Depending on when they graduated, alumni have experienced different systems of residential life, which most of them recall fondly. They should, since each system had its strengths, though each also had its weaknesses.

This year’s Committee on Undergraduate Life (CUL) has identified four recent eras. The Fraternity Era lasted until the 1960s. Most students joined one of the frats, which were self-selecting. During the Strong House Era, which lasted until the early ’80s, small groups of friends were assigned to a house where they lived through graduation. Student government and intramurals were house-based. Each house had faculty members associated with it and funds for cultural programming. In the Weak House Era, which lasted until the early ‘90s, a growing number of students shifted house affiliation, often to avoid spending three years in less desirable residences. The steadily increasing number of transfers ultimately led to the Free Agent Era that exists today. Each year, small groups of friends choose rooms wherever on campus seems most desirable when their number comes up in the housing lottery.

A strength of the current system is that no student has to face three years in a building he or she dislikes. Maximizing this freedom, however, has had unintended consequences. Students don’t really identify with their house (it’s just where they’re living this year) and therefore tend not to build relationships with their housemates. This has resulted in fewer interactions among students of different backgrounds, interests and class years.

Perhaps, then, we shouldn’t have been surprised when surveys showed that only half of our graduating seniors reported that Williams had done much to help them relate better to people of different races, nations or religions, a number well below most of our peer institutions.

For these reasons we made residential life a focus of the strategic planning process that began a few years ago and asked for a full review of the matter by the faculty/student/staff CUL, chaired at the time by history professor Charles Dew ’58. The committee recommended moving toward a house system to be designed to retain the best of the current arrangement while recapturing the best of the former models.

This year’s CUL, under the leadership of philosophy professor Will Dudley ’89, consulted widely, thought hard and produced a wonderful, detailed report that proposed the adoption of just such a system. You can find the report at www.williams.edu/go/cul/.

With the enthusiastic endorsement of the Board of Trustees and administration, work is now under way to launch the new house system in fall 2006.

At the end of their first year, students in self-selected groups of up to six will be randomly assigned for their subsequent three years to one of five “houses.” Each house will comprise a geographic cluster of residences, so students will experience increasingly more desirable accommodations with seniority. The five houses will average 275 members.

The goal, according to the CUL’s report, is to create “an environment in which upperclass houses are not merely places to live, but are genuine and lively communities to which students feel a real attachment.”

Each house will have a governance structure, faculty associates and funds for programming. Intramurals will again be organized by house. College Council is thinking of how best to structure itself to reflect the new system.

Many students embrace this change, but, not surprisingly, many feel deeply the loss of the soon-to-pass opportunity to pick a room each year anywhere on campus. Some also fear that the social makeup of the houses will feel contrived.

But our own experience here on campus in the recent past shows that a vibrant house system can enrich students’ lives by encouraging the kinds of interactions across barriers of age, background and interest that are the lifeblood of a residential liberal arts college.

I am pleased that Williams is about to right its course in this direction and applaud all who are working hard to make it happen, to the benefit of countless students.

—Morty Schapiro
Drew Thompson ’05 and Jessica Lovaas ’06 each will study aspects of AIDS in Africa as a Watson Fellow and Harry S. Truman Scholar, respectively. Thompson is to spend a year in Uganda and Botswana, and Lovaas plans to pursue a joint master’s in international affairs and public health at either Columbia or Harvard. As Fulbright Scholars Deborah Hemel ’05 will examine the Israeli medical system’s response to terrorist attacks as a student at University of Haifa, Shawn Powers ’04 will do research with an NGO in Manila on the economic impact of the large-scale migration of Filipino workers, and Matt Ellis ’03 will study Arabic at an Egyptian university.

The curtain rose on the ’62 Center for Theatre and Dance in late April with Shakespeare’s As You Like It (which many scholars believe is the first play ever produced in London’s Globe theater) and Landscapes: Six Short Pieces, by Samuel Beckett. The Dance Program presented Legs of the Journey Home, site-specific works “celebrating space and place.” With a six-week summer theater lab expected to connect current students with Williams alumni in professional theater as well as guest artists in film and TV (and with a summer dance lab in the works), Dean of Faculty Thomas Kohut says the heart of the center is “intellectual engagement with theater and dance.” The Williams Board of Trustees has set tuition and fees for next year at $40,310, which is 5.8 percent more than last year’s costs. The College continues to offer more generous financial aid by reducing—in some cases to zero—the loans of all aided students and extending Williams’ need-blind admission policy to all students, international and domestic. Keep an eye on Student Center construction via a live “webcam” mounted in the eaves of Chapin Hall. Continuous video is available between 4:30 a.m. and 10:30 p.m. Visit www.williams.edu/go/studentcenter and click on the link “Student Center Webcam” for a still image of what’s happening at the precise moment you open the Web page. (The image may be dark, depending on the time of day and weather conditions.)

The 33rd Annual Aluminum Bowl, a 5K cross-country race held in conjunction with the Williams Purple Valley Classic, will be held Sept. 24 at Mt. Greylock Regional High School. For information, contact cross-country coach Pete Farwell ’73 at pfarwell@williams.edu or 413.597.3249.

Friedman, Bond to Headline Commencement

Three-time Pulitzer Prize winner and New York Times foreign affairs columnist Thomas Friedman will give the principal address at the College’s 216th Commencement June 5. Julian Bond, board chairman of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, will give the baccalaureate address. Both will receive honorary degrees during commencement, as will Evelyn Glennie, an internationally known percussionist; Ellsworth Kelly, a painter, sculptor and printmaker; Jhumpa Lahiri, an author and Pulitzer Prize winner; Joseph Rice ’54, chairman of Clayton, Dubillier & Rice investment firm and a former member of the Williams Board of Trustees; and Sally Shaywitz, a Yale School of Medicine professor of pediatrics and co-director of the Yale Center for the Study of Learning and Attention.

For more information on any of these stories, visit www.williams.edu and enter the topic into the search field.
Scene & Herd

News Bits continued...

attends college on the West Coast. ■ The Office of Alumni Relations and Development named its primary meeting room in Mears House in honor of R. Cragin Lewis ’41, director of alumni relations from 1975 to 1986 and longtime class officer and generous benefactor of Williams. A portrait of Lewis now hangs in the “Lewis Room” on the second floor of Mears, former home of Theta Delta Chi fraternity, of which Lewis was a member. ■ Jim Shepard, the J. Leland Miller Professor of American History, Literature and Eloquence, was one of 186 artists, scholars and scientists in the U.S. and Canada selected to receive a 2005 Guggenheim Fellowship. The English professor and author is working on a new collection of stories that take place around the globe, and the fellowship will help fund his travel and research. ■ Visit www.williams.edu/go/diversity for the latest on the diversity initiatives. Virtually all of the College’s governance has

Williams is seeking nominations for next year’s alumni trustee and Tyng Bequest administrator elections. Send names to Alumni Relations Director, 75 Park St., Williamstown, MA 01267-2114.

Further Afield

Newsday of Long Island carried an April 2 profile of Peggy Diggs, lecturer in the arts and humanities. Diggs was one of 46 artists selected nationwide to receive a Creative Capital Foundation grant to pursue “Work Out,” a collaborative, community-based project with incarcerated men and women who will design industrial and residential objects for small spaces.

Political science professor Marc Lynch has appeared in a variety of media, including the Ottawa Citizen, the Charleston (W.Va.) Daily Mail and on Voice of America, discussing TV’s influence on the spread of democracy in the Middle East. He writes in the March 6 Baltimore Sun: “Arab satellite television … might be more important than was the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in driving the recent cascade of events from Baghdad to Ramallah to Cairo to Beirut.”

