

## ***THE RESIDENTIAL COLLEGE AND ITS RESIDENTIAL CULTURE***

Daniel F. Chambliss

Christopher G. Takacs

For the upper-middle class young people in contemporary America, few living situations will match those in which students find themselves at a liberal arts college. Crowded together in dormitories, working, learning, eating, and relaxing, with hundreds of people their own age in a small, contained, and total institution, new students quickly realize that most of their life at college is distinctly different from life before college. Residential colleges essentially require, through planned dormitory living, a total geographical reconstruction of their students' world. Aside from some boarding school graduates – and for many of them, liberated at last from *in loco parentis* supervision – students are dramatically affected by the residential, close, and total nature of the college. Social lives especially are remade; more precisely, the residential college makes nearly *all* parts of the students' lives social. Not only are students' individual social lives shaped by the school; all the facets of life – relationships, hobbies, interests, likes and dislikes, studies, habits, recreational activities, extracurricular activities, and even consumption habits – quickly become enmeshed in the residential and social world of the college.

This complete lifestyle integration is the foundational feature of the residential liberal arts college; it is what makes the experience so intense, so memorable. Devoting four years to any institution requires a serious commitment, but if almost all of those years are spent physically and socially *in* an institution that integrates all parts of the student's life and behavior,

commitment and involvement is profoundly deepened. Imagine an adult not merely working in an office, but eating all meals there, finding friends and lovers – even sleeping there seven nights a week. People and relationships are the heart and soul of a liberal arts college, and the residential nature of the school creates and shapes those relationships and the culture that sustains them.

### ***Meeting People, Making Friends: The First Year***

For most matriculating students, dorms are where one meets people. Fall sports athletes do have team practices, and some friends are made in classes, but for most students the dorm is one of the best settings for making friends, a fact implicitly recognized by the planning that goes into freshman housing.

Freshmen are especially affected by residential arrangements, since 1) they have no choice of room or roommates, 2) they often must live with multiple roommates, and 3) they are new both to this dormitory and to independent living generally. Indeed, one reason for requiring that freshmen have roommates is to encourage interaction and development of relationships. They are also often deliberately assigned to certain dorms in large blocs, sometimes without upperclass dormmates, in order to further promote intra-class networking.

For most freshmen, their dorm, in fact, was the main way they initially met other students and friends at college. George's freshman year roommates became some of his closest friends later on in college:

I: How did you meet your friends at Hamilton?

S: It was my dorm . . . I lived in South. It's an awesome social dorm, and I lived in a quad. I ended up, the three other guys in my quad are, they're my best friends here now. We [now] live all over campus. We're all spread out and stuff. We have other friends, but I still hang out with those guys probably every weekend. [George 03-04]

And Sarah:

I don't have a lot of friends in my classes. Well, in my Econ class, there's only two other girls besides me, and one of them lives next door to me so I already knew her are going into it, which is actually nice... As far as making friends, my roommates and I for the first couple weeks just kind of stuck together. We have sort of a group of friends that we're all connected in some. [Sarah 01-02]

Murphy reflects on how the informal and everyday interactions between groups of freshman students in his dorm can occur anywhere:

[They have] talks in the bathroom, and they're so weird. They're always together, and I just feel like you get, like the dorm can be really cool. You get to know people, and you just meet people in weird ways in the dorm because you're living together. You'll meet people in the laundry room, and you'll see people walking

down the hall all the time, and eventually you just start talking to people.

[Murphy 02-03]

Murphy's description of this group as "weird" expresses the novelty of dorm life. For many students, socialization in a bathroom is perfectly acceptable, either from convenience (people are in there) or necessity (it's the biggest space around). Again, many students have no idea about the kind of student cultures that exist in other dorms, halls, or rooms, because different living situations produce different cultural effects: while lounges in some dorms are used around the clock for socializing and working, lounges in others may lay completely unused for days at a time.

