Provost David S. Lee,  
and Executive Vice President Treby Williams*

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The University's commitment to providing its students with a vibrant and immersive residential experience is essential to Princeton's distinctive model and mission as a great liberal arts University. For more than 30 years, the University's residential colleges have played an important role in advancing this mission, serving as a nexus of academic and non-academic life on campus and fostering a learning environment that promotes interaction, reflection, and meaningful engagement.

The Task Force on the Residential College Model addressed a series of challenging and critical questions about the University's present system. We are grateful to the members of the task force for articulating a strong set of goals for the colleges and a series of thoughtful recommendations to help realize them. The task force report provides important insights that will inform the near-term expansion of Princeton's undergraduate student body by 125 students per class (leading to a total 500 additional students) as well as an expected additional increase in the number of undergraduates that is likely to occur in the longer term. As the student body continues to become more diverse, the report also helpfully addresses the University's ongoing efforts to build community and enhance inclusivity so that Princeton undergraduates from all backgrounds can thrive.

In this memo, we will respond to the report by identifying recommendations on which the University will take immediate action, those that need further development and integration into ongoing planning processes, and those that we believe to be of lower priority.

### **The goals for Princeton's residential colleges**

The task force proposed a set of guiding principles, which we address throughout this memorandum in the context of the task force's recommendations, and four overarching goals for the residential colleges. The goals are:

1. *Serve as a nexus of intellectual and social life on campus; provide environments where undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, and staff can interact both formally and informally.*
2. *Create environments that foster a sense of community and enable meaningful interactions among members of the college community; provide a sense of belonging for all students in an environment where different backgrounds and viewpoints are represented, respected, and welcomed, and where students are able to engage the full spectrum of diversity at the University.*

3. *Create healthy environments that support individual health and well-being and enable social, intellectual, and personal growth, including opportunities and space to reflect on service and leadership in meaningful ways.*
4. *Offer resources and support during various student transitions, including, for example, the transition to college, the transition from consuming knowledge to producing knowledge in independent research, and the transition from college to post-university life.*

We agree with these goals, which complement the University's broader [goals for campus life](#) and help to advance Princeton's teaching and research mission.

### **Building on strengths to enhance the residential college system**

After a careful self-study, the task force concluded that the University's residential college system is "arguably stronger than it has ever been, presenting an important opportunity for Princeton to build on existing strengths to enhance the college system." The task force identified four broad strategic priorities that would leverage these strengths and advance the goals for the colleges and the overall undergraduate student experience. We will consider each of them in turn.

The task force rightly noted that differences exist among the six residential colleges and that "there are likely meaningful lessons to be learned from individual colleges about how best to enhance the college system and advance the University's broader campus life goals." In its report, the task force advised us to explore the distinctions among colleges carefully as we move forward with efforts to strengthen the residential system. We agree with the task force that the differences among Princeton's colleges, including both the ways in which they have structured different aspects of their programs and the physical structure of the colleges' facilities, provide us with valuable information about effective ways to realize the goals for the colleges. We have asked those who will oversee next steps to explore these distinctions and consider how best to leverage the strengths of each of the colleges as planning efforts continue and recommendations are implemented.

The task force's strategic priorities are:

1. *Strengthen community by changing college composition, enhancing affiliation, and limiting size.*

With the opening of Whitman College in 2007, Princeton launched a residential college system in which three of the six colleges house only freshmen and sophomores, and three include residents from all four class years. (Prior to this transition, the University's five residential colleges had only freshman and sophomore residents.) We asked the task force to pay special attention to the ideal size and composition of the residential colleges, informed by nearly a decade of experience with the current system.

The task force's highest priority recommendation is to strengthen community in the residential colleges by creating a "true four-year college system."

We endorse the recommendation to transition all of our colleges to a "four-year model" by including residents from all four class years in each college. This would give juniors and seniors the option to live in a college, though they would not be required to do so. We have heard broad enthusiasm on campus for such a transition.

