# Report of the College Halls Task Force

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Introduction
Vanderbilt University has developed an engaging educational environment that appeals to future leaders who seek to learn and grow intellectually, developmentally, academically, and ethically. This comprehensive education of the whole person also requires a residential setting that fosters opportunities for engagement between students and faculty. Vanderbilt’s consideration to move towards a College Halls system began in 1997 with discussions surrounding our mission as an educational institution and educating students beyond our academic offerings. Following an extensive planning process including campus-wide dialogues and debates, plans to establish a phased-in College Halls system at Vanderbilt was approved in 2002. The notion of such residential communities is rooted in an educational philosophy that suggests that learning not only takes place within the classroom, but outside as well. As such, faculty, teachers, and mentors should not separate themselves from the lives of their students, but engage in a living-learning environment that fosters a sense of civility, collegiality, and community. This educational philosophy has been a driving force in the establishment of The Ingram Commons, the first phase of Vanderbilt’s College Halls system.

The success of The Ingram Commons brings with it critical momentum; it has provided important new information as we turn our attention to returning students among the undergraduate population and how to help them reach their academic, social, personal, and professional goals. With renewed appreciation for the many ways students learn, teach and lead outside the classroom, we understand the benefits of a fully integrated residential college experience that our College Halls system will provide. This system, with its variety of room types and amenities, will house sophomores, juniors and seniors who will be encouraged to live there for their remaining undergraduate years in order to perpetuate and sustain the unique character and culture of each college. This engaging environment will provide many opportunities for students to hone their leadership skills as mentored by resident faculty and graduate students.

Precis
In Fall 2014, Vanderbilt University will open two new residential colleges at the current Kissam Quadrangle site. These residential colleges will provide housing for sophomores, juniors and seniors (in roughly an equal mix) in “engaged communities.” The Colleges will provide students with opportunities for interactions with faculty, for self-directed inquiry and exploration, for shaping and implementing programs, and for participation in the governance of their academic community. Unlike many of our living learning centers, College Halls will not have defined programmatic obligations nor require participation in self-designed group or individual projects. Rather, student members will be expected to contribute actively to their Floor, Hall,
and College, but the kind of contribution will be determined by the strengths and interests of the individual member. Students will apply for membership in the College Halls individually or in small friendship groups of 2 to 6 students; those accepted to the College Hall system will be invited to participate in the seniority-based room selection process. Students unhappy with their room placement within the Halls can opt out and participate in other housing processes, but once a student has accepted a bed in the College Halls, he or she becomes ineligible for those later processes.

Purpose of Report and Task Force Membership
The primary purpose of this report is to provide a description of what distinguishes College Halls as VU residential colleges, and to establish the parameters that will help guide selection of students into those Halls. Aspects of this report could serve as a long-term model for all College Halls, but the system is designed to evolve and change over time, so other recommendations provided here will likely need to be adapted as future Halls are added.

Task Force membership included six faculty members (representatives from each of the four Undergraduate Colleges and Schools, the School of Medicine, and a representative from the Faculty Senate); two students (one of whom represented VSG); two representatives from the Dean of Students area; and three members of the administration.

Task Force Membership: Cynthia Cyrus (Chair), Mark Bandas, Susan Barge, Beth Conklin, Sean Donahue, Brian Griffith, Zye Hooks, Ian King, Jim Lovensheimer, Bridget Rogers, Tom Schwartz, Leigh Shoup, Randy Tarkington

Charge to the Task Force
Create a robust description of what distinguishes College Halls as VU residential colleges, and establish the parameters that will help guide selection of students into those Halls. Specific sub-tasks include:

- Review Vanderbilt’s current living-learning communities as a context for VU College Halls.
- Define the kind of student who will enrich the first two College Halls. Establish expectations for student involvement in programming and an understanding of the way in which College Halls might intersect with students’ academic programs and with their other extracurricular obligations.
- Develop a strategy to get those students into the College Halls by developing rules governing the application process: who evaluates the applications? Are groups considered? Roommates? What is the idea proportion of sophomores/juniors/seniors?
- Address the issue of mutual commitment: do students have a right to stay? What are grounds for dismissal? How do we balance the development of a core community with exclusion of other potential candidates?
**Context for the Task Force Discussion**

Vanderbilt will begin construction of two new residential colleges at the current Kissam Quadrangle site in May 2012, thanks to recent approval by the Board of Trust. These colleges, which open Fall semester 2014, will introduce a new level of residential community and engagement to Vanderbilt upperclassmen. This is the second phase of College Halls at Vanderbilt, and follows upon the successes of The Ingram Commons which opened in 2008. The architectural decisions have largely been finalized. The Task Force discussions undertaken here seek proactively to shape key College Hall policies in preparation for the opening of the Kissam College Hall complex in 2014.

