



PURPOSE CASE
BUILT STUDY

West Campus Residential Initiative

Cornell University designed new housing for students to provide living-learning environments, supporting on-site programs and ongoing interaction with faculty.

Executive Summary

Organization

Cornell University

Location

Ithaca, New York, USA

Construction Type

New construction

Opening Date

2004

Project Area

500,000 square feet

Total Budget

\$225 million

The Atlantic Philanthropies Investment

\$103.6 million



In the 1990s, Cornell University faced a campus-wide housing problem. Physically unattractive dormitories on the University's West Campus did not foster a sense of community among students or engage them in learning outside the classroom. The existing culture in these residences contributed to a broader campus divide between Cornell's North and West Campuses. The noisier West Campus dormitories tended to attract freshmen students who intended to join nearby Greek fraternities and sororities, while the quieter North Campus was home to more academically-engaged students. Efforts to remedy the West Campus residents' reliance on off-campus housing following their freshman year were unsuccessful due to the shortcomings of outdated buildings. As Cornell's peer institutions began to implement residential models that emphasized a holistic undergraduate experience, it became clear that the University would need to reimagine its housing system in order to enrich the lives of all future students.

Though Cornell's housing challenges were not new, responding to them required significant capital investments that would address on-campus housing as a whole. An opportunity arose in 1997 when University President Hunter Rawlings III announced a strategic plan to consolidate freshmen housing on North Campus by constructing three new dormitories. The move presented an opportunity to also transform West Campus. The West Campus Residential Initiative sought to create attractive on-campus housing for students beyond their freshman year, provide an alternative to off-campus and Greek housing, foster a sense of student community, and extend learning opportunities and interactions with faculty outside of the classroom. The ultimate goal was to create a residential system that reflected Cornell's core values of inquiry, creativity, equity, and public engagement.¹

A project planning group composed of faculty, staff, and students proposed five residential living-learning Houses on West Campus, which were constructed between 2001 and 2008. Faculty members drove the vision and the programming for the new buildings: each House would contain its own dining hall, common areas, and accommodations for faculty-in-residence. In a productive hybrid arrangement that combined interdisciplinary expertise, two project managers were named—one from Student and Academic Services and one from Facilities Management.

While the financial burden of simultaneously implementing two major residential initiatives created debt for the University, it allowed efficient and timely completion of the two projects. The Atlantic Philanthropies, a frequent contributor to Cornell, provided funding totaling \$103.6 million for the West Campus Initiative.

Today, West Campus attracts more students than it can accommodate and better serves Cornell's institutional values. While differing perspectives on House governance and admission processes have created some rifts between administrative staff and faculty, this initiative has successfully exposed students to a new range of intellectual and extracurricular opportunities and helped change the University's undergraduate residential culture. While it is yet to be seen whether the initiative has enhanced Cornell's competitiveness among its peers, the expanded programming within West Campus reflects Cornell's longstanding academic values.

This case study is based on research conducted by MASS Design Group between May and September 2015. Funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies, this case illustrates how capital projects can introduce new approaches that enrich the character and programs of institutions.

Purpose Built Series

Capital projects often bring lasting benefits to nonprofit organizations and the people they serve. Given this opportunity, foundations grant more than \$3 billion annually to construct or improve buildings in the United States alone.ⁱ Each capital project affects an organization's ability to achieve its mission—signaling its values, shaping interaction with its constituents, influencing its work processes and culture, and creating new financial realities. While many projects succeed in fulfilling their purpose, others fall short of their potential. In most instances, organizations fail to capture and share lessons learned that can improve practice.

To help funders and their nonprofit partners make the most of capital projects, The Atlantic Philanthropies and the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation commissioned *Purpose Built*—a multi-faceted study by MASS Design Group, a nonprofit architecture and research firm. In 2015 and 2016, MASS conducted interviews, reviewed literature, and examined a diverse set of completed projects around the world; each project was supported by one of the above funders.

The study generated a set of core principles as well as tools for those considering or conducting capital projects:



Introducing the Purpose Built Series is an overview of the study and its core principles.



Making Capital Projects Work more fully describes the *Purpose Built* principles, illustrating each with examples.



Planning for Impact is a practical, comprehensive tool for those initiating capital projects.



Charting Capital Results is a step-by-step guide for those evaluating completed projects.



Purpose Built Case Studies report on 15 projects to illustrate a range of intents, approaches, and outcomes.