The task force made several more specific recommendations about how to implement a four-year system, including provisions that all students would have the opportunity to live in their originally assigned college throughout their entire undergraduate experience, and that juniors and seniors who wish to reside in a college must live in the college to which they were assigned as freshman. We believe that more information about student decision-making regarding both housing and dining is necessary to inform these policies. Additionally, we need to carefully consider the programmatic and physical implications of requiring students to stay in their original residential colleges.

At our request, the task force also made recommendations about the ideal size of each college, suggesting that they be capped at approximately 500 students in residence, including a "critical mass" of upperclass students (assumed to be around 150 students). The task force admitted, however, that transitioning to a four-year model (thereby adding more residents to each college) while limiting the size of the colleges represent competing pressures.

We appreciate the benefits of a size limit of around 500 residents, but as we move forward, we will face practical constraints, given the nature of our existing college facilities and our commitment to expand the undergraduate student body. As the task force recognized, carefully designed programming can "offset" potential negatives and help to realize the benefits of relatively large college communities.

Although we endorse incorporating junior and senior residents into all the college communities, additional research is necessary to understand what constitutes a "critical mass" of juniors and seniors and, indeed, whether such a number may vary depending on specific features of an individual college. For example, the Forbes "Pink House" and the Edwards Collective, a "living/learning community" for students interested in the arts and humanities, offer examples of how juniors and seniors living in the colleges can develop strong connections and community, even in relatively small numbers. This year, we will pilot a sustainability "living/learning" community in the Pink House and we are supportive of the establishment of additional "living/learning" communities in the colleges in the future. It will also be important to consider how the structure of different dormitories, and the balance of available room types, helps to drive housing decisions of juniors and seniors. Any future addition of junior and senior residents into the University's existing residential colleges will need to be tightly coordinated with the upcoming expansion of the undergraduate student body.

Beyond considering their composition and size, the task force made two additional recommendations to support community-building in the residential colleges. The first was to strengthen the connections that all students have with their residential colleges. The task force considered, for instance, how best to enhance juniors' and seniors' affiliation with their originally assigned colleges, regardless of whether they choose to live in a college or in unaffiliated dormitories. The second recommendation was to establish a working group to assess whether the dining options for juniors and seniors support the residential college goals and to propose new options, if appropriate.

We are supportive of the recommendation to strengthen the connections that students have with their residential colleges to the extent that doing so will help to create thriving and inclusive college communities and meaningfully advance the University's goals for the student experience across all four class years. At the same time, however, it is essential to encourage our students toward a variety of different affiliations and communities, both within and beyond the residential college system, throughout their time at Princeton. This is another area where additional information and analysis will inform future decision-making and programming efforts.

We fully agree that dining options for all students need to be assessed to determine which options would most effectively support engaged communities, within the colleges and across campus more broadly. Vice President for University Services Chad Klaus is currently leading a comprehensive review of all undergraduate board plans to inform future programmatic options.

We have asked the dean of the College, the vice president for campus life, and the vice president for University services to build on the work of the task force in determining how best to implement a four-year college model at Princeton. Their work will engage the Council of College Heads and closely coordinate with the ongoing campus planning process and efforts to prepare for the expansion of the undergraduate student body.

## 2. *Invest in physical infrastructure.*

The task force made four recommendations to advance its second strategic priority for investments in the residential colleges' physical infrastructure: renovate outdated, poorly functioning spaces (specifically the Forbes College Annex and Addition as well as most of Wilson College's dormitories); provide more communal spaces in all colleges; create spaces that accommodate a diverse student body; and think carefully about the location of future residential colleges.

The construction of housing to accommodate 500 additional undergraduate students, which will include the addition of a seventh residential college, is a major investment in the University's college infrastructure. We have asked the Campus Planning Steering Committee to take the task force's recommendations about the location of a future college into account, such as thinking about co-locating colleges to support the establishment of thriving residential communities and considering potential future college sites in the context of other loci of campus activity, as planning efforts continue.

We agree that the Forbes Annex and Addition and certain dormitories in Wilson College are in need of renovation and/or reconstruction. These issues will be considered in the course of the broader campus planning process.

