

The Proposed Housing Draw Revision: A Tutorial based on Frequently Asked Questions

(this report was delivered at the GSG Assembly meeting on January 14, 2004, by Meredith Safran)

1. How does the draw currently work?

The current draw system is a complicated process. Not only is it not computerized, but the Housing Department essentially runs five separate draws at different times (for the GC/Annex; 3 and 4 bedroom apartments; Millstone; apartments for singles; and apartments for families). While the draw for dormitory space in the GC and annexes is fairly straightforward since only single people can pick into these rooms, the story is very different when it comes to apartments, which represent the majority of the housing stock.

In a good-faith effort to balance the demand for apartment space between the two categories of student that the Housing Department recognizes, singles and families (which category includes married students and domestic partners), about 20 years ago the University started employing a system that was intended to accurately divide the apartment housing stock between these two groups *before* the applications for housing were even submitted. The University continues to use this system to execute the basic allocation of apartment stock among the broad categories of singles and families.

2. What's wrong with that system?

There are a number of problems that spring from the current draw system. For starters, the multiple draws create an unwieldy process, since every draw is compartmentalized away from the other ones. If you aren't sure that you'll successfully draw into your preferred housing, you have to file multiple separate draw forms--and then the housing staff, which is quite small, has to process these multiple separate draw forms. And this is done manually, as the process is not computerized. So the basic form of the draw, multiple separate manually processed draw applications, presents one area that can clearly stand improvement.

This unwieldy process is the institutionalized expression of a housing policy that creates other problems, which are primarily expressed in the draws for apartment housing, which is the majority of all graduate housing stock. As you may know, the current system establishes a rigid division between the housing that is made available to people who apply as singles

and those who apply as families. This division was made according to the system that the University devised some twenty years ago to regulate allocation of housing between singles and families. However, for historical reasons the domestic patterns of graduate students have changed

quite a bit in the last twenty years. Furthermore, this division of housing stock is not based upon what students are requesting; this division is made before the draw applications are even submitted.

Since the Housing department divides the housing stock based upon this decades-old system, carrying out a division that has no regard for what types of housing students have *actually* requested, there has apparently been a major overallocation of housing stock to the category of families in recent years. This is not to say that students who are married or domestic partners don't deserve recognition that their housing needs are different than those of single students, but just to point out that housing appears to be allocating more housing to the *category* of student

families than there is actual *demand* by students who are, in fact, married or DPs. Keep in mind also that the University system entails that

once housing stock has been allocated to one category, it cannot be accessed by the other, even in the (unlikely) event of demand in one category being totally met.

While on the surface this may seem to be a problem only for singles who would like to have those apartments rather than for students in the family

category who are allocated an overabundance of housing, it has turned out that this state of affairs is harmful for both groups. Although everyone knows that housing is in shorter supply than before, the last few years of

the housing crisis have highlighted the fact that that the housing cutoff for the family housing category is quite a bit higher than the cutoff for single students. At the same time, there has been an unusually marked spike in the number of claimed domestic partnerships. While this spike may merely coincide with the situation highlighted by the housing crisis, rather than being contingent, there is a real possibility based on anecdotal evidence that there is a correlation. After all, most everyone who has been through a draw cycle knows that the current system lends itself to certain gaming methods, aka fraudulent behavior. While that is not to say that these gaming methods never existed before the housing crisis, the housing crisis has changed the housing landscape and with that

change comes an increased need to address this tacitly accepted problem.

What are these gaming methods? For example, when an individual has a partner, but one who does not in fact live in Princeton, and nevertheless uses this absent partner as the pretext for access to the family housing as a domestic partnership; or, the example of ghosting, in which a partner or roommate is totally fabricated; or, the instances of younger students who intend to live off-campus picking into rooms and subletting them to older students or even non-Princeton people.