The Boston Globe quoted Morty Schapiro, Williams president and economics professor, on the 568 Presidents Group, which is composed of 28 colleges and universities working to simplify the process of applying for student financial aid. Schapiro states in the March 20 article: “The philosophy is to be more transparent about how we give aid, so people don’t say, ‘Why did Williams give me this and Yale give me that?’ We wanted to be more up front about what the methodology was.”

The April 15 Wall Street Journal quotes psychology professor Saul Kassin on how police questioning can lead to false confessions. Kassin was a defense witness in the pre-trial hearing of a Long Island man who confessed to rape and murder in 1985 and later was released from prison when new DNA evidence did not match his. In April Kassin became the first person ever in New York State to testify about research on false confessions.

In Discover magazine’s 100 top science stories of 2004, published in January, chemistry professor Ann Skinner’s analysis of burned antelope bones from South African caves—which confirms that early hominids built campfires as many as 1 million years earlier than previously thought—was ranked 44th.

The Christian Science Monitor reported Feb. 14 on socially responsible investment practices among nonprofits, including Williams. The article quotes Mark Orlowski ’04, who, as a senior, advocated for creation of the Williams Social Choice Fund.

The PBS special series “Strange Days on Planet Earth” features marine science and Williams-Mystic professor Jim Carlton, who warns that invasive species could have a “catastrophic impact” on the ecosystem.
been involved in this effort to generate ideas for steps Williams can take to ensure that all groups of students, faculty and staff can thrive here. A self study describes actions already taken this year and lists almost eight pages of recommendations, which will be considered and prioritized with the help of outside experts in these fields. Let the Review know what you think of the new Scene & Herd. Visit www.williams.edu/alumni/go/opinion to fill out a brief survey.

International Studies, 50th Reunion Gift Receive Boost

A $1 million gift from Paul Hunn ’55 will support his class’s 50th Reunion Gift, “Bringing the World to Williams and Taking Williams to the World,” designed to broaden international education at the College—an initiative of The Williams Campaign.

The class gift will help establish an endowed fund to support a visiting professorship that will bring to campus international affairs experts, international studies fellowships for students, internships and a course conducted abroad during Winter Study.

“More than ever, a Williams education must develop in its students the global awareness and perspective they’ll need to advance in our increasingly international world,” says President Morty Schapiro. “By designating their gift in this way, Paul and his classmates have displayed great leadership in helping Williams achieve this vital objective.”

Hunn spent 32 years at Manufacturers Hanover Trust (and now JPMorgan Chase) in New York City. Now retired, he has served on several boards and has lectured regularly at the University of Virginia’s Darden School of Business. The Williams Campaign is a five-year, $400 million effort to strengthen the myriad ways, formal and informal, that students learn from the faculty and from each other. As of late April, Williams had raised more than $256 million toward its goal.

They Said:

“If a cluster starts with a personality, the people coming in don’t have a chance to frame its identity; they get framed by it.” —Doug Bazuin, director of campus life, on the Committee on Undergraduate Life’s recommendation for “cluster housing,” slated to be implemented in fall 2006. The proposal includes creating five groupings of residence halls (excluding first-year entries and co-ops), each of which has a house as its physical and social center. Students would be affiliated with a house beginning sophomore year and select rooms each year from among its cluster of residence halls. Record, 3.1.05

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“Much to the College’s credit, yes, we’re over budget, but [the administration has] made it clear that we are not going to value-engineer the life and intent out of this building. We’re still pushing. We’ll still try to eke every day out of the schedule that we can.” —Michael Briggs, project manager for Buildings and Grounds, on how the Student Center opening was delayed from fall 2006 until early 2007. Rapidly rising steel prices and unexpected clean-up of an old oil leak under Baxter Hall pushed the project $8.5 million over its original $36 million budget. Record, 3.8.05

“Theater and dance companies will not only perform but also do workshops, have master classes and be in residence. We will bring in scholars as well” and enhance “the provocative thinking going on at Williams.” —Rachel Chanoff, the College’s new director of programming for the guest artist series to be held in the ’62 Center for Theatre and Dance starting in October 2005. Record, 2.22.05

“Supporting [alumni e-mail] prevents us from starting enjoyable, daring projects by requiring myopic diligence to maintenance.” “In this day and age, when people can easily get free e-mail accounts like Yahoo, Hotmail and Gmail to which Williams addresses can be forwarded, the College should be putting its resources toward technology on campus for current faculty, staff and students.” —Williams Students Online and Dinny Taylor, the College’s chief technology officer, on WSO’s plan to eliminate e-mail accounts for alumni users. Record, 3.15.05 (All alumni can sign up for permanent e-mail forwarding addresses from Williams by visiting www.williams.edu/alumni/go/emailforwarding. One advantage: No matter how many times you change your e-mail service provider, your friends will always be able to reach you at your Williams address.)

“Each year we get several of our teams to participate, and some even do their own shopping and wrapping of the presents. We do a day of gift wrapping here in the athletic department and then we go to Hillcrest to deliver the gifts and stay for the holiday luncheon. It’s really a wonderful event, knowing we can bring some joy and smiles to children less fortunate.” —Tammy Wright, administrative assistant for the athletics department, after Williams teams were honored for their community service with Hillcrest Educational Centers’ Judge Barry Community Service Award. Record, 3.15.05

The Arabic Plotinus: A Philosophical Study of the ‘Theology of Aristotle.’ By Peter Adamson '94. Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 2003. 240 pp. $68. The first book-length study of the Arabic translation of Plotinus’ “Enneads,” which was erroneously attributed to Aristotle by Muslim philosophers and for centuries was the source of Neoplatonic ideas in the Muslim world.


The Color of Freedom. Introduction and notes by David H. Albert '71. Common Courage Press, 2005. 348 pp. $17.95. The oral history of two Indian revolutionaries, one who was born an “untouchable,” the other a member of a higher caste.


Sequoia, Presidential Yacht. By Giles M. Kelly ‘49. Cornell Maritime Press Inc., 2004. 144 pp. $19.95. Kelly, who served as the Sequoia’s skipper from 1983 to 1988, relates the history of a yacht that has been host to eight presidents since its 1925 construction.


ON COMPACT DISC


Bebek. By Bebek (including Lynn (Murphy) Michalopoulous ’97). Bebek, 2005. $17.92. An album that is both jazzy and electronic, a mixture of rich vocals and innovative accompaniment. Bebek means “baby” in Turkish.

Twinkle. By Victoria Rummier ’88. Pitch Puppy Productions, 2004. $19.94. The jazz vocalist, who was born in Detroit and has lived and worked in Paris for the past 10 years, releases her debut CD.
A Eunuch's Story: How a Book that Never Should Have Been Published, Was

While pursuing her ongoing research interests in the art and politics of imperial publishing in Ming China, art history professor Ju-Yu Scarlett Jang made an unlikely discovery. Sometime in 1620, a palace eunuch had compiled and published a sophisticated, illustrated book on the art of rulership for the education of the crown prince.

Though by then the role of eunuchs had evolved from mere servants to the imperial family into close personal and political advisers to the emperor, publishing such a book—a task usually done by or under the auspices of the emperor—was far beyond the scope of an eunuch’s responsibility.

Now Jang is working to answer the many questions surrounding the book’s existence. Among them, why is it that the book never reached the crown prince and, according to a contemporary author, no one dared mention its publication? Who funded the beautifully illustrated, 300-page book? Who were the calligraphers, woodblock carvers, printers and illustrators, and where were they from? Was a particular printing workshop responsible for the project? And what was the book’s relationship in format and design with its Ming dynasty precedents?