Another efficient way to meet new people is through friends already made. Asked how she made friends her first year, Laura said:

Well, a lot of them were in my hallway last year, and my other best friend here lived down the hall. There were those two, and the others I probably met there, and the people on the crew team, I met some there; and through associations through friends who just lived down my hall who had other friends. [Laura 02-03]

Again, Sarah: "We'll sit at the table with someone who lives next door who will have three friends with her, then we'll all meet each other". [Sarah 01-02] Mark saw the kind of social cascade that occurs when you meet your friends' friends:

North and Kirkland [dorms] are great for your first year because you're going to be in a quad, so you automatically have three people that you're interacting with a lot. And you have all of *their* friends, as well as all of *your* friends. So you get that immediate immersion in the culture. [Mark Twain 03-04]

Essentially, the more people one meets, the more people one *can* meet.

But while this strategy works well during the first semester, it usually stalls later on. The inevitable formation of stable dorm or roommate groups, prep school cliques, informal dining groups, and extracurricular or academic groups, can slow or even halt the cascade effect of meeting people. Early commitment to one group thus effectively blocks the making of other new friends. A student who arrives on campus early for crew training, makes friends within the crew team, and consequently spends their first month eating, socializing, and spending time exclusively with the crew team, has severely limited the variety of people and groups he or she can have exposure to, in a time when such exposure to new people is most important. The need for friends is then satisfied, but one may also be prematurely locked into one social group.

### ***Seeking Privacy, Finding Personal Space***

Within a few weeks of arriving at college, students have picked their beds, desks, and dressers, laying claim to areas of the room. Some work hard to carve out their own corners and separate them from their roommates' space – not necessarily an aggressive or defensive act, but

simply to find some bit of personal space. Recall Frank's description of his roommate's behavior:

He had his own little corner in the room. Like the room was a rectangle, and one of the corners had a closet in it. So there was a little 5x5 spot between the closet and the other wall, and he put his desk in there and just kind of did work all the time. [Frank 01-02]

While most students have an unspoken arrangement with their roommates, a division of personal spaces, they also often designate common areas to share with each other and visitors. Bathrooms, couch-and-TV groupings, and kitchens are often such common areas. Dan describes a very open and social, but seemingly comfortable freshman living situation:

There are always people walking around the halls. If we don't have our door closed and locked, then there are just always just people coming in and out of the room. And Dunham's also fairly central, so when people from Bundy come up the hill and they have an hour to kill, they end up hanging out in our room. Or you know, if the people from the Dark Side [another part of campus] need to hang out for a little while, they just come into our room or any of the rooms in the hall, and then always just stop by and visit.

But I mean, I love it. It's given me an opportunity to meet even more great people. We live with a bunch of freshmen; there's a quad of freshman girls that

live next to us; a quad of freshman guys that live across the hall; there's a senior girl who lives across the hall from us; two girls in my class live kind of across like diagonally from us. So it's given us an opportunity to meet some more great people. [Dan 02-03]

Dan describes the “open-door” attitude that he and his roommates have—friends come and go as they please and the room is always open. By leaving a door ajar, residents announce that coming is not just okay, it's encouraged. Freshmen display this behavior frequently, and understandably – remember, dorms are the primary way most students initially meet others, and an open door can be the first step to meeting the people in a hallway. For most it is worth the loss of privacy.

When room activities become too loud or distracting, students who want to work or be alone find places on campus to take over for themselves. Some go no further than the dorm's common room or lounge; others go to great lengths to find completely isolated areas. When the “open-door” dorm room gets too noisy, Dan finds other places:

I: Where do you find you go to avoid distraction?

S: A lot of people will go to Café Opus and like that, but basically the second floor of CJ is generally dead, and there's no one in there past about 8:00. Or random places in Root Hall, or the third floor of the Chapel, just kind of random places. If I go to the Library, I'm going to get distracted also just from people who are walking around – even if I don't know them. You know, they're just kind of sitting there and staring off into space, so if I go somewhere, and

generally it's in a hallway so there aren't any windows to kind of get distracted from. So you're kind of by yourself, and you do a lot of work. [Dan 02-03]

While students like Dan can only work in complete solitude, others have no problem writing a paper with a party going on in the next dorm:

I didn't mind working in a place that was going to be loud. And I like the fact that people are more social, so you can meet more people... And I definitely knew I was going to the Library at night, but I can also study in my room. [Laura 02-03]

Still others find that instead of having to leave the noise and distractions, the distractions leave them:

I wouldn't go out sometimes . . . because everybody else would leave and I'd be the only one in the room, and I'd be, like, oh – peace and quiet. You know, you just need a little space. [Madeline 02-03]

I live in Dunham which – it's not the nicest dorm on campus. In fact, it's probably the most rowdy... [but] it's definitely not hard to live there. The kids are respectful for the most part.