The current draw system, with its outdated over-allocation of housing to the family category, presents an incentive to this behavior. In this kind of gaming pattern, the possibility exists that legitimate families may end up getting shut out of housing. That is why what is initially perceived as a problem for single students becomes a worry for married students and domestic partners.

On a less scandalous note, the current draw system, with its numerous different draws held at different times, especially under the shadow of a housing shortage, encourages people not to apply for the housing that they would prefer, but the housing that they think they'll be able to get. Besides it being rather disappointing to constantly settle, the negative effect that this has in the long term, in combination with the false DPS, ghosts, and subletters, is that the University cannot use the applications to the draw as an indication of what housing graduate students actually want. In terms of gathering data for long-term housing planning and construction, the current draw system is not at all helpful, when it could be very much so.

3. Is there a way to address these problems?

These problems that I have just sketched out--the multiple draws, the outdated allocation formula, the fraudulent practices that the system encourages, the uselessness of the data on student housing preferences--these problems are endemic to the current housing draw system, and no superficial tinkering would have resolved these problems. The only way to address them would be to reconceive the entire draw system from the ground up, taking apart the old draw, considering its different parts, and replacing what wasn't working.

The process of draw revision started about a year and a half ago, in the summer of 2002, under the previous Executive Committee, chaired by Scott Miller. The initial GSG proposal was drawn up and superintended by Eric Adelizzi, who was then chair of the Housing Committee. In December 2002 the fourth draft of this proposal was presented for comment and revision to a group of referees who form the housing policy group. This housing policy group is a standing committee of the University whose purpose is to discuss and vet matters pertaining to graduate housing. The members of this housing policy group include several Graduate School administrators, housing officers, members of the GSG Housing Committee, and representatives from the residential committees of the GC, Butler, and Lawrence. The policy group makes recommendations to the director of Housing, Tom Miller, and the Dean of the Graduate School, Dean Russel, who decide whether to take these recommendations or not.

In December of 2002, this housing policy group agreed to the basic framework of the GSG proposal and began the lengthy process of revising the draw. At this point, when the initial proposal was accepted by the housing policy group, the draw revision ceased to be a special project of Exec, or even of the GSG. The GSG continued to participate through the members of the Housing Committee who sit on the policy group, along with the other grad student representatives, Housing staff, and Graduate School staff. But the GSG had no special authority to direct the policy group nor would it have any special influence in the decision of the administration.

According to the GSG members of the policy group, the group met to discuss the revision at least six times, with five of the meetings occurring since August. On each occasion, members of the GSG Housing Committee, the Butler Committee, the Lawrence Committee, and the GCHC were invited to attend. The Butler Committee, I should note, did not send a rep to any but the most recent meeting, on December 30.

Over the course of these meetings, the policy group agreed upon a unified draw system, thus combining the five separate draws into a system that would allow students more flexibility in listing housing preferences and abolish the division of apartment housing allocation into two separate categories. Instead, the housing staff will monitor the housing assignments to ensure that single applicants and family applicants within a given year acquire housing in proportion to one another (if 70% of

third-year single students draw in successfully, then housing will ensure that roughly 70% of third-year families draw in successfully).

4. Wait, I haven't heard anything about the child bonus yet. Where does that fit in?

For the majority of all housing applicants, housing is allocated based upon your year, and a corresponding number value is assigned to you.

This

number value indicates your priority in the draw. So if you are a second

year, your value is two, and you would draw in ahead of a fourth year, whose value is four. Within years, draw times are assigned randomly by lottery.

But the current draw system marks out certain groups as exceptions. For example, members of the residential committees of Butler, Lawrence, and the GC are accorded the privilege of picking housing ahead of the lottery participants. Also, incoming students are all guaranteed housing.

Then there are two further exceptions. One is successful hardship applicants, which sounds like a terrible oxymoron but actually refers to people who have demonstrated to the hardship committee that their life and

financial circumstances are such that they would be very unlikely to be able to afford to live off-campus; these individuals and families are guaranteed housing.

