

The Houses

The twelve residential Houses are one of Harvard's unique resources. Each is a complete subcommunity, of a scale small enough that most of the students residing in a House can get to know each other. (The largest House has about 450 students.) Each includes a dining hall, seminar rooms, computing facilities, common rooms, and recreational facilities. Other amenities, such as darkrooms and weight rooms, vary from House to House. House facilities are open to all members of the House without charge.

Each House has a faculty Master, an Allston Burr Senior Tutor who serves as the dean of students in the House, around twenty resident tutors, two fulltime administrative staff, and a cadre of nonresident affiliates.

Because some of the older Houses are such prominent architectural features of the Harvard campus and because alumni so often relate their memories of Harvard to their life in the Houses, it is easy to think of the Houses as ancient fixtures of the College. But in fact the oldest Houses are less than a fifth the age of Harvard itself.

The Houses emerged out of the vision of Harvard President A. Lawrence Lowell, who was concerned that the College was so large as to cause anonymity and a retreat into narrow interests. Lowell wrote in 1928 that "large communities tend to cliques based upon similarity of origin and upon wealth. Great masses of unorganized young men are prone to superficial currents of thought and interest, to the detriment of personal intellectual progress." (Women were not educated with men at Harvard until the 1940s.) From the beginning, it was part of the design of the House system to mix up students with different backgrounds and interests. As Lowell wrote, "The division [of students into Houses] should not be based upon differences in the subjects studied or the career the members intended to enter; that, on the contrary, men interested in various fields of thought should be thrown together with a view of promoting a broad and humane culture. So far as subjects of concentration, pecuniary means, and residence in different parts of the country are concerned, each House should be as nearly as possible a cross-section of the College."

The same goals still guide the House system. Gender, race and ethnicity, and extracurricular expertise are also now recognized as relevant to the learning that happens among students who live together. It is the critically important role of the Masters to knit a community together out of the resulting "cross-section of the College" and to draw on the entire human wealth of Harvard to enrich the lives of the students who live in their Houses. Masters can maintain strong House traditions or create new ones; for example, Cabot House's status as the powerhouse of inter-House athletic competition was not changed by the appointment of a new Master two years ago or by the implementation of a fully randomized assignment system.

Every March, freshmen form themselves into "blocking groups" which are assigned randomly to the Houses, subject only to the constraints of available space and outer limits established for the gender ratio in any House. Almost all students (96%) remain in residence in the Houses throughout their Harvard careers. Those who live off campus may affiliate themselves with Dudley House, a center for graduate students as well as nonresident undergraduates, which has its own Master and Senior Tutor.

The Houses provide opportunities for students to explore extracurricular activities on a more "amateur" and less time-consuming basis than College-wide groups may require. Music, theatre, intramural athletics, and volunteer community service all take place on the local level within the Houses. Some formal instruction takes place in the Houses, through House seminars and tutorials, for example. But the most important education students receive in the Houses comes outside the classroom, from conversations and

activities with tutors, faculty affiliates and other invited guests, and fellow students. The Houses provide the atmosphere of civility and mutual respect prerequisite to this kind of learning. The Houses are, to use Lowell's words again, "a social device for a moral purpose."

A topic of current interest is a call for "Universal Keycard Access," that is, for any student's keycard to open the entryway doors in all the Houses, rather than just those in his or her own House. A lively discussion has been raging all year as to whether safety would be improved or impaired by such a change, and whether students' ease of access to their friends in other Houses should outweigh concerns that the sense of House community would suffer if thousands of students rather than only a few hundred could legitimately have access to a House at any time of day or night.

Whether your child is a rising sophomore who has only recently learned his or her House assignment or a graduating senior who is bidding Harvard farewell this spring, we hope you will have an opportunity to see the House and meet the Masters and others in the House who play such an important role in shaping students' experience.