Even though I live in a quad, I can always find some privacy in my room.

Usually aren't all four kids aren't in there – even if they are, one of our two rooms is empty. It's not hard to obtain privacy, and I really have no problems living there.

Many students do complain about their lack of privacy, but as juniors and seniors they often move into single rooms. The lack of privacy does cause problems. But surprisingly enough to outsiders such as faculty or parents, students actually need relatively little private space to live their college lives comfortably and successfully. In fact, as we have seen, some students don't need to work in a quiet area, or to shower behind a locked door, at all. On average, the student standard for privacy seems extremely low – probably the lowest it will be for many of these student's entire lives.

### ***Living with Roommates***

Dormitories and dorm mates thus present broad opportunities for social life; specific rooms and roommates can immediately govern how students spend their time and how comfortable their lives. Many freshmen, with one, two, or even three other (new) roommates, suffer significant roommate problems in their first year. Messiness, loud noise and unpleasant music are frequent sources of conflict, although often students hesitate to confront each other over such issues. Jim's roommates were messy:

S: Like I came in one time to my room and on my desk is a pair of dirty

socks and, dirty socks, like just on my desk on my papers, you know, and I was like I picked it up and I threw them in the middle of the room because I didn't want 'em on my desk. And it's happened with like a dirty dish and [soup] packets. And later the guys are like, oh, yeah, it's mine, you know, and they put it on my desk. I don't understand why they do that.

So I don't know which one of them it is, but . . . I've never asked who put this on my desk . . . I don't wanna make no problems or anything. You come in your room and find a dirty sock, dirty tissues, people's papers you find on your desk, which is annoying. So I'm just like, either throw it in the garbage or just put it in the backroom. [Jim 01-02]

Some students commented that the worst part of their year was dealing with their roommates, such as Maudie, who's roommate was going through psychological problems:

It definitely did [effect my freshman year negatively]. Like I was just so tired and stressed out, and that was, I mean we had a really big brawl one weekend and like I moved out of the room for a weekend, and it was during that time, I got really sick from all the stress and all the pressure, and then that week I had a test in every single class. So my second semester, I didn't do that well. Yeah, but my grades were not as good as, you know, they should have been based on like that

and other like little amenities. But that would be my only biggest stresser.

[Maudie Savran 02-03]

Other students clash over opinions and beliefs:

Two of my roommates were cool. But there was this one who just, everything had to be his way . . . And he liked to be bossy, and he held viewpoints that I don't think 95% of the people would agree with here, at Hamilton.

But I don't know, it was interesting. But it's always better now that you don't have to live with the person, I think it's not that bad.

Still others dislike their roommate's alcohol or drug habits. Murphy simply let the college deal with the students judicially:

The worst thing about [my freshman year] was probably living in a quad with my roommates, because I had, I had one really great roommate and then two really bad roommates that by second semester had both gotten evicted. It was just, it kind of stunk because you're stuck with these people who you don't even know, and you have no choice but to live with them.

We got along fine, but they, they definitely both have like substance abuse problems, and so they were really messy. One of them definitely had a urinary problem because he'd get really drunk and like to pee on everything. That's what eventually got him thrown out of the dorm . . . We did the best we could, and in the end the school solved the problem for us. [Murphy 02-03]

Still, a surprising number have excellent roommate relationships:

My quad, we all get along together, which is pretty incredible. I think anyways, when you put four girls in a room and not have anybody get shot is a good thing. [Madeline 01-02]

Other students recognize that, despite roommate problems, there is an inherent social value to constantly being around others – it forces you to adapt, to learn to understand and accept people, and to behave in better ways:

I mean I've never had a single at Hamilton. I lived in a quad, and then a double, and then a double, and then I'm in a quad now. I think just by living with people around, always around you, you're constantly being challenged because you can't just say something ignorant or stupid and get away with it when there's other people there listening. So I mean I feel like, I mean one of the main reasons I've changed a lot is because you become more open minded and more careful and less

ignorant of others, or [of] how other people behave and interact. [Kim Smith 04-05]

Students understand that roommate issues are tricky and sensitive. They consistently recognize the immense importance of remaining on good terms with their roommate(s), simply because of the amount of time they spend in the other's company. Outright complaining and confrontation seem rare; more common are passive (or even passive-aggressive) methods. Either way, many students are forced, with little chance for escape, to handle awkward or unpleasant situations with another person. Years later, they often cite this as a valuable learning experience.