As part of her research, Jang traveled to Beijing last August and viewed the original text, which is being housed in and preserved by the Beijing Library. The chance to see in person the only known copy of the book was a highlight of the project, she says.

Jang plans to publish her findings as a chapter in the forthcoming book: Art, Politics and Palace Eunuchs in Ming China (1368-1644).

After completing her undergraduate work at the National Cheng-chih University in Taipei, Jang came to the United States to pursue a doctorate at UC Berkeley. She has been in the States ever since, teaching at UC Berkeley and Ohio State prior to coming to Williams in 1991. She enjoys Williams, she says, because it is small enough for her to "really engage brilliant students and faculty intellectually in a more intimate atmosphere."

Trained also as a painter and calligrapher, Jang teaches courses in Asian art, including a Chinese calligraphy course that has studio art and art history components, the only such course currently offered at Williams. Among her course offerings are "Introduction to Asian Art: From the Land of the Buddha to the World of the Geisha" and "Images and Anti-Images: Zen Art in China and Japan."

—Jennifer E. Grow

Beyond Borders: International Studies’ New Look

One week, the presenter might be a student just back from a year abroad, describing Egyptians’ attitudes toward Americans. The next, it might be a political science professor discussing the implications of Taiwan’s economic development for a “one China” policy. Or it might be a visiting lawyer explaining how the Central European Eurasian Law Institute trains judges in the former Soviet Union. Whoever is presenting and whatever the topic, Williams’ International Studies Colloquium attracts students and faculty whose interests cross many disciplines and span the globe.

The colloquium is the centerpiece of the International Studies Program, a new academic concentration that provides an umbrella for a growing number of curricular content tracks, some focused on an area of the world (Africa, East Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, Russia and Eurasia), and others on a theme (economic development).

The premise is that it is illuminating for students and scholars of different parts of the world to compare notes and gain broader perspective on their areas of interest.

Jackson Professor of Religion Bill Darrow, a specialist in Iran and Islam, is the program’s organizer and its first chair. "Since World War II," he says, "the trend in undergraduate education has been toward foreign area studies. We all became specialists in our own particular region and went our separate ways. While we were doing excellent work talking...

10 | William & Mary Review | Summer 2005
As a teen, Nathan Sanders loved languages—up to a point. Though he studied French, German, Russian, Greek and Latin, he rarely got far enough along to be able to use any of them proficiently. "I would stop once I understood how a language worked, how sentences were constructed, how words were pronounced. I thought I was just lazy," he says. But a sophomore-year linguistics course at MIT opened his eyes to an entire discipline devoted to what intrigued him most about languages: their capacity to reveal the logic of the human brain.

One-Man Show
Sanders is the sole faculty member of Williams’ Linguistics Program. "Put simply," he says, "linguistics is the scientific study of patterns in human language. We try to find out how languages are fundamentally different or the same. Then we ask, 'What do these similarities and differences tell us about how humans construct language? Why does this pattern exist?'" His 101 course introduces students to most of the important aspects of language: sound, syntax (word order), semantics (the basic meanings of words and phrases), morphology (how words are built from smaller units) and pragmatics (how context, word choice or intonation confers extra meaning).

Socrates and Scientific Inquiry
Sanders uses the Socratic method in his courses, presenting students with a discrete bit of linguistic information and asking them to develop theories to explain the data. Then, to develop the objectivity required for scientific inquiry, students evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their theories. Unlike neuroscience, which attempts to understand language via the hard wiring of the brain, linguistics attempts to derive universal principles from language patterns. "Linguists and neuroscientists approach language from two different directions," Sanders says. "Somewhere in the center, we meet."

Winter Study Survivors
Sanders also took advantage of Winter Study this year to explore his interest in reality TV. His course “Surviving Your Fifteen Minutes” examined “how malleable reality can be, how lies can be spun out of truth and how heroes and villains can be edited from the same source.” In addition to reading scholarly works on the topic of reality TV, 18 students participated in a Williams version of Survivor. They competed in mathematically simulated physical trials (climbing mountains, finding food in the wild) and real-life challenges (solving puzzles, untangling knots). Like their TV counterparts, they engaged in lying, backstabbing and collusion to increase their chances of winning. Those voted out in each “Tribal Council” became producers, writing descriptions of subsequent episodes.

—Zelda Stern
Re (JA) Training

What's changed since Julius Rosenwald '69 was a junior advisor? Just about everything.

Isaac Foster '05 finished nibbling a french fry and said something that confounded me: “I have to be back in Williamstown around the third week in August for JA training.”

“Training!” I exclaimed. “What training?”

Isaac’s father (my classmate Tom '69) smiled at me and said, “Times have changed since we were junior advisors.” Thirty-seven years ago, my preparation for becoming a JA consisted of the following: The day all freshmen arrived in early September, someone from Buildings and Grounds said to me,

“Here are the keys to Lehman West.”

Fulfilling my position required little more than telling a freshman the difference between Griffin and Goodrich or finding a Friday afternoon ride for him to Boston. Today, the juniors selected to live in first-year entries no longer simply dispense information. Combining their experience and six demanding days of training, they become thoughtful mentors who have the skills and compassion to advise.

Listening to Isaac as he described the scope and breadth of his role as a “modern” JA piqued my interest. Just how have times changed? To find out, I decided to “embed” myself with the new crop of JAs that would be convening at the end of summer 2003.

Early on a Friday morning in late August, I arrived at Dodd House to begin my training. Dave Johnson '71, associate dean, presented us each with a stack of materials, including the latest edition of the Junior Advisor Handbook—96 pages in length. A glance over topics covered—including disorders, rape and

By Julius Rosenwald '69 • Photos by Scott Barrow
sexual assault/harassment, and pre-party planning, among others—revealed just how much Williams has changed since my time as a JA.

The newly minted class of juniors that filtered into the Dodd living room reflected that evolution. In 1967, JAs were male, and almost all of them were white. The current group looked more like a cross section of a summertime crowd at 42nd and Broadway in midtown Manhattan—young men and women from across the country and around the world.

We began with a session on “Security as Friends and Allies.” In her opening remarks, Jean Thorndike, director of Campus Safety and Security, told us: “You’ve taken on a very demanding position. We respect and admire you for what you are doing.”

Listening to a description of potential fines—$5 to open a locked bedroom door after two warnings; $101 for parking in a handicapped zone—a memory struck me. In my time as a student, there were no $100 penalties for violating the College’s party policy. There was no College party policy. And, with just a handful of staff, the campus security of my generation was a far cry from the 26-member department it is today.

Nor did we have anyone like Scott Braman, a security officer who works the graveyard shift. He spoke to us frankly about the worst-case scenario of a weekend evening of revelry ending in tragedy.

“It’s very important for you guys to be honest with us,” he said. “Tell us what they’ve been drinking. How much. Whether drugs were involved. That may be valuable information for the EMTs. It could save a life.”

We moved on to fire safety with Joe Moran, manager of environmental health and safety, and I had to smile. Not only did our room in Lehman West have a working fireplace, but custodians also kept the wood box full. And no one in that pre-airbag era saw a problem with
the JA who kept his BSA motorcycle in the living room.

Hearing about the dangers of overloaded electrical outlets reminded me that students today plug in a host of devices, many of which had not been invented in 1967. Today's first-years have rechargeable camcorders, cordless phones, cell phones, laser printers, refrigerators, microwave ovens, video game displays, DVD players, CD burners, digital cameras, laptops, desktops and PDAs. In the '60s, the well-equipped freshman arrived with a bedside lamp and a clock radio.