See the full *Purpose Built* series online at www.massdesigngroup.org/purposebuilt.

i Foundation Center, *Foundation Maps* data based on grants made in the United States, 2006-2015.



“[The initiative’s purpose is to create a place] where students could certainly still socialize and grow in personal skills, but also have extended opportunities beyond the classroom to interact with faculty and graduate students.”

**—Project Manager,
West Campus
Residential Initiative**

Above. An aerial shot of Cornell’s West Campus shows the redesigned layout.
Cover. Students walk between the West Campus Houses.

Introduction

Since its founding in 1865, Cornell University has aimed to be a place where “any person can find instruction in any study”²—a credo that has guided the University’s development over the years. As one professor described, “Cornell strikes a sweet spot between being a small undergraduate-focused space [and a place] with the research strength and resources of a bigger university.”

From the beginning, Cornell has housed a relatively low percentage of undergrads on campus. Cornell’s undergraduate housing includes dormitories on North and West Campuses, with a significant proportion of sophomores, juniors, and seniors living in on- and off-campus Greek houses or in Collegetown, the neighborhood adjacent to campus. In 1996, Cornell housed 41 percent of its undergraduate students in on-campus housing—the second smallest percentage when compared to 16 peer institutions.³ This trend continues today, with a majority of undergraduates living off-campus in 2016, according to Cornell’s office of Campus and Community Engagement.⁴

The reliance on off-campus housing can be traced to Cornell’s founding. Early University leaders advocated for campus development approaches that would integrate the University with the surrounding

community. In time, however, Cornell’s on-campus residential system became increasingly problematic, spurring 23 housing studies between 1966 and 1998.⁵

BARRIERS TO A QUALITY EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE ON WEST CAMPUS

Prior to the Residential Initiative, the dormitories on the University’s West Campus failed to foster a sense of community among students and provide intellectual opportunities that extended learning outside the classroom. Popularly known as the U-Halls, the dormitories were utilitarian, concrete buildings constructed in the 1950s as a temporary solution to a postwar enrollment boom. Formal quads separated student living areas from dining, studying, and other communal spaces. At the center of West Campus, a single dining hall, Noyes Center, served over 1,800 students. Faculty members recounted that the central dining hall made it difficult for each dorm to develop an individual identity. As one of the faculty leaders for the West Campus Residential Initiative commented, the architecture created an environment of anonymity rather than belonging.

As upperclassmen frequently opted to live off-campus or in Greek houses, the West Campus U-Halls were attractive to a limited number of students who saw West Campus’ proximity to Cornell’s Greek houses and Collegetown as an advantage. Academically and



Above. The original U-Halls built in the 1950s on West Campus failed to foster a sense of community and provide intellectual opportunities for students.

socially engaged students more frequently chose to live on North Campus, creating what Cornell President Hunter Rawlings III termed “a divided campus,” both in terms of diversity and intellectual engagement. As one of the Residential Initiative’s project managers described, West Campus had a “noisy, party, social atmosphere, that didn’t necessarily help extend intellectual and learning opportunities for upper class students . . . A curtain [fell] when they left the classroom and came back to their living environment.”

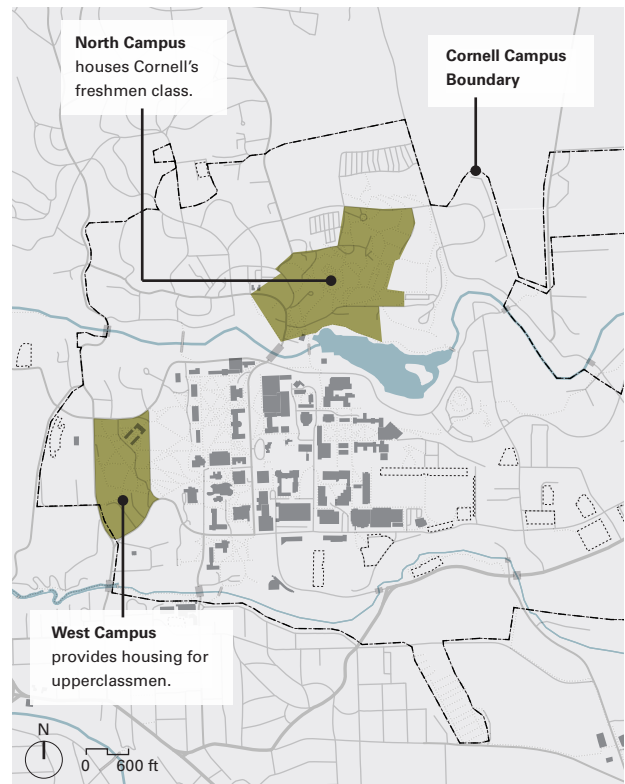
To address the division between student cultures and create a holistic experience across campus, Cornell made programmatic changes to provide alternative extracurricular opportunities in West Campus. Faculty members in residence were distributed throughout the U-Halls to provide mentorship and intellectual programs for students. However, the lack of communal spaces in the U-Halls inhibited these efforts. As a result, the U-Halls continued to be seen as places where students would stop learning at the end of the day. One Student and Academic Services leader described the need for more comprehensive and intentional interventions to reconcile the divide:

