The Harvard Houses: A Model For Rice

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Originated in 1938, the Harvard house system is both older and more firmly established than Rice's college system. Because the Harvard experiment has hinged on some of the problems which our own house face, and because the houses are now wrestling with problems which the Rice college would be fortunate to be "plagued," a brief study of the Harvard system can serve as a guideline for design and implementation.

To those who bemoan any comparison with our Great Neighbor to the North, it should be said that the Harvard houses were, along with the colleges at Oxford, Cambridge and Yale, the models on which Rice based its system.

Membership And Personalities

Eight residential houses and a non-residential house for "commuter" students, Dudley, comprise the Harvard plan. Each house has had a consistent membership of officers, faculty, and seniors. Freshmen who live at Harvard live in freshman dormitories; during the spring they visit houses in which they are interested and make applications for membership.

Selection is "two-way": insofar as possible, first choices of masters and of freshmen are matched. The masters have established a system of checks which prevents an overconcentration in any one house of "A" students, graduates of select private prep schools, students in a certain field, or students from a certain part of the country.

The selection system is considered beneficial in requiring each freshman to choose the sort of life he wants to lead for the rest of his college career. The houses have developed certain stereotypes of students, and those are quite aware that the internal diversity of each house belies this pat description.

For this reason, and because students are encouraged to adopt along with one or two prospective roommates who will be assigned to the same house, assignment to a house designated as second or third choice is rarely traumatic.

Nevertheless, each house has developed, to some degree, a distinct personality. Thus Adams House is known as "nonconformist and bohemian"; Eliot, as "aristocratic"; Lowell, as "academically highbrow".


House activities differ accordingly. Adams and Dunster promote dramatic productions; Kirkland and Leverett have writing and art contests. Some of these activities are subsidized by Ford Foundation grants.

Is the selective system a success? Most believe so.

Jencks and Riesman applaud the strength of the various House "cultures" and point out that there is little danger of homogenization of the internal diversity within the houses that results from limiting self-selection along a few obvious boundaries means that students of whatever sort have a continuing chance for self-discovery." And a 1959 Harvard Student Council report unanimously lauds the selective system and disapproves of Yale's I.B.M. system for "the sake of distribution.

This report also approves the real, yet intangible, house personalities and comments that each Master, because of his power (about the same as at Rice) and his permanent connection with the house, ultimately determines its personality and its success or failure.

Physical Facilities

Physical facilities of the Harvard houses are, to say the least, impressive. Besides the sumptuous living quarters—which have a cost per student about seven times the American college average—and the house library, each house has a ten to fifteen thousand volume library, music rooms (for listening and for practicing), a record library, ample ping-pong and pool equipment, and TV.

All but one have private seminar rooms; all but two have ample quarters for reading and study for guests and special occasions. Most have photography darkrooms, art shops, and three or four pianos. Some have squash courts and newspaper rooms, and Adams has a swimming pool.

Each house dining hall serves excellent food for about five hours every day (compared with Rice's two to three hours), living quarters vary in price: suites are built for one, two, or three occupants. The "singles" are usually reserved for seniors writing honors theses. Living accommodations approach a "semi-private" arrangement. Obviously, such facilities are out of the immediate reach of other universities. But the point is clear: Harvard has been unwill to let inadequate physical facilities cramp its growing house system.

Organization And Activities

The academic segment of the student's college experience is found in the classroom and departmental studies, and the house is expected to act as a center of leisure—that is, as the focus of the student's social, athletic, and intellectual activities.

Social and athletic programs in the houses are generally successful and generally similar to those at Rice.

But the house's concern with the student's intellectual life is markedly different from the situation here.

Through both formal and informal house activities, the student is encouraged to develop his private intellectual interests and to relate them to his academic experience in the university at large.

House organization reflect this concern. Each has a Master, a Senior Tutor, and sometimes an Assistant Senior Tutor, who handle the administrative responsibilities.

Its faculty staff includes two or three Fellows of the House and about fifteen Associates. These men are professors from various fields and play a role comparable to the Rice Nonresident Associates.

In addition, each house has from ten to fifteen resident tutors and from fifteen to twenty non-resident tutors—qualifed graduate students and junior instructors. The tutors are the major source of faculty-student contact and are largely responsible for the intellectual content of the house atmosphere.

Tutorials play a very important role in the humanities students' education. During the sophomore and junior years, each student meets regularly with a tutor in the house for work in a certain field.

Tutoring during these years is usually ungraded, but it is considered a vital part of the undergraduate's schedule (Harvard students have an average four-course load). Some tutorials are more often a result of a professor in the student's major department who is not necessarily associated with the house.

Other experiments, such as holding discussion groups for a large lecture course in the house, have met with limited success. Some of the houses provide easier access to tutors and visiting senior faculty than hasty after-class discussions or departmental office hours.

This emphasis on academic work in the house and the general presence of the resident tutors is a truly "intellectual" atmosphere, although Jencks and Riesman maintain that the student's meal-time conversational habits are the real basis of this development. But the tutors are not unimportant in the mealtime discussions.

Most of the Harvard houses are leisurely and informal (though not in dress; coats and ties must be worn)—and, therefore, cafeteria-style. As Jencks and Riesman point out, this arrangement makes it possible for casual yet intensely vital discussion to spring up.

Such spontaneity is necessary, they maintain, because the Harvard student culture frowns on smobhy and calculation and would not permit planned discussion-table arrangements.

House governments (called "House Committees") are held in general, in which interested students—members and non-members—discuss and propose "public" acclaim. Emphasis is on spontaneously-organized activities and groups, separate from House Committee sponsorship—such as informal literary discussion groups and musical organizations.

Conclusions

If the goal of a house or college system is to provide a civilized and intellectually-oriented base for the student's college experience and to help him organize his cultural, social, and athletic activities, the Harvard system is undoubtedly a success. In contrast, the Rice colleges have thus far been largely limited to the latter. The athletic, social and cultural aspects of Rice have emphasized far more heavily increased faculty-student contact. If the Rice colleges are to develop as intellectual centers, some provision must be made for a tutorial system or some similar University-wide program. And certainly, our demand more—best, every more, resident staff members and qualified graduate students.

Third—perhaps most important and yet most difficult—student attitude toward the colleges must change. At Harvard the houses mean more than sleep, food, and weekend parties. Such a change in the attitude of the Rice students' attitude can be encouraged by administration and faculty action, but it can take place only if he wishes it.

Generally, then, the difference in the two systems lies in the depth of commitment of each University—administration, faculty and students alike—to the houses or colleges as an integral part of the educational experience. And the Harvard experience stand as proof that such a commitment can be rewarded.