In the '60s, the well-equipped freshman arrived with a bedside lamp and a clock radio.

We next watched a chilling video depicting how rapidly fire can engulf a dorm room. Then we took part in a "smoke-out"—a somewhat harrowing drill in which we were required to enter a corridor filled with roiling smoke and find our way out.

"Without following the wall," Moran said, coaching us as one by one we dropped to the floor, "you're not going to get out." He stressed the importance of keeping passageways clear of objects. "If you are crawling and bump into a dresser or a bicycle that's in the hallway, you'll lose time," he said. "Maybe enough time to kill you."

A session titled, innocently enough, "Administrative Issues" was chock full of details integral to entry life, including a crash course on the Americans with Disabilities Act (which my tenure predated by nearly a quarter-century), support for international students (not
really an issue in 1967) and academic resources for students who faced difficulties meeting the demands of their course work (outside a JA’s purview in my time).

Charles Toomajian, registrar and associate dean for academic programs, drove home how far removed I was from the era of carbon copies and typewritten term papers: “Help first-years go through the self-registration online process. But be careful. You have to prevent them from infecting our computer network. Make sure they have anti-virus software installed. Just last month there were 30,000 viruses thrown out by the Williams servers.”

We were never expected to be treasurers of an entry’s banking operations. Yet these days JAs have to understand exactly how House Entertainment Funds can or cannot be spent, sift through hundreds of account code numbers and receipts and fill out payment and reimbursement forms online.

What my counterparts and I did in the ’60s would land today’s JAs in jail. We would make the rounds of the entry, collect a few bucks and then drive to a liquor store in New York State, where the

if someone tells you this that you listen well and help them however they want help. Because I did feel limited in the ways I could help, I gave her the names of some people she could talk to, which she did, but she also needed to be able to talk to her friends. It’s also important to remember that coming out is a long process, and your continued support will be needed.

TELEVISION
Think hard about having a TV/VCR in your common room. We thought nothing of it until we had installed it, and it immediately became the center of attention when people were in the common room. Also, people were staying up until 3 a.m. watching movies. It was hard to get any sleep. If you decide to get a TV and VCR, I would recommend making rules right from the start. In retrospect, I would have much preferred to not have a TV/VCR and have the common room be an informal hangout where people could come and talk.

ANNOYING FROSH
You’ll probably have someone in your entry who annoys you. Sometimes it gets to the point where they annoy you all the time and you almost cringe when they come into the room. Of course, you always feel kind of guilty that you cringe because you are a JA and you are supposed to like everyone. When this happens, though, you have to remember that you are human and you are going to dislike people. So … you shouldn’t torture yourself, and you should make it clear in a nice way to the person when they annoy you. … You could say in a joking way, “Enough, already!” or “Listen, I really don’t have the time right now.” This way, they kind of understand that they are annoying you and they should stop, but at the same time they are not going to take it too badly if you are offhand about it.

ACADEMICS
At the beginning of the year, my co-JA and I were surprised when the faculty advisor to seven of our first-year students asked us to his office for a meeting. He proceeded to share with us certain information from the high school transcripts of our advisees … He warned us that … two of them might have a bit of trouble with a couple of courses. … We were able to monitor their progress … and were ready to step in with encouragement and academic suggestions (writing workshop, tutors, etc.) when problems did materialize.

GRIEF
One person dealing with a death or other personal loss can have a significant impact on his or her entry. … Try to be tuned in to the impact that someone’s grief is having on others in the entry as well as on the person herself. You can always call
In 2005, JAs open doors by swiping cards with magnetic strips—a fitting reminder of how complex life at Williams is today.

Issues of economic injustice, racial profiling and social stereotypes would only have lurked in the shadows back in the 1960s. Many of us countenanced insensitve behavior. Threads of prejudice ran through the fabric of the time, and few challenged that norm. No longer. In the words of one JA, “When we’re planning events, we have to accommodate everyone even though they have different means.”

The session that afternoon increased my discomfort, as two professional actors from New York City took the stage in Brooks-Rogers to perform Sex Signals, a show culminating in a sketch about date rape. The term “date rape” had not even entered the vernacular when I was a JA, even though that form of violence surely took place. The notion that we, as JAs in an all-male college, would bother to consider double standards for men and women seemed inconceivable. There were no candid discussions about someone’s right to stop a sexual advance or say “No” at any time. We had no concept of “victim” or “accused.” Today, junior advisors do.

I endured more emotional wrenching in a session with Doris and Tom Smeltzer, whose 19-year-old daughter struggled for a year with bulimia before an electrolyte imbalance caused her heart to stop. Since her death, the Smeltzers have traveled the country, speaking to young people about body image disorders, including compulsive exercise, anorexia, bulimia and binge eating.

In our session in Brooks-Rogers, the Smeltzers urged us to be attuned to warning signs—obsessive dieting, preoccupation with food and weight,
imbalanced eating habits, excessive exercise, feelings of alienation. Then Ruth Harrison, director of health services, reminded us, "This is not an issue you want to take on by yourself. We need a team to do it."

Health Services staff available to JAs and students include a nutritionist, psychiatrist, therapist, physician and nurse practitioner, many of which did not exist at Williams in the 1960s.

Following mediation training, we attended the workshop "Diversity and Differences in Entry Life." During role-playing, we were presented with a hypothetical first-year woman not interested in participating in entry activities with the rest of the group. In another, we worked through how to help fictional roommates Mary and Emerald coexist when one is uncomfortable with the other's drinking.

When the subject came up of how JAs should deal with pestering parents, I smiled. Apparently certain mothers and fathers of today (ahem), prone to micromanaging, make repeated calls to inquire about how their offspring are doing.

That did not present a problem for us. In Lehman West circa 1967, there was one pay phone in the ground floor hallway. A parent calling that number would most likely have gotten a busy signal; if memory serves, a student by the name of Leftie Carlton '69 spent hour upon hour talking to his girlfriend back in Wauchula, Fla.

Training continued with a session on identifying struggles and crises. We covered tools for detecting depression, dealing with issues of gender and sexual orientation and understanding homesickness. We also were advised on how to handle problems with violence, talk of suicide, personality conflicts and behaviors that disrupt entry life.

"The edges, the extremes, are signs of trouble," campus psychotherapist Margaret Wood told us. "Is someone sleeping all the time? Or never? Is someone partying all the time? Or never? Be aware if someone is isolated, spending all their time on the computer."

As we covered these and other hard-to-swallow topics, I looked around me.

No one was daydreaming. No one was doodling. An air of seriousness and acceptance of responsibility filled the room.

Norma Lopez '95, who was assistant dean of the College at the time, shifted gears, wrapping up junior advisor training with the animation of a coach talking to players before the Super Bowl. She concluded by saying, "You must know the difference between a crisis and a normal crazy event. If it feels like a crisis, it is. Don't wait and assess for five minutes. Call immediately. Listen up. We are all so proud of you."

Walking out of Dodd, I thought about September 1967. Those "keys to Lehman West" no longer exist. In 2005, JAs open doors by swiping cards with magnetic strips—a fitting reminder of how complex life at Williams is today.

Julius Rosenwald '69 is a freelance writer in Pownal, Vt.
As Thompson Memorial Chapel enters its 100th year, we take a look at the students behind the tunes that ring out from its tower.