### ***Bonding Through Complaints***

Roommate problems are only one source of complaint around residential life, though. Ironically – for within months they come to love both their friends and the College that brought them together – students complain endlessly about the location, management, and social life of the college. They complain about not having a car, sharing bathrooms with members of the opposite sex, living in a dirty dorm, maneuvering around vomit and beer cans just to get to your door, existing on top of a snow-covered hill a mile from “civilization,” never having enough concerts, having to eat bad food, having a small dorm room, having a cold or hot dorm room, hating a roommate or dorm mate, being hundreds of miles from a “real” city. “Our bathrooms are disgusting, I’ll put that in. I live in Kirkland [dorm], so you know, they don’t come in on the weekends to clean, and that happens to be when most college students are puking.” [Madeline

01-02] Despite their best efforts, many students cannot be placed in the type of housing they request, especially during their first year.

It was just really, really noisy and when I filled out my Res Life [form], I said I wanted a single sex floor that was non-smoking, and I got a smoking floor that was coed. So it just like wasn't the best, and it was, I was like near upper classmen guys that were so loud, and so I like never got to sleep. So it was just like not the most ideal situation... I moved out because it [was] just so loud on my floor because it was coed and I was next to a bunch of hockey guys. And I didn't want to be in a smoking room. [And] all three of my roommates smoked. [Carrie 01-02]

But when students complain about such issues, they share and codify their suffering. Describing his freshman dorm, Murphy commented: “[People say] Kirkland is disgusting. *You bond if you live in filth so well.*” [Murphy 03-04] Another student described the “cult” of her freshman dorm, which she believes was formed around the notoriously bad bathrooms, and the cramped quarters of the dorm.

S: I guess you could kind of say that North is a cult . . . like a sleepover 24/7. I don't know if it's the bathrooms or what, but in North like we all hang out together. . . I think it's the bathrooms. In South they have their own bathrooms in their room, and they keep their doors closed all the time and they don't really get out in the hall and chat with people . . . We have the smallest dorms for freshmen.

That sucks, like the size of the room and just living in a small [place] with people, it kind of gets you to be close with them. [Anne 01-02]

For Anne, the cramped quarters in North bring people together physically and socially – increasing the number of people in a given area, or shrinking an area with a set number of people will increase intimacy and interaction, and also give them a shared, if sometimes unpleasant, experience to talk about. As we will see, the varied use of small spaces such as dorm rooms requires roommates to be flexible – when one roommate decides to go to sleep, another with a friend can move their conversation into the hallway. Also describing the North dorm, Murphy comments:

The freshmen are all on either side of the building, and then there's just these upper classmen in the middle. And I feel like, you meet all these people in the bathroom, and then you're just staring down the hall at each other all the time, and so eventually you just walk down the hall and they're like hi, I'm so-and-so. And I felt like the first floor boys and the second floor girls were inseparable.

And then the third floor boys and the fourth floor girls were inseparable, and you just become really involved with being in North, especially if it's cold and no one wants to leave the dorm. [Murphy 02-03]

In South dorm, on the other hand, students have the luxury of space, and little to complain about. However, as they have their own bathrooms, and larger rooms overall, they need never even

enter the halls except to leave the building, and hence have little chance for casual interaction with others living in the dorm.<sup>1</sup> The irony here is apparent: students initially see crowded dorms and shared space as “bad”, but such conditions actually create the broad range of intense contacts that allow for the deep friendships that come to characterize their College experience.

### ***The 24/7 Dorm Room: A Multiple-Use Small Space***

Back in their relatively small rooms, with a certain configuration (whether it has a bedroom and a living room, or just one room), students must sleep, store all their possessions, and manage all of their work. They perform many tasks in a very limited space, tasks that often conflict with those of their roommates. Students sometimes refer to their dorm rooms as their “cells,” because of how cramped they can be, especially with two or three roommates.