These cultures were not intentional on the part of the institution, and were, in fact, somewhat counter-productive for what the institution wanted. We were trying to address that by some of the programming and partnering we were trying to create, but I think Hunter Rawlings’ stance was that was not going to be bold enough to break this paradigm that had been building over time.

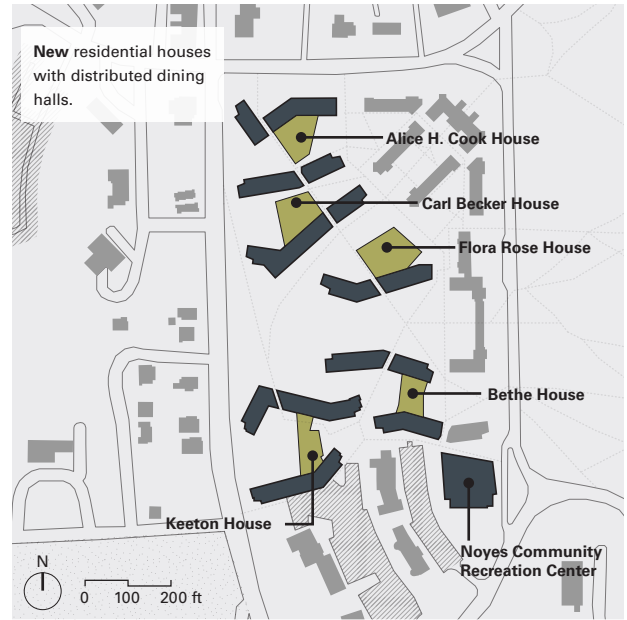
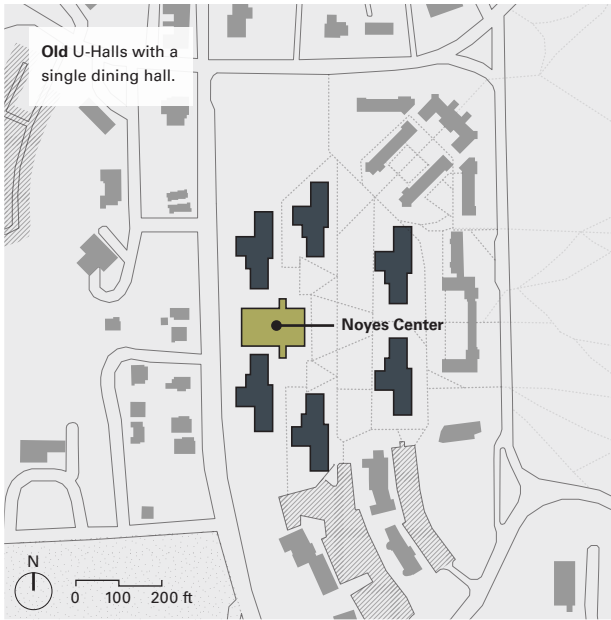
Along with a need to modernize and improve the physical conditions of housing on campus, and shift the West Campus culture, the University wanted to provide upperclassmen with an alternative to Collegetown and the Greek system. One administrator recalled, “It was a transformational statement to be able to say to our students,

“The Greek system is going to remain. It’s been here since the day we opened our doors in 1868 . . . and it’s there if you want to take it, but you don’t have to take it. We can guarantee you housing in a program that is actually going to be designed with sophomores in mind.”

As Cornell struggled to integrate its whole-student pedagogy in the West Campus dormitories, it faced a risk of falling behind in the competition for the best students. Through the 1990s, American universities were incorporating more integrated learning models that emphasized a holistic undergraduate experience. The trend followed studies published by the Carnegie Foundation in the 1980s, including Ernest Boyer’s 1987 book, *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America*, which emphasized the value of undergraduate experiences at research universities, calling for colleges to “construct an inquiry-based freshman year” and then provide students with long-term mentorship, interdisciplinary education, and communications skills.⁶ In a 1998 report, the Boyer Commission (otherwise known as the National Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University) cited initiatives to enhance the undergraduate learning experience at some of Cornell’s chief competitors, including Harvard University, Duke University, and the University of Chicago.