As Thompson Memorial Chapel enters its 100th year, its bells ring out for every occasion and outdoor, well beyond traditional ecclesiastical expectations. “Take Me Out to the Ball Game,” for instance, sounded just past midnight last Oct. 27, after the Red Sox took Game Four of the World Series. “The Mountains,” according to a 2000 CNN segment about Williams, seems to play on campus every day during break stretches in early April, “to remind [students] what’s out there behind the clouds.” And Chaplain in Rick Spalding fondly recalls hearing “Shalom Chaverim” one day as he walked across campus during the Jewish high holidays in the fall.

Thompson’s bells ring seven days a week (at 12:30 p.m., 4 p.m., and 7 p.m., except on Monday nights, when they toll 10 minutes early to avoid disturbing 7 o’clock classes). Yet many within each class forget, and some might not know, that the performers behind—well, technically, below—are William students, most of whom have no previous experience playing the carillon that rings them. “No one comes to campus knowing how to play,” says Spalding. Each fall, Spalding sends out a campus-wide e-mail message inviting inquiries from prospective carillon performers. And he always gets an eager response from a few daring musicians. The students train in September with Catherine Yamamoto (a Alumni Fund officer and mother of Christopher ’03) or with a veteran ringer.

“If you mess up, the whole campus can hear that you’ve just played a wrong note,” says senior Aaron Helfland of Northampton, Mass. “So the way to learn is simply to start with easier music and work your way up to the more complicated stuff.”

By October, the performers are ready and the bells are in play. Three times each day Helfland or one of his fellow “carillonneurs”—Lillian Chang ’03 of Great Neck, N.Y., Tiffany Chao ’06 of Beijing, China, Joe McDonough ’06 of Portsmouth, N.H., Peter Torisnik ’07 of Beaumont, Texas, and Hanjie Yu ’07 of Flushing, N.Y.—climb 46 steps to the tower chamber containing the 10-bell instrument and rings away for 10 to 15 minutes. It’s a big commitment, and a hor- some one, since each student soloist during his or her time slot. Pay would not be the motivating factor. “It’s $7.75 per hour,” says Helfland, “and I work three or four quarter-hour shifts a week. It’s hardly worth submitting the paperwork.”

So how do the bell-ringers sustain their commitment? Chang, a history major, says she was first drawn to the chimes as a high-schooler touring another college. “I heard about their carillonneurs playing the theme song from the kids’ TV show Sesame-Doo,” she says. “I’ve since played that along with other tunes people don’t expect from this traditional, majestic instrument.”

Torisnik, a biology and political science major and organist, plays because “I think giving short concerts to the campus, anonymously, is fun—and the instrument itself is pretty cool. It’s amazing to think that someone by Mission can hear what I’m playing in this little room in Thompson Chapel.”

QUASIMODO RECONSIDERED

That “little room” hides behind a narrow door at the top of the stairs just inside the church’s south (tower) entrance. One bowing February afternoon, Helfland unzips his key (each carillonneur keeps one), unlocks the door and climbs up to the carillon chamber, a drafty, bare-bones space that sports a couple of chairs and an old desk. On the desk rests an even older bakelite-covered miniature organ, where Helfland and other carillonneurs warm up and practice new songs. There’s also a set of notebooks containing music collected by generations of Williams ringers.

Helfland checks the clock on the chamber wall, awaiting his cue from across Route 2, where the Goodrich clock tower bell tolls 4 p.m. As its fourth chime fades, he turns to the carillon keyboard and raises both hands about six inches above the row of 10 “batons”—wooden levers, each two feet long, with foot pedals on the floor beneath him. He takes a deep breath and starts pounding away with the anxious force of a mill worker trying to keep up with a conveyer belt of widgets.

The “twinkling thrash” of the batons, sometimes threec per second, echoes through the stone enclosure in pure cacophony. High above, at the edge of hearing, the bell rings in response. “That’s the weirdest thing about playing this instrument,” says Torisnik. “I can’t hear what I’m playing while I’m playing...so we have to hope that it sounds good to the listeners outside.”

No one outside the chapel during Helfland’s performance would have a clue about the sweaty task inside. Indeed, the bells seem to play themselves. The hymn “Conquering Kings Their Titles Take” simply soaks across campus, tempering the winter chill and moving a few passersby to glance up as they hurry between buildings.

Ending his 10-minute set with “The Mountains,” Helfland wipes his brow and leads the way up three more very high, very narrow stairways—another 198 steps in all—to the top of the tower, a reproduction of St. Cuthbert’s tower in Wells, England. There hang the bells—10,762 pounds of bronze, cast by the Meneely Bell Company of Troy, N.Y., by Nachtrieb.
and installed when the chapel was completed in 1904. All but one of the bells are hinged to wooden beams and do not move in performance. Instead, each bell’s inner wall is struck by a hammer connected by a long cable to its corresponding keyboard hutan way below.

Then there’s what Spalding calls “The Great Bell,” the only one that swings when pulled by a thick rope hanging behind the carillon console in the chamber below. The Great Bell tolls in the morning to signal Mountain Day, at the Alumni Memorial Service during Reunion Weekend, on Commencement Day if it rains and during other extraordinary occasions (Sept. 11, 2001, for example).

Helfand, a studio art and art history major, plays carillon in the College’s Berkshire Symphony Orchestra and student chamber ensembles. He also took piano lessons for about five years, which helped, because the carillon is arranged like an oversized keyboard. “Even then,” he says, “there is a substantial adjustment to make, because the levers of the carillon are not arranged in the same pattern as the black and white keys of a piano.”

Williams’ carillon covers the eight notes of only one major octave, with two extra notes that allow the carillonneur to play in either of two major keys or one minor key. Real carillons (there are 200 in North America) have at least 23 bells, and each carillon music is written for instruments with a range of four or more octaves, meaning the Williams carillon isn’t quite worthy of the name. “Our little secret,” says Helfand, is that Williams’ instrument “is just a set of chimes [best for] simple tunes with strong melodies and conventional harmonies.”

PLUS CA CHANGE

Helfand’s generation shares much in common with past Williams bellringers. Guy Verney ’34, a retired Chenango vice president and father of Jeff ’77, remembers toasting wretched winter days with “Oh, What a Beautiful Morning.”

Verney played the carillon for four years as part of his financial aid contract. “There were only two campus carillonneurs then, both from my frat, Theta Theta Pi,” he recalls.

Beta had a lot of scholarship students and the pick of student jobs, which were passed down from one brother to the next. “I fell into the carillon business the second semester of my freshman year, when one of the two Beta seniors on ‘carillon duty’ got married over spring vacation,” Verney says. “Since he didn’t want to do it anymore, and since I played piano, I got the job.”

In Verney’s era, the carillon rang at 7:55 a.m., as a “warning” for 8 a.m. classes (which took place on Saturdays as well) and again five minutes before the noon chapel service. As the newcomer, Verney got early morning duty and had to rush from the chapel tower to get to his first class on time. He’d also play for 15 minutes before the required 7 p.m. chapel service on Sundays.

Between his carillon paychecks and advertising revenues from his job as publisher of the College’s handbook, Verney turned a profit at least one of his undergraduate years. But the money wasn’t everything. When the weather was fine, he says, “I used to go to the very top of the chapel and enjoy the best view in town.”

All carillonneurs have their favorite stories. Chang remembers the day she played a couple of John Denver tunes at 4 p.m. “As I exited Thompson, I saw two of my friends coming from Griffith with these angry looks on their faces. ‘Was that you playing John Denver?’ Chang denied it, which may have been for the best. ‘Apparently their poli-sci test ran overtime, and I had disrupted the entire class,’” she says.

And Helfand confesses to performing last fall’s midnight rendition of “Take Me Out to the Ball Game.”