A word on nomenclature. “College Halls” is the overarching concept of engaged communities formed around a rich mixture of residential and academic experiences. The Kissam Quadrangle will house two “Colleges,” units of approximately 330 beds, each of which is made up of two “Halls.” The residential staff will include two “Faculty Directors,” each of whom oversees one of the Colleges. They will be supported by four “Graduate Fellows,” who will each be responsible for an individual Hall. The new complex will also house an “Area Coordinator,” a full-time professional member of the Residential Education staff.

**Procedures**

The Task Force convened nine times in a mixture of 90-minute and 2-hour meetings and consulted a variety of constituencies. With the assistance of Associate Provost Susan Barge, we reviewed the physical layout of the new Kissam project and situated our discussion within the larger agenda of the University’s plans for College Halls. We also talked with former members of the Upper Class Experience Committee and reviewed the data of the VU Quality of Life Survey (2010) and the VU Upper Class Experience Survey (2009).

To understand the status of existing residential communities here at Vanderbilt, we consulted four Residential Education professionals regarding Vanderbilt Living-Learning Communities and reviewed the activities, requirements, and application guidelines for McGill, the Kissam Experience, the Mayfield Lodges, and VIP: Vanderbilt Interest Projects. We also spoke with a number of representatives of the Ingram Commons -- the Dean of the Commons, 2 Faculty Heads of House, an Area Coordinator, and two students – and reviewed the Ingram Commons Data Set (2011). We spoke with faculty members, School and College Deans and Associate Deans, and a representative of the Center for Teaching to garner a sense of how the expectations of returning students vary from those of first year students and what links there might be between students’ academic departments and their residential experiences in the new College Halls system.

For expert advice on pragmatic details of the project, we talked with Housing and Residential Education staff regarding application and housing placement concerns, with representatives from Dining Services about meal plans, and with a representative of VSG regarding student governance issues.
In addition to formal meetings and reports, the members of the Task Force consulted with their home base constituencies and provided written reports and updates to the whole group as our work progressed. We also circulated a working draft of the College Halls Task Force Report to the campus community from 14 November through 8 December for review and comment. Additionally, as part of the review process, representatives of the Task Force met with the CommonDores (15 November 2011), with the Vanderbilt Faculty Senate (1 December 2011), and with Vanderbilt Student Government (4 December 2011). The recommendations of this final version of the report take into account the comments received.

**Task Force Recommendations**

1. **College Halls community**

   **engaged communities**

   College Halls are designed to be engaged communities. To that end, the Task Force quickly developed a strong consensus that members of the College Halls community should be expected to contribute actively to their Floor, Hall, and College, but that the kind of contribution should be determined by the strengths and interests of the individual member. There was a strong belief that the College Halls should “avoid programming ‘clutter’,” a theme to which conversation returned repeatedly. Emphasis will be on casual interactions, and particularly small-group interactions, though unifying programs and ceremonial events will help build a larger sense of community. Finally, the Task Force believes that College Hall programming and character will inevitably change over time, and that this is one of the strengths of the system.

   **character of the experience**

   College Halls will add a significant and enriched learning environment to our residential campus, which for returning students currently consists of living-learning centers and conventional residence halls. As compared to our conventional dormitories, College Halls will provide students with more opportunities for interactions with faculty, for self-directed inquiry and exploration, for shaping and implementing programs, and for participation in the governance of their academic community. Unlike many of our living learning centers, College Halls will not have defined programmatic obligations nor require participation in self-designed group or individual projects. Residents of a College Hall will be expected to contribute to and enrich the life of their community. The expectation is that members of the College Halls will undertake a range of experiences from the informal to the ceremonial to the co-curricular to the athletic to the outright academic. In all, members of the College Halls should actively explore a series of values: lifelong learning, intellectual community, and service to humanity as a whole.

   The College Halls are also designed to mix together groups of students. Small clusters of friends might apply together, but one should also expect to encounter new people on the corridor and in the Hall. Each Hall will mix together with students from all three “returning student” classes. The target population for the College Halls in its
Students who join the College Halls will be encouraged to stay for the duration of their time at Vanderbilt, though they retain their right to seek a different housing option in a subsequent year. In rare instances, students who detract from the stated goals of the community may be asked not to return.

friendship groups

Students at Vanderbilt have told us repeatedly that who they live with matters more than any other aspect of their residential experience. Although the application process has yet to be finalized (see “Next Steps” at the conclusion of the report), the College Halls Task Force recommends that students be allowed to apply for membership individually or in small friendship groups of 2 to 6 students. When possible, these friendship groups should be allowed to live together or near one another, but there should also be a mixture of new people on each floor or corridor.