Above. Cornell’s undergraduate housing includes dormitories on North and West Campuses.



Top Left. This diagram shows the design of the old West Campus U-Halls with a single, centralized cafeteria that served over 1,800 students.

Top Right. The new West Campus design emphasized individual in-house dining halls to create distinct residential communities.

Above. The Noyes Community Recreation Center provides students on West Campus with access to a gymnasium, fitness center, and bouldering wall.

Project Mission

In response to these mounting campus and sector pressures, President Rawlings launched a strategic vision to transform housing on the University's North and West Campuses. In 1997, he announced his plan to move all freshmen to North Campus—a shift that would not only create a unified freshman residential area but also provide Cornell with an opportunity to reimagine West Campus.

The West Campus Residential Initiative sought to create a residential housing system—comparable to residential college systems at Oxford, Harvard, and Yale⁷—that would provide upperclassmen with an attractive housing alternative, create distinct residential communities and identities, and integrate the intellectual, cultural, and artistic life of the University into students' living experience. The initiative did not aim to increase the number of students West Campus could accommodate in on-campus housing; rather, it focused on the creation of communal and programmatic spaces to provide more academically engaged students with learning opportunities outside the classroom and access to mentorship. One project manager described the initiative's purpose as “[creating a place] where students could certainly still socialize and grow in personal skills, but also have extended opportunities beyond the classroom to interact with faculty and graduate students.”⁸ Ultimately, the West Campus Residential Initiative would give Cornell a chance to create a residential housing system that would both reflect the University's mission and values and contribute to a competitive advantage in attracting high-caliber students.⁹

Process

ESTABLISHING A PROJECT TEAM

Individual representatives from Facilities Management and Student and Academic Services (Student Services) were selected to manage the initiative. The two managers worked from the same location throughout the duration of the project to allow efficient and direct communication across the two departments. At the executive level, the assistant vice president of Student Services worked directly with a faculty leader. Student Services staff members were motivated by the potential of the new facilities to provide a fulfilling experience for all students, while faculty members envisioned spaces that extended academic and intellectual opportunities outside of classrooms.

Cornell's dean of students appointed a Faculty Planning Group to develop a guide for the physical and programmatic design of West