Lighting is important in carillon music. It’s a good idea to have one’s ears trained to the sound of a carillon. It’s an art form that has been around for centuries, from medieval times when carillons were used as city clocks to modern times when they are used in religious services. The carillon is an excellent instrument for accompanying any type of music, from classical to contemporary.

On a daily basis, though, carillon music is so much a part of the campus atmosphere that many faculty members and students may not really hear the bells. That’s fine with Helfand, who says, “People may not pay attention at the time, but they do remember.”

Or, as Toczisko puts it, “The carillon is one of those things that becomes part of the campus unconscious—people may not always notice it, but I think it’d be missed if it disappeared.”

Rob White is director of communications for Williams’ Department of Alumni Relations and Development.

A working celebration of Thompson Memorial Chapel’s first 100 years officially commences during Reunion Weekend in June. Visitors will appreciate the $500,000 restoration of the chapel’s chancel, marble floor and stained glass windows. More about the restoration and centennial can be found at www.williams.edu/thaplan.
IN THE KITCHEN

From a cooking course for British brides to owner and executive chef of an award-winning New England inn, Peter Platt ’80 followed an unusual trajectory for a career in the culinary arts.

By Darra Goldstein
Photos by Scott Barrow
A
ter being turned away from sev-
eral oversubscribed Winter Study
courses as a first-year student,
Peter Platt ’80 decided to design
his own. He had heard a National
Public Radio report about a cook-
ing school in London, where his
aunt lived, and was intrigued by the idea
of studying there sophomore year. So,
that January, he was off to England for a
basic cooking class at Le Cordon Bleu.

As it turned out, the course was
designed to teach British brides how to
cook and entertain. But Platt, who is now
the owner and executive chef at The Old
Inn on the Green in New Marlborough,
Mass., was undeterred. He cooked five
days per week for four weeks and turned
in a journal recounting his adventures.

Jim Hodgkins, who sponsored Platt’s
project as Williams’ assistant director
dining services, remembers him as
a student with whom he could discuss
cooking as art and as alchemy. When
Platt was invited back to campus in 2001
to prepare a special Valentine’s Day
dinner at the Faculty House, Hodgkins,
who retired later that year, was very
impressed with his evolution as a chef.

“One thing that struck me about him
[w]as his humanity,” Hodgkins says
today. “He is a person who makes time
for others, not a prima donna like many
chefs. Peter worked with our staff; he
taught them and helped them. And the
food was exquisite. ... He worked hard at
schooling himself.”

After returning from London, Platt got
catching back up in schoolwork. After all,
he had a family reputation to uphold as the
latest in a long line of Williams alumni
that began with his great-grandfather,
Henry Russell Platt, Class of 1887. His
grandfather Henry Russell Platt Jr.
graduated in 1919; next came his father, H.
Russell Platt III ’48. And then there were
cousins and a great uncle, Sherwood J.
(Que) Platt ’25, who, like Peter, majored
in history.

Still, Platt found himself gravitating
 toward the kitchen, looking for ways to
indulge his passion for food. One year he
cooked an entire Thanksgiving dinner,
complete with oyster stuffing, for his
friends in Fitch House. And he periodic-
cally traveled over Florida Mountain to
make dinner for his former teachers at
Deerfield Academy.

Scott Lankford ’80 recalls that Platt’s
parents would take the boys out for
“gorgeous feasts” at The Mill on the
Floss in New Ashford, Mass. “Here was
the civilized Platt family taking me, an
uncivilized Colorado guy, out for some of
the best meals and conversation I’ve ever
had,” Lankford says. The two roommates
would then work off the feasts on long-
distance runs on the back-country roads
around Williamstown.

By his senior year, Platt longed to
be back in the kitchen, and once again
Winter Study came to his rescue. He
contacted the chef at Boston’s venerable
Parker House and asked to volunteer in the kitchen. Although the proposal ran counter to union rules, the chef agreed, and Platt spent four weeks helping with banquet preparations. His work was so good that, after graduation, he was offered an entry-level job in the Parker House café, where he remained for a year until being promoted to the restaurant. There he trained under Jasper White and Lydia Shire, who would become two of Boston’s first celebrity chefs. Platt benefited especially from their insistence on using local and seasonal foods, still a new concept in the early 1980s. Platt also met his future wife, Meredith Kennard, who worked at Parker House as a waitress.

Platt remained at Parker House until 1985, when he was offered a job as sous-chef at Wheatleigh in Lenox, Mass. Even though the hotel was not yet equipped with a professional kitchen—there was no ventilation hood, no stainless-steel work surfaces, and the heat lamp for prepared foods was a jury-rigged light bulb inside a #10 can—he jumped at the opportunity to return to the Berkshires. By the time he became executive chef in 1989, his labors had brought Wheatleigh renown. A New York Times critic pronounced Platt’s food “brilliant.” When an opportunity arose for him to have more autonomy in the kitchen, he moved to The Old Inn on the Green in 2002.

Compared to most prominent American chefs, Platt is an anomaly. Except for his four weeks with the British brides, he never went to culinary school. Instead he had hands-on training in the kitchen, not unlike the French system of stage, or apprenticeship. He also had the benefit of a Williams education, which not only jump-started his career through Winter Study opportunities but also encouraged him to think hard about the food he prepares.

Platt insists that his philosophy is simple: He wants diners to feel satisfied in a basic, personal way. He isn’t into tricks or fancy presentations. Appearance is important, of course, because it sends visual cues that stimulate the appetite. But if the food tastes delicious, that’s really all that counts.

Platt does not cook to impress, but to please. He wants his restaurant to be a place where, each evening, a new community of diners comes together. His favorite meals are those cooked for customers celebrating special occasions with family and friends. Platt extends his community-centered approach to the local farmers and purveyors who stock his kitchen,
and his focus on sustainability places him at the forefront of American chefs. His duck and Rhode Island Red chickens come from Stone Church Farm in Ripton, N.Y.; his foie gras—considered among the best in the country—from La Belle Farm in the Hudson Valley.

The decision to buy locally is especially important in Berkshire County, which has seen a steady loss of dairy and other farms. As director of Berkshire Grown, Platt works to connect local farmers with restaurants and celebrate the bounty of the Berkshires.

And celebrate it he does. Platt’s style of cooking is best described as new American cuisine combined with classical French technique. His inventive interpretation of New England cuisine—parsnips and rutabaga never tasted so good!—should prove even more exciting this summer. His wife, Meredith, recently left her job as head gardener at Hancock Shaker Village to become the Old Inn’s innkeeper, and she has ambitious plans for the herb and edible flower gardens. The Platts also plan to lease acreage to a local farmer who will supply the restaurant with organic produce.

For the past four years, The Old Inn on the Green has received Zagat’s top food ranking in the Berkshires. Such accolades please Platt, of course, but even more meaningful is his role forging deeper connections between people and their food along a continuum that begins with the land. To think that it all began with a Winter Study course at Williams.

Darra Goldstein is professor of Russian at Williams, author of several cookbooks and editor-in-chief of the award-winning magazine Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture.

A Seasoned Chef

Peter Platt changes his menu four times a year to reflect the seasons and the current harvest. On a glorious summer evening you can dine out on the terrace, enjoying local wild green with white asparagus and a black truffle vinaigrette, grilled loin of line-caught bluefin tuna and a summer sorbet made with elderflowers and champagne.