2. Programming

Programming in the College Halls should be thoughtful; the cliche “less is more” clearly applies. Intellectual content is clearly desirable, however. Programming should largely be student- and community-driven and is expected to change over time. A range of ideas were suggested that may be considered by the College Hall programming leadership: a speaker series, short concert-plus dinner and other arts-related events; partnership with existing programming to sponsor intentional conversations regarding career options and academic choices. Indeed, career-related mentoring came up several times. The College Halls leadership could also explore co-sponsorship of campus-wide events. Eventually, College Hall seminars might be an option to consider since students have responded so positively to the First Year Commons Seminars. From the beginning, however, upper division classes can be taught in the various classroom spaces that the College Halls provide, and it is important to get word out to the faculty that this is a way to connect with these “engaged communities.”

Programming of any sort will come in different sizes, with attendance from 5 to 50. Success should not be judged merely by the numbers; many meaningful experiences occur in small-group interactions. The College Halls will draw on faculty, staff and community leaders to provide programs, workshops, lectures, trainings, and orientations. They will develop signature events and ritual events. But much of the success of College Halls will be in informal interactions they generate.

informal interactions

Informal interactions are fundamental to the College Hall experience. At their best the College Halls create an environment that facilitates meaningful interactions, often in small groups. Small faculty dinners and weekly study breaks might serve as anchors for people’s experiences. In addition, signature events (like McGill’s chocolate tastings or the pancake suppers at North House) and ritual and ceremonial events will establish
Hall- and College-level identity. Chance encounters and drop-in events (like a brief Melodores concert) are often more desirable to students than formal presentations of lectures, though the latter also have a role. Additionally, the College Halls give students a chance to see faculty as having a “life beyond the syllabus.” In so doing, the College Hall experience also helps its student members to take charge of their own University experience.

**food**

Our interlocutors tell us that food will be a crucial component of the College Halls experience, since eating together creates bonds. Breakfast and dinner will likely be the most important meals, since lunches are typically eaten elsewhere. The first floor of the College Halls complex will have food facilities that feature both grab-and-go and (at times) cooked-in-view options. For these regular meals, students tell us that they prefer having a variety of options, and that portability matters. Rand will remain the central dining hall of Central Campus, but the College Hall complex will have Great Rooms that accommodate up to 75 students, and other community dining opportunities can be scheduled in nearby Alumni Hall. In addition to the regular meals, study breaks and “signature events” typically feature food, and the faculty directors will most likely host faculty dinners; those have been among the most successful programs elsewhere on campus.

Since currently VU Seniors are exempted from purchasing meal plans, the Task Force recommends that the professionals of Dining Services be charged with exploring ways to facilitate the integration of food as part of the community experience (see “Next Steps”).

3. Faculty role

The role of the Faculty Directors of the College Halls will be less parental than that in the Commons. The primary role of the Faculty Director is to facilitate and mentor students, not strictly to generate programming. Our interlocutors told us several times that “faculty succeed when they show up,” especially when they support students by attending evening activities. Faculty Directors also have a role hosting faculty dinners, study breaks, and facilitating small group experiences. Non-residential faculty will also be invited to engage in the College Halls experience.

4. Student role

There is an expectation that members of the College Halls will be actively engaged in developing the life of their community, but that each member should have a choice of which programs to attend, how best to contribute to the College Hall experience, and how to connect that experience to the broader Vanderbilt campus. College Halls should include students from across the four undergraduate schools and be open to students with a variety of extra-curricular or co-curricular interests. Athletes, study-abroad students, Greeks and non-Greeks alike should be able to find opportunities within the
College Halls structure to shape their campus experience.

College Halls should allow for different (but non-negligible) levels of student engagement, but still find ways to hold students accountable for their commitment to participate. Students could bring a variety of talents to bear upon the College Hall experience, such as initiating or participating in programming, working to create a sense of community, or facilitating “an opportunity” for others. They might engage in peer-to-peer tutoring in conjunction with various campus organizations. Students might reach out to faculty, staff, graduate students, and community leaders to attend, lead, or participate in College Halls programming. Students can also find other creative ways to build rapport with faculty outside of a classroom environment. They might take advantage of “bring-a-faculty member” opportunities, either one-on-one or in small groups, for instance. Students could sponsor or participate in a student concert, theatrical production, creative experience, and so on. They could provide service to the community. In addition, there is an opportunity for self-governance and student leadership, though the details of what the structure should be has yet to be resolved (see “Next Steps”). There might perhaps be an executive board and groups akin to the house advisory councils, or perhaps a division into activity committee, dining committee, and so on. There should almost certainly be student involvement in the programming process, perhaps through a programming council. In short, there are any of a number of ways that students can contribute to bringing the experience of College Halls to life. In this process, students should be proactive in crafting their own experience, and be the authors of their own education.