We also agree that the University should aim to provide more communal spaces in the colleges and create spaces that accommodate an increasingly diverse student body. The extent to which and the exact nature of how the University will act on these recommendations will depend on many factors, including the outcome of the campus planning process and resource availability.

We have also asked the Campus Planning Steering Committee to be mindful of opportunities that the upcoming construction of new student housing may provide to help realize the overarching goals for the residential colleges and advance the University's broader strategic priorities. For example, there may be ways to strengthen the connections between residential colleges and proximate dormitories housing juniors and seniors. Similarly, there may be opportunities to co-locate student housing and other programs and functions on campus to leverage synergies and create thriving hubs of activity and engagement.

Significant philanthropic support, such as the generous gift from Meg Whitman '77 to support the establishment of Whitman College and the gifts from many alumni to reconstruct Butler College, will be essential to the University's ability to realize its goals for the residential colleges, expansion of the undergraduate student body, and residential life at the University more broadly.

3. *Enhance co-curricular programming and residential life.*

The task force report includes many recommendations for how to enhance co-curricular programming and college residential life. We agree that thoughtful enhancements to college programming will play an important role in realizing even more fully the opportunity for the colleges to "serve as the literal and metaphorical places where students come together to share, reflect on, and learn from their experiences."

We wholeheartedly support the task force's recommendations to strengthen and enhance resources for diversity, inclusion, and equity. The University has made significant progress over the past year to create a more inclusive campus climate, building on the work of the Special Task Force on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. In response to the recommendation of both the Special Task Force and the residential college task force, this year we increased diversity training opportunities for student advisers in the colleges, among other initiatives. We recognize that additional progress is necessary, and that it will require sustained efforts to enhance the diversity and inclusivity of the entire campus community. The residential colleges will be integral to the University's ongoing work to create an even more inclusive environment and campus community.

We agree entirely that the residential colleges should create and support communities in which students from all backgrounds, perspectives, and groups feel welcomed and engaged. We want all of our students to thrive and grow at the University. We expect interactions on Princeton's campus to be based in civility and mutual respect; we know that they will sometimes be challenging, provocative, or difficult. The residential colleges can provide an important site at which to address, with trust and empathy, the most difficult and complicated issues of the day.

Informed by the work of the task force, the dean of the College, the Council of College Heads, and the vice president for campus life will lead efforts to enhance co-curricular programming in the colleges.

4. *Strengthen faculty engagement and intellectual life.*

The University's residential colleges serve as the nexus of academic and non-academic life, and we agree that the University should seek to strengthen faculty engagement, both formal and informal, and intellectual life in the colleges. We will ask the dean of the College and the Council of College Heads to explore a variety of ways to encourage more faculty involvement.

The task force's recommendations about advising, including those regarding the Freshman Seminars advising program and the potential integration of BSE and AB advising, pertain to matters under the authority of the dean of the College. We will ask Dean Dolan to consider these recommendations and to work with the dean of the Graduate School on those that concern the Resident Graduate Student program.

We appreciate the task force's argument regarding the importance of the location of the college heads' residences, and we understand the value these homes provide to help build community and encourage informal social and intellectual engagement between students and faculty. Given the demands informing the current campus planning process and the major investments that will be necessary to renovate certain existing dormitories and build a new college to accommodate the expansion of the undergraduate population, it is unlikely that we will be able to address the task force's specific recommendations regarding residences for the Whitman, Butler, and Wilson college heads within the next 10 years, but we will consider these questions carefully within the broader resource umbrella. We have also asked the Campus Planning Steering Committee to consider the question of a head's residence in conjunction with planning for a seventh residential college.

While the college heads' residences are important to the University's residential college program, we also want to recognize that the college heads' approaches to engaging with their college constituencies play an essential role in fostering community and facilitating important interactions between students and faculty. We are grateful to the college heads for this important work, which takes place not only within the college heads' residences, but throughout each of the colleges and across campus more broadly.

## ***Conclusion***

We conclude by reiterating our gratitude to the members of the task force for their work. The residential college system is integral to the University's distinctive liberal arts model of education, and we look forward to building on the strengths of the robust college system in place today to help realize our goals and aspirations for the future of the University.