To my mind winter is even better, when you can dine by natural candle- and firelight in the romantic setting of the 1760 inn. The dining room’s cozy appeal is enhanced by the winter menu’s comfort foods: pan-roasted chicken breast, French lentil soup, steak au poivre. Creamy quail eggs and tiny potatoes provide the perfect counterpoint to zesty slices of pepper- and tapenade-encrusted tuna in Platt’s interpretation of salade nicoise.

Although Platt tends to serve the same basic foods throughout the year, they appear in different iterations. In summer, he dresses chicken breast in a light Asian fashion with sesame and miso vinaigrette, its autumn dressing, a chanterelle mushroom sauce, tastes deeper and earthier.

Platt always likes to add a few surprises to the menu to keep both his cooks and his diners happy. I was thrilled to find gooseneck barnacles from British Columbia paired with Maine lobster and diver scallops, and wild Texas antelope offers an exciting change from the more common venison. This combination of continuity and innovation means that diners can find both comfort and adventure at The Old Inn on the Green.

— Darra Goldstein

Summer 2005 | Williams Alumni Review | 27
n colleges, students educate students. Some do it better than others. So we see “peer effects” not only in their clothes, vocabulary and mating rituals but also in academic performance and learning. A student will do better academically—learn more, learn to think more carefully, perform better—if he or she is associated with strong fellow students instead of weak ones.

It’s long been suspected that this is the case, and important educational policies appear to be based on that suspicion. But now there’s emerging statistical evidence that indeed a college student’s academic performance is affected by the qualities of his or her peers.

These peer effects may help in the classroom—a professor can cover more material in greater depth in front of sharp and attentive students than with dull and distracted ones, to everyone’s advantage. But peer effects seem to be more pervasive and subtle than that. Having to defend a late-night dorm room argument with a demanding fellow student is simply more educational than being able to get by with a sloppy argument, even if the argument is about what went wrong on a date last night or whether God exists. In a residential college with demanding fellow students, education goes on all the time, which is one reason for residential colleges.

Hard evidence on the existence of peer effects has not been easy to get, mainly because of friendships. Are peers’ behaviors similar—say, they like studying history or drinking beer—because they’ve influenced each other or because they sought each other out as kindred spirits? The first is evidence of peer effects; the second isn’t.

To avoid that kind of “selection bias,” we at the Williams Project on the Economics of Higher Education researched peer effects at Williams and four other colleges among randomly assigned roommates (in a study led by Dave Zimmerman, the Orrin Sage Professor of Political Economy) and among partners in psychology-lab experiments (in a study led by Al Goethals, the Dennis Meehan ’54 Third Century Professor of Leadership). Roommate studies also were conducted at Dartmouth, Berea
College and University of Maryland. Based on this research, peer effects are often significant, even for the highly limited question of what influence one student’s SAT scores are likely to have on another’s grades. So we’re persuaded that peer effects exist and, on the broader canvas of a college education, can be highly influential.

As part of an economic production process, though, educational peer effects are really strange. They mean that a firm’s (school’s) customers (students) not only buy the product (educational services) but also supply the firm with an important input to its production (peer quality).

It’s as if the quality of the Taurus you bought from your local Ford dealer depended on the quality of the other people buying cars there. If they were good drivers, your Taurus would ride better, corner more precisely and get better gas mileage. And if your fellow customers were very, very good drivers, your Taurus would become a BMW. We’re only beginning to understand the economic implications of a production technology like that. But we are beginning, and they look a lot like higher education. So let me describe the most important of them.

Schools care very much about who their students are, about whom they sell their product to. It’s not true, as it is for Ford dealers and most familiar businesses, that they’re indifferent to who buys the product, because admitting better students will—other things equal—produce a better education for everyone. Indeed, most of the increasingly fierce economic competition among colleges over the past decade has been a competition to get better customers, not just more customers, because, through peer effects, the quality of a school’s education will be improved just as it would be by getting more and better faculty or facilities or lab equipment or the like.

So selective schools are selective in order to produce a better education. There are socially valuable benefits of that selectivity—the improvement of education—that may offset the oft-cited social costs of its stratification. Whatever the net social value, it’s important to understand what’s motivating schools to be selective, if they can be. In place of the dubious incentives that are often suggested, like exclusivity (a “Rodeo Drive” effect) or striving for prestige for its own sake, it appears that schools are often being exclusive in order to have fewer weak students, in order to produce better education—a much more substantial motive.

But if schools are being selective in admissions in recognition of the role that student peer quality plays in producing educational quality, a role like that of good faculty and facilities and lab equipment, it would seem to make sense for them to pay good students a wage or salary like they pay for good faculty and facilities and lab equipment.

So why don’t schools pay students a salary or price for their peer quality? The answer is, they do. And hugely.

Those students whom colleges think will bring the greatest amount of peer quality can currently earn $50,000 a year and more, and there’s an increasingly hot bidding war for them as more and more colleges enter the competition for scarce top-student peer talent.

The hitch is that this wage payment is hidden from view. It takes the form of a subsidy, selling the student educational services that are very expensive to produce (about $80,000 a year at Williams) for a very modest price (the $27,500 average net price at Williams). The average student at a wealthy school like Williams is getting $52,500 a year in subsidy—an implicit wage or salary. Even the wealthy student who’s paying the full sticker price of $38,100 is getting a $41,900 salary as a full-time undergraduate.

Williams’ numbers are typical of the wealthy, high-paying private colleges and universities in the U.S. Those are the salaries being paid for the best student peer quality in higher education.

But the student subsidy (peer salary) being paid by the average U.S. school is in the neighborhood of $10,000. An education that cost $15,000 to produce in 1995-96 (in today’s dollars) was sold for an average net price of $5,000. A study of 2,700 schools using National Center for Education Statistics data shows huge differences in student subsidies or peer wages among schools.

Since peer wages are paid to all the students at a school, those schools that pay high wages attract long queues of applicants who’d like to sell their peer quality for that much money. Most applicants are turned away from high-wage schools because they don’t bring the greatest promise of peer quality. What’s more, schools don’t expand to be able to take more students, like a sensible business would, simply because they control their peer quality by limiting enrollments.

What are the implications? First, there’s a hierarchy of schools in the U.S. based on their ability to pay high peer-quality wages for students, and there are very few students in the rarefied atmosphere of the wealthiest private schools with their huge...
yearly salaries. Most schools pay their students far more modestly, with more modest results, and many schools’ admission motives edge over from student quality to student numbers, where quality is relatively less important. At the extreme, open admission abandons peer quality for enrollments.

Second, this has been, and may still be, the main form that competition among schools for student quality takes in U.S. higher education. Colleges compete through the student-subsidy wage they offer all their students as they sell that expensive education at a modest price. Schools with the highest student subsidies are paying the highest peer salaries and therefore have the most choice in students. The “best” students in terms of peer effects are concentrated at the schools that pay the highest peer wages.

But increasingly there’s a new strategy at work. Some schools are offering higher individual peer wages to a particular student who promises above-average peer quality—and therefore will increase the a that give a higher general wage to their students but that won’t match the bid for an individual. This price competition threatens to change U.S. higher education in very basic ways.

Most important is that the genie is out of the bottle and probably won’t go back in. So the raw power of this classic “price competition” is increasingly likely to dominate higher education as aggressive schools’ price discounts to improve their own student quality are matched or exceeded by the once-passive schools whose peer quality has thereby been reduced. Retaliation. And retaliation breeds retaliation (a fact basic to competition, even as described in Econ 101, that’s ignored in most of the competitive pricing strategies that are expected to improve a school’s student peer quality).