But a dorm room is clearly not a prison cell. Students use their rooms to sleep, eat, party, work out, study, prepare food, play games, watch TV, talk on the phone, hook up, listen to music, drink, get high, and spend time with friends, and they are generally comfortable managing these different and often conflicting tasks in the minimal space that is theirs:

Basically we had two rooms, four beds in one room and four desks in the other, with a futon, a TV and a fridge. That was the set up.

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<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon is well catalogued in the senior sociology thesis of Hamilton student Kathryn Healy-Wurzburg.



I had three roommates . . . One was a really good guy, a hockey player, really nice kid, really easy to get along with. Another one was a lacrosse player, sometimes not too easy to get along with, kind of messy, but overall he was a pretty good guy. My third roommate was kind of academic, never really went out on the weekends, just did work all the time. He had his own little corner in the room. Like the room was a rectangle, and one of the corners had a closet in it. So there was a little 5x5 spot between the closet and the other wall, and he put his desk in there and just kind of did work all the time. [Frank 01-02]

Designating different rooms for different activities is typical. Sometimes suites are organized that way, with one room for living and working, and another room just for beds.

But sometimes the spatial plan changes, as when a student has a boyfriend or girlfriend over, in which case their roommate(s) may be “sexiled” – exiled from the usually-shared bedroom. And students only loosely respect the traditional temporal patterns of sleeping through the night, working during the day, and partying on weekend evenings. They go to bed as early as nine o’clock in the evening, or as late as five in the morning on weeknights; some (athletes, often) may rise as early as five o’clock, or others as late as three or four o’clock in the afternoon. Many students stay up all night to party or to work. The “all-nighter” is usually powered by copious consumption of either alcohol or caffeine – for instance, the formidable “Red Eye” drink served up at the College’s café, nearly a liter of coffee fortified with two espresso shots. Locations for all-nighters are few – students may spend them in their rooms working quietly, in party rooms or lounges where all night drinking is available, or late-night dining halls, or perhaps

24-hour library facilities. Students who frequently stay up long hours, have friends over for long amounts of time, or drink or use drugs to excess, often do so to the quiet annoyance of their roommates:

“Yeah. It’s not so much like getting trashed, it’s just, I don’t know, I’d rather not turn my room into a party room. It’s a place where I live and sleep and I shouldn’t have to party in it”. [Jack 2 01-02]

The majority of roommate conflicts seem to arise from differing conceptions of what kind of behavior is appropriate for certain parts of the room (and its contents) and at what time. Students whose roommates have “annoying habits” are considered “inconsiderate,” if and when those habits take place either too often, or in an “inappropriate” place or time:

I: What makes her difficult to live with?

S: Various habits that she has, just like being really inconsiderate a lot of the time.

I: Like does she do something in particular that’s inconsiderate?

S: Oh, she does a lot of things. Like little things and like big things, like stay on the phone for hours and hours and hours and hours every day. And, I don’t know, like sitting at her desk when we’re all watching a movie and blow drying her hair. You really can’t do that in the other enormous room that we have? I wanted to bop her. [Sasha Smith 01-02]

Weather can determine the amount of time students spend in their rooms, and what kinds of activities they do there:

I was a little unhappy last semester because it's a big change to be out, especially since we have winter like seven months a year, so I had to drive to campus. Literally, I would have gotten frostbite from walking.

. . . Now it's gotten a little warmer out and I can come here during the day, and like do all my studying and stuff here. And I can go home and if I want to take a nap it's generally peace and quiet. I have my own room, and then I can come back on campus at night to see people, and go out. [Madeline 02-03]

Students far from dining halls often cook for themselves in their rooms in the winter, avoiding a night walk across a snow-covered campus. Others find entertainment just in their own building, such as in friends' rooms, instead of going out into the cold and to other buildings.

So any specific time or place can have multiple meanings and uses. Traditional "dinner time" becomes the 2:00 a.m. "let's get pizza!" "Bedroom" becomes an "all-purpose dorm room." The quad at midnight becomes a convenient place to make out with a date; the old boarded-up fraternity house, when broken into, becomes an ideal place to smoke a joint; the library becomes a social center, and the fitness center becomes a pick-up spot. In some situations, this flexibility is required. Staying up late to complete a paper is the obvious

example. In other cases, it is simply more beneficial, such as when a student decides to use the library to work instead of his dorm because his roommate is having friends over. Flexible use of time and space is a necessity; within the constraints, finding privacy is often difficult.