The fourth group is a bit different, because they are not removed from the

lottery entirely, but rather are separated out within each class. This group is people claiming the child bonus. Remember the fourth year single

who had a value of four? If this student had a child, he or she would be entitled to deduct a fraction of a point and thereby raise his or her standing in the draw of fourth years above every other fourth year without

a child. Although the advantage sounds very small, being a fraction of a point, in fact the impact on that student's chances of getting housing have jumped by several hundred places in his or her fourth-year pool of applicants. It should be said, however, that this group of people who have claimed the child bonus is very small: according to the Housing Department, last year there were only roughly 40 students with children out of about 850 applications for apartment-style housing.

5. If this child bonus applies to so few people, why would anyone bother about it in the draw revision process?

As I mentioned, when the policy group accepted the GSG proposal as the basis of their discussions, the group also adopted the aim of examining all parts of the draw in an attempt to treat us all equally as students first, including the special exceptions to the lottery system, and then reconsider when equal treatment is not sufficient. In the course of this total review, the child bonus was naturally addressed, among all other things. The current policy was then compared to the possible benefits of an improved hardship process instead of the child bonus. This comparison was made not with the intent of removing a privilege that one group enjoys; this comparison was made to determine whether a greater benefit could be given to those who need it. Hardship is in fact a better guarantee of housing than the child bonus because the successful applicant

is guaranteed housing before the lottery even starts, whereas third- and fourth-years--fifth years not being eligible because of post-enrollment rules--these third- and fourth-years especially have to hope that there is still housing stock left when their number comes up.

The understanding in the policy group was that this trade-off of the child bonus for hardship would only be implemented if the hardship process was eased and if the hardship committee could carry this increase in caseload.

The original GSG proposal specifically called for families with children to be protected by hardship. But the fact that there was debate on the matter of the child bonus should not be construed as opposition to people with children, any more than the impulse to create a system that does not encourage cheating is an attack on singles. In the course of reviewing the draw system, every part of the system had to be open to discussion of theoretical and practical positions in order to ensure that decisions and proposed policies were well thought out.

6. How is hardship currently handled?

According to Dean Montero, the hardship application process is as follows:

"The Draw Information and the hardship application both indicate that the following items will be taken into consideration when deciding eligibility: student stipend and income, number of dependents, ability of spouse to work, outside income, and relevant personal information. In

addition to filing a regular housing application, the student files a hardship application, a statement explaining their situation (e.g., personal, financial, medical, etc.), any supporting documentation, and a copy of the past year's federal tax form.

"The Hardship Housing Committee --composed of the assistant director for graduate housing, the GC residence life coordinator, and three or four graduate students-- review the applications and recommend [to Dean Montero] who should receive priority housing. Recommendations are made after thorough discussions of the cases; to help ensure students' privacy, the committee members are not provided the students' names."

7. Why didn't I hear about all this earlier?

As Exec has indicated in our letter to the Assembly and Butler residents, the fact that the housing draw revision was going on, and the fact that the Housing Committee was actively involved, was no secret, since it had been reported on at four Assembly meetings this year, and that includes three times this academic year. Furthermore, the GSG could not have kept this process a secret even if it had, for some bizarre reason, wanted to, since the policy group includes representatives from other student groups, namely the residential committees of Butler, Lawrence, and the GC. I can't speak for how the residential committees operate, but I can make some comments on matters that need attention in the GSG.

The present situation underlines a real and systemic problem with the way that information is flowing between the GSG and the grad student body. Since there are a lot of new members in Assembly, let me sketch out how the structure of the organization suggests that information should flow. On the one hand, there is the Executive Committee, who are elected as individuals by a general election among the graduate student body. This 7-member committee functionally sets GSG policy and directs its advocacy efforts where appropriate and as possible. On the other hand, there is Assembly, which composes the vast majority of the personnel of the GSG. The Assembly is built in such a way as to encourage equal representation across the entire University, which is why there is a seat designated for a member of each department and a number of degree-granting programs, and Exec has worked diligently to make sure that these Assembly seats are filled. Added to this body are special interest seats for particular constituencies, including seats for a member of the Butler Committee, the Lawrence Committee, and the GCHC. Although these residential committees hold non-voting seats, they are recognized, institutionalized members of the Assembly. All together, as the GSG, we are charged with representing

the graduate student body and its interests and needs in the University, and specifically in advocating for these interests and concerns with the administration.