So there’s a sea change going on in the way colleges compete for student quality. The old style, dominated by the rich schools who won at the game, pitted their general student subsidies (wages) against each other, creating a well-known hierarchy of “the best” (highest wage) schools, which “the best” (highest peer quality) students attended. Schools on down the hierarchy accepted their position and, with it, their average student quality. The new style, epitomized by “student enrollment managers” and dominated by the aggressive schools that win at this game, target individual peer quality with individual scholarship—salaries that are higher than the student can get at a wealthier school, salaries that induce him or her to “trade down.”

Old style competition was stable (indeed, rigid); the new style is fluid, and none of us really knows where it’s going to wind up. There’s a growing consensus, though, that schools’ (limited) ability to cut prices is increasingly being used to bid for peer quality of wealthy students at the expense of more costly poor students of equal quality who have to be given additional need-based price discounts (financial aid). So this market dynamic appears, like so much in U.S. higher education these days, to be working against the highly qualified low-income student as schools are choosing to improve (or protect) their peer quality at the expense of their older, idealistic dedication to equality of opportunity for low-income students.

Finally, if this all sounds like a real stretch—the imaginative extrapolation of a whole set of redefinitions in admission and financial aid, all based on evidence of academic peer effects—consider that the nation’s leading graduate schools have been doing all this for a very long time and in exaggerated form.

In first-rate PhD programs, the quality of the education depends heavily on
the quality of fellow students, since no good program can survive with weak peer effects. Graduate schools pay a peer wage that's typically larger even than the tuition they charge. Strong students get a "stipend" in addition to a tuition waiver, along with a costly education. If it costs $70,000 to educate the PhD candidate and his or her stipend is, say, $20,000 a year (not unusual in economics), the student's peer wage is a cool $90,000 per year—$60,000 of it visible as the $20,000 stipend plus a $40,000 tuition waiver, and $30,000 of it invisible as student subsidies. And those nice peer wages are migrating from programs like economics PhDs, where they've been paid for at least 50 years, to new ones like graduate religion and, most recently, law and business schools.

Recognizing the role of peer effects is starting to change our understanding of higher education and how it's produced. Some nagging economic questions are answered: Why don't schools expand to meet excess demand? Why do they often engage in aggressive price discounting even when they can fill their classrooms and dorms? Why do the most expensive colleges have the longest queues of students trying to get in? None of this makes any sense in a normal, familiar business firm, but all of it, and more, protects the unique role of peer effects in producing high-quality education.

What remains to be seen is whether most colleges, in the rush to compete for those students who offer the greatest peer quality, will freeze out the growing numbers who have far greater financial needs. Only a few schools have the resources to both maintain high student quality and protect access for those high quality students from families with low incomes. Fortunately, Williams is one of them.

Gordon C. Winston is the Orrin Sage Professor of Economics, emeritus, and director of the Williams Project on the Economics of Higher Education. A version of this article appeared in the Nov 28, 2003, Chronicle of Higher Education.

Bridging the Gap

The Williams Project on the Economics of Higher Education has captured the attention of scholars as well as policy and institutional decision-makers across the country, making the northwestern corner of Massachusetts a hotbed for rigorous study of the issues facing colleges and universities.

With some $3.5 million in foundation support, largely from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Williams faculty associated with the project over the past 16 years have studied a host of issues, including whether business models can be applied to higher education, how students influence each other's academic performance and the ramifications of recruiting high-ability, low-income students to colleges like Williams.

Faculty members' work has been published in several books, magazines and academic journals, presented at professional conferences and before Congress, and catalogued in nearly 70 working papers available online. Authors include economics professors Ralph Bradburd, Henry Brunt, Cappy Hill '76 (the College's provost), Mike McPherson (who is now president of the Spencer Foundation), President Morty Schapiro, Gordon Winston and David Zimmerman as well as psychology professor Al Gorthals.

"A significant number of the more prominent researchers in this field have come from Williams," says Sandy Baum, professor of economics at Skidmore College and a senior policy analyst with The College Board. "So Williams has been instrumental in developing a constructive dialogue about the issues facing higher education today."

The involvement of undergraduates distinguishes the project from other think tanks. A dozen students spanning the classes of 1990 to 2002 have written senior theses using databases maintained at the project's headquarters in Mears West. Nearly 40 have served as research assistants, and each year a recent graduate serves as a full-time research coordinator.

The original plan for the project was "to apply economic tools to the study of the higher education industry in a way that would be of practical interest to educators and policy makers," says President Schapiro. "None of us dared to dream that the project would be alive and well more than 15 years later."

Adds Baum, "Williams has been very effective at bridging the gap between relevant scholarly research and higher education policy."

Visit the project on the web at www.williams.edu/wpehe.
My mother moved to Williamstown last summer. This news would be unremarkable but for a few bothersome facts. 1) For most of her 30 years in the United States, she has lived on suburban Long Island, part of the large, bustling Korean-American community in the New York metropolitan area. 2) As a result, she never became fully fluent in English. 3) She does not know a soul in the entire Berkshires. So the Purple Valley, for all its many virtues, is not the first place I’d imagine my mother would end up.

Circumstances changed dramatically, however, when my father died unexpectedly in an accident indirectly caused by a debilitating neurological disease he had been diagnosed with several years before. It became clear that my mother should sell their house and get a smaller place. But when she brought up the idea of living in Williamstown, I immediately dismissed it as preposterous. Imagine: She’s snowbound in a small house on a country road, without an Asian grocery store or Korean church in sight. I feared that my mother wasn’t thinking clearly, still in the grips of shock and grief.

To her credit, she did make a good-faith effort to house hunt in and around New York. But given the tight market, the prospects were discouraging. Then she brought up Williamstown again. Thinking of the place made her happy, she said; she couldn’t get the idea of living there out of her mind. “Let’s think about it,” I stalled.

My mother, however, charged ahead. She drove up with her cousin, just to see how it would feel to actually be there. She saw a listing for a one-bedroom condo in a large Victorian near campus and asked me to inquire about it. “If it’s at least 1,000 square feet, I want to take a look at it,” she said. I replied, in my know-it-all tone, “Oh please, Mom, there’s no way a one-bedroom is going to be that big!” But she insisted, and I called and found out it was 1,100 square feet! She went, she saw, she made a deposit on the spot.

Naturally, friends and family had their doubts. Why on earth would she want to go so far? Where’s Williamstown? Even after the papers were signed and movers were hired, I worried. Is she making a big mistake? Should I have tried harder to discourage her? Then again, maybe my mother didn’t need or want the same things as everybody else. She was sure this was right for her, and I wanted to be supportive.

Years ago my mother told me how she’d been torn between marrying my father and running away to Europe to pursue her art. As it turned out, in choosing the former, she hadn’t had to entirely give up the latter. With my father’s support, she continued to paint on and off over the years, exhibiting occasionally in New York and Korea. Over time, running a small business and raising two children in an adopted country soaked up most of her time, energy and resources. And after my father fell ill, the art was abandoned.

Now, in her early 60s, my mother was at another crossroads: She could stick with the distractions and comforts of the familiar or experiment with the life that remained to her. “Won’t you be lonely?” I asked. “Oh no,” she said, “it’s much more lonely to be with people who don’t really know me than to be alone with my thoughts.” She wanted to paint full time, she wanted her cabin in the woods, her creative retreat. Still, why Williamstown? Why not an artsy countryside. The three-hour drive must have seemed a part—perhaps the most rewarding or the most hopeful—of a much longer journey. That their children belonged to such a place, nurtured by books and trees, seemed a tangible measure of how far they’d come.

Leaving her old life was not an effort to erase or forget. At the threshold of her future, a stone’s throw from the site of the new student center, my mother’s new place pulses with memories.

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