### ***The College as a Total Institution***

Residential colleges, as “total institutions”, provide for nearly all of the basic needs of students, and many go well beyond this to offer extracurricular, sports, and entertainment opportunities. For most students, nearly *all* their activities take place on campus, and often in a few buildings. Since students usually live with or near their closest friends, have their favorite dining halls, and have academic majors that focus their class and study time to a few select buildings (especially in the later years of college), their exposure to campus spaces and facilities is limited. A college may be the cultural and entertainment center for the greater surrounding area, so students need not (and effectively cannot) look beyond the next few buildings for all of their needs and many of their wants.

Students themselves are conscious of the totalizing nature of their college. They perform numerous activities in a limited space with few problems. As John says, it isn’t like high school:

Well, high school students don’t live together. High school students . . . I explained this to my parents and I said that when I’m at Hamilton, when I’m on campus, I feel like I’m in the office all the time, like I’m always on. Like I just

sleep over at the office every night. Someone I know described college as a full time job with really weird hours.

But it just seems like the office feeling, like fellow students are more like coworkers kind of. You come here and there's a purpose, and you're doing work, and you don't stop doing work. I don't really feel, I don't have like a close circle of friends here. I have a lot of friends, but not too many close friends. So it's kind of like a coworker relationship – we're both stuck in the same boat trying to achieve a goal, and we rely on each other's kind of comfort and solace. [John Martin 01-02]

John best describes his experience living on campus as living at an office – working long hours and living where you work, so the distinction between work and home is completely dissolved. He also emphasizes the importance of other students in the formula – they are coworkers who are “stuck in the same boat trying to achieve a goal” (apparently academic success and/or a degree).

Jay comments on another social force relating to the total institution of college – that students go through their four years with largely the same population of friends, and that these people are very similar:

I think the best thing [about college] is the fact that you can go through many aspects of your life with the same types of people; that people are fascinating enough to play the same sports and take the same classes as you, and be interested

in the same things. And I think that really, to meet people on different levels, which I think you can do at Hamilton, that makes you grow more, and it also makes you grow in your experience a lot more. [Jay 01-02]

With the exception of boarding schools, there is no other place students are surrounded so exclusively by agemates of such similar backgrounds. The college selects them, and they select the college – and then they are crowded together, doing very similar things, for four years.

### *Living in the Bubble*

The social intensity thus created is heightened by one more factor: many students feel isolated from the local area and indeed, from the entire outside world. For them, the college is like a “bubble,” with its own self-contained culture, barely touched by the “real” world. The campus is geographically isolated, far from a “real” city like New York or Boston. Indeed, some students seem to equate the “real world” only with the large urban areas they are used to. And the self-contained student population has little day-to-day interaction with nearby small city and towns both because of physical and cultural distance. For some students, of course, the “bubble” phenomenon is not a problem—it allows them to focus on their work, their social lives, and their interests without any distractions. For them, this may be precisely why they decided to attend a small liberal arts college.

But most understand the pros and the cons of being separated from the “real world”:

I guess the best thing [about college] is that [it's] is a comfortable place, you know, it is small. For me... it's small and I think that's helped me I think a lot. I mean it's a great school, academically it's challenging for me. And I guess the worst things are, maybe, that it is pretty small! I knew that I wanted to go to a small school, but you know, 1,700 kids is really small. Also that, kind of, in the middle of nowhere, you're not exposed to... I guess to "the real world." [James2 01-02]

Often, students' complain of how few activities – parties, concerts, bars – there are on campus, saying they must go downtown to escape the isolation and find anything to do. Jack adds that going to bars is unfulfilling compared to what he is used to:

It seems like going to the bar is gonna be the night's activity; where I come from, it's not. That's where you go to pre-game or after you go to a party, you go to a bar. That's never like the *main* part of an evening... I don't feel there's enough social options, I guess. There'd be [only] one really good party that you can go to... [Jack]

Some students take the lack of options in stride – many students' reaction to the lack of campus parties and activities was to make their own:

When the TDX party was cancelled, we're like whatever, we'll go back to our room and we played Twister. Things like that, just being able to make up your

own fun because you are in a small town and there's only so much that you can really do. So you just have to get creative. [Laura 03-04]

For other students, the “bubble” problem is less about finding things to do, and more about knowing what is going on outside of the campus and in the rest of the world:

This is the first time, I think, in my entire life I've not known everything that's going on in the world around me. That was something I wasn't expecting in college, actually. I honestly have no idea about this war we're in, or I didn't even know that that plane crashed yesterday . . . And even then didn't really register, I guess you could say.