In order to perform this advocacy, the GSG has to be able to communicate with the student body in order to find out what these interests and needs are. So how does the GSG communicate with the student body? There are essentially two ways that the GSG can do this. One means within the power of the Executive Committee is the ability to send global emails, which includes advertising surveys and encouraging actions like letter-writing, both of which were used in the push to get the shuttle. However, this is only efficient in one direction, the dissemination of information, assuming that the "delete" button isn't clicked first. Given the many responsibilities of Exec, which have unfortunately often included the running of most or all standing committees, engaging in a correspondence with about 2000 other grad students is an incredibly inefficient use of our limited time--we are, after all, grad students ourselves.

The much more logical conduit of information is through representatives to Assembly. You are the intermediaries between discrete groups of individuals, otherwise known as your departments, and the GSG. If you don't ask your department-mates--your constituents--their opinions on a given topic, or if you don't collect data from them for GSG projects, then they have been effectively shut out of the decision-making process. If you don't report to your department what the GSG is doing, they have been deprived of their most logical source for this information. Assembly reps are a far more efficient conduit of information back and forth to the grad student body, and it's hard to see how an Assembly member can claim to be "representative" without consulting his or her department-mates on student issues. Presumably, that is why one of the duties of a rep is to report to your department about what goes on at Assembly meetings. To those reps who are doing this, thank you.

At the moment, we have a special situation, which is that almost the entire Assembly membership has turned over in the past year, and many of those seats turned over in this past semester. Unfortunately, this timing coincided with the bulk of the housing draw revision. There is a pretty

steep learning curve upon entering this organization, both because the issues that the GSG deals with are complex, and because most have a significant history of contestation within the University. New Assembly members would probably have a harder time navigating the most important topics, and it is possible that new members did not realize the importance of the housing draw revision even when reports were being delivered in Assembly. I should also note that as Assembly meetings are already quite long, it is unusual to give a long, detailed presentation like the one I'm giving now. If we were a professional government, that would be the norm, but since none of us really have the spare time to sit here for more than two hours, reports tend to consist of announcements, brief updates, and solicitation of questions and comments. Their brevity is not a sign of their unimportance; the fact that topics are being reported is implicit acknowledgement that these are topics about which the Assembly--and by extension your constituents--should be aware.

An additional problem that I myself encountered when I was a department rep to Assembly--and I imagine that this has not entirely changed since last winter--an additional problem is that while in some departments the position of GSG rep is considered important and is hotly contested, there are other students who dismiss the organization and think that they can't be bothered with it. Sometimes I even felt guilty talking about GSG issues, as if they were just a bore. But when I sat down every month or so to write up a brief e-summary of GSG activities for my department-mates, I was reminded of how many important issues the GSG has been tackling, and very successfully, in the five brief years of its existence. And sometimes I even got responses thanking me for the updates, and comments and questions!

But whatever anyone thinks of a student government--and I myself was never one to participate in these kinds of groups--whether this group is called a student government or not, this is the only group in the entire University whose sole purpose is to advocate for the interests and needs of graduate students as a whole. When it comes to post-enrollment, or the construction of affordable housing, or negotiation of parking privileges and the shuttle, the adoption of dental and vision insurance options and the press for lower costs for dependent insurance, no other organization by any name is a clearinghouse for graduate student concerns. We have achieved this by cultivating a relationship with various offices and administrators that is based on an understanding that we are working for

the good of our community, and that there is a mutual interest between graduate students and the University in doing so.