5. Application process and housing selection

The principles used by Housing will still apply to the College Halls selection process:

- Personal choice is fundamental (Students have a choice to apply to College Halls and can choose to accept their assignment or not)
- Seniority matters during the selection of room assignments.
- The process needs to be fair.
- “Keeping it simple” is important; it needs to be a process students understand and can manage.

Although the selection process needs to be developed more fully (see “Next Tasks”) and will undoubtedly be tweaked over time, the selection into College Halls should be early in the housing calendar so that students who don’t get in or don’t get their desired choice of room can participate in other options. Thus, we recommend that the College Halls room process occur before other residence hall assignment processes.

The College Halls housing process will be divided into three parts: 1) an simple application to the College Halls that will confirm the applicant(s’) understanding of the responsibilities of College Hall membership; 2) random selection from the pool of
candidates; and 3) a room selection process that will be seniority driven. Subsequent years, we might use a modified seniority-driven process, in which returning seniors select rooms before new seniors, followed by returning juniors, then new juniors, and so on.

To reflect the “friendship cohorts,” we envision an application process that allows students to apply to the College Halls individually or in groups of up to six students. Each student is limited to participation in a single application. Groups will be selected on an “all-or-nothing” basis; either the whole group is selected or not. Acceptance of a group does not guarantee access to a suite, however, and the room selection process may require a group to divide up into separate spaces, but at a minimum, students applying together and selected in this process will be assigned to the same Hall.

The application to the College Halls will be brief (one page), and at least in this first year should include a commitment to the idea of “engaged community” by the individual or the group. All students who complete the application by the deadline and are in good standing with the university will be considered equal candidates for the colleges. Members will be chosen by lottery, and the individual or group will be randomly assigned to the four halls. Specific criteria to be considered in managing the application process to ensure that the halls are balanced in this randomization with respect to hometown and other affiliations will be developed by a separate Task Force during 2012 (see “Next Steps”). The Task Force expects that an internal governance structure will evolve within the College Halls that will facilitate future application processes, though any change of process will need to ensure that the Halls remain a welcoming and diverse community.

Once a pool of students has been accepted into the College Halls, they will be invited to participate in a room selection process that is seniority-driven and akin to current housing models. Students unhappy with their room placement within the Halls can opt out and participate in later housing processes (LLC, off campus, regular housing), but once a student has accepted a bed in the College Halls, he or she becomes ineligible for those later processes.

There will be a College Halls wait-list since some students will need to cancel. (Acceptance to Study Abroad programs, for instance, will often post-date the College Halls room selection process.)

6. Accountability

Given the expectation that students contribute actively to creating the College Halls community and forging its connections to the broader Vanderbilt campus, there is consensus from the Task Force that students should be held accountable for their engagement – though, as mentioned above, the level of participation will vary from student to student and week to week. Students in College Halls should be expected to attend College Hall events, though no specific event should be required.

As part of the application process, students will be asked to commit in advance to being engaged members of the College Halls community. They should also be asked to
reflect on those self-established ideals and invited to provide feedback and/or suggestions on the emerging community midway through the Fall semester and again near the start of the Spring. There is a preference for student models of monitoring and self-governance; the mechanisms in use at McGill form one such system. Whatever system is ultimately adopted, in rare circumstances, students can lose their right to reapply for not contributing, but the expectation is that the majority of students will be encouraged to retain their Hall affiliation over the remainder of their time at Vanderbilt.

**Next Tasks**

In 2012, discussion should move forward on two separate fronts with separate Task Force membership. The first Task Force should define the roles of and develop a selection process for the Faculty Directors, Graduate Fellows, and Area Coordinator. This may include making recommendations regarding the reporting structure. The second Task Force should be charged with developing the College Hall selection process for the first year. This will include further review of the question of student accountability, and a special consideration of the balance of individual applicants and group applicants.

Additionally, Dining Services should be charged with developing a meal plan model that will accommodate the programming ideals of College Halls.

Lastly, VSG and other student groups (including RAs and representatives from other governance councils) should be asked to develop a preliminary student-governance model for the College Hall system in consultation with the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education and the Associate Provost and Dean of Students. It may be best if the student governance conversations occur in Fall 2012 in order to take into account the roles of the Faculty Directors and Graduate Fellows.