I'm not used to not knowing what's going on in the world. And that was something that definitely shocked me. I'm sure that's probably true at all colleges, but it's . . . just like a bubble. [Liz 01-02]

Well [the] lack of awareness [is a problem]. I, myself, am very, very much guilty of this, but we all just kind of are happy to reside in our little bubble here on the hill. We don't even know what's going on in like New Hartford and Utica, let alone across the world. Like this whole situation with Iraq. Like how many people know really what's going on with that? I know I don't. I feel like that's definitely a problem. [Sasha Smith 02-03]



One student recognized that “the bubble” is a double edged sword – it provides intimacy and solidarity, but also prevents good things from the “real world” from reaching the students:

The best things [about my experience are], I think Hamilton’s size is definitely a very big asset to the school in that it’s so small and you can really get to know everyone. You get to know your professors, and you can go to their houses, and you can go to their offices all the time. I think that’s really a huge part of the school. The worst thing I think is its size too. You get limited by the amount of diversity on campus, and it’s very easy to form cliques. It’s a paradox. Its size is its biggest asset and greatest downfall. [Harry Potter 01-02]

### *College as Home*

But in the end, despite – or maybe because of – feelings of isolation, lack of privacy, and the difficulties of multi-tasking their dorm rooms, many students feel that the college campus really is like a home.

The best thing about [the College] is, I guess that feeling you get on campus where you do feel at home. . . . If I didn’t feel that way, then I wouldn’t even consider coming to this school. [Jack 2 01-02]

College is more than where they keep their stuff and sleep at night—they are re-immersed in an intense social and physical network. And it is safe:

I can leave my books out, my CD player, out in the common room, in the lounge, and I can leave the dorm for an hour or so. I'll come back and find my stuff still there. I can leave my door open. I don't even lock my door at nighttime. I just close it, but I mean it's just, I can go take a shower, and leave my door wide open with my stereo playing . . . A lot of people respect the dorm.

### ***The Cultural Effects of Residential College Living***

A number of physical and social structures inherent in the residential liberal arts college foster the feelings both of isolation from the world as well as the closeness of community. First, the close physical proximity of students to one another, in rooms, in dorms, in classes, and in public spaces, *increases the intensity of their social experience*. Isolation from the rest of the world, with its feeling of exclusivity, only heightens this effect. Second, initial shapelessness of student living spaces – with movable furniture, and minimal regulation by civil or college authorities – forces students collaboratively to *develop* their own order, both within their rooms and throughout the dorm itself. Third, because students must live with each other, or at least in the same dorm as each other, throughout college, they must *maintain* their developed order in some way. They learn to work with their space to accomplish their goals, and behave according to their developed sense of order. Fourth, out of the shared living and working experiences students develop a *language* to discuss shared problems and issues. This language increases solidarity amongst students, and creates a sense of common ground and egalitarianism.

So specific features of residential life at the College produce the peculiar character of social relationships and feelings. In geographic isolation from the rest of the world, students are crowded together sharing bedrooms and bathrooms, required to meet and live with others in spaces used differently at different times of the day. In any particular room, one sees a variety of people in a variety of roles.

In such settings, it's easy to meet people – by chance, by purpose, for official activities or not. In fact, it's unavoidable, even for the shy, the angry, or the intensely private person. And students encounter other students in many roles – as classmate, dormmate, lover, editor, partygoer, slob, friend, or druggie – and regularly in combination of all of these. Just as any space has multiple uses, any person has multiple roles, with little chance to clearly segregate one from another. The College is truly in this sense like a family, and the campus truly like a home. Even though students are largely unaware of how this occurs, they enjoy the benefits nevertheless.