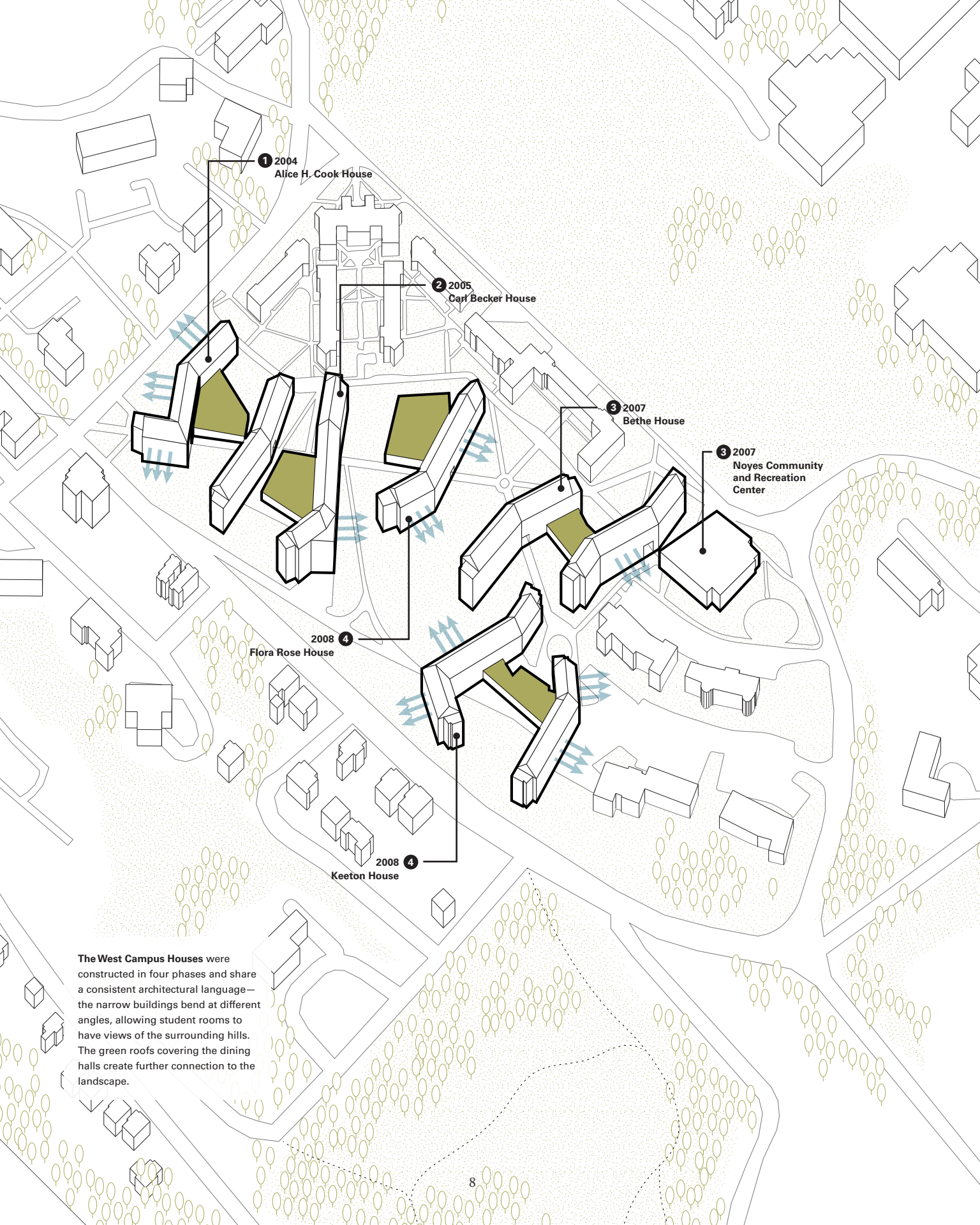
Campus. The planning group included academic faculty, staff from Student Services, and students. The vision for the housing system and programming was primarily driven by faculty leaders, with operations overseen by Student Services. In 1998, the group completed its report, “Transforming West Campus,” which recommended that the University “redesign and/or construct four or five ‘living-learning’ Houses on West Campus to support the concept of faculty leadership and involvement”¹⁰—facilitating the programming the University had previously tried to implement on West Campus.

FUNDING PROJECT INITIATIVES INTANDEM

The large scale and coinciding timing of two capital projects posed challenges to Cornell's fundraising strategy. Together, the budget for the North and West Campus initiatives totaled \$290 million (\$65 million plus \$225 million), and fundraising for both initiatives occurred in parallel due to the close relationship between the projects. The University took out loans to finance construction for the North Campus Residential Initiative, which began one year prior to the West Campus project in 1998.

The Atlantic Philanthropies, which had a long-standing relationship with Cornell through its founder Charles F. “Chuck” Feeney,ⁱⁱ contributed to both initiatives. Atlantic donated \$60.7 million for the North Campus Residential Initiative in 1998; payments on this grant were directed toward the \$65 million bond the University assumed to construct North Campus. In 2000, the Foundation committed an additional \$100 million matching grant for the West Campus Residential Initiative. The initial fundraising strategy for the matching gift was to secure ten \$10 million donations, offering naming rights on North Campus to attract donors. Forgoing naming rights was a favored Atlantic funding strategy, since grantees could then leverage the naming opportunities to generate future funding. Cornell expected the project to raise funds from alumni leaders, other university citizens, and parents of students, as it focused on the student experience. In 2002, Atlantic provided the University with an additional \$3.5 million grant to support increased staffing needs for development and fundraising.

ii *Chuck Feeney, the founder of The Atlantic Philanthropies, earned a bachelor's degree from Cornell's School of Hotel Administration in 1956. In 1982, the University became Atlantic's first grant recipient when Feeney launched the Cornell Tradition, a fellowship program that provides stipends to Cornell undergraduates with financial need who demonstrate significant academic achievement, as well as work and service accomplishments. Feeney became Cornell's largest donor from 1982 to 2016, giving more than \$600 million in grants for capital projects, including the University's Kroch Library, Statler Hotel, Beck Center in Ithaca, and Cornell Tech campus on Roosevelt Island in New York City.*



1 2004
Alice H. Cook House

2 2005
Carl Becker House

3 2007
Bethe House

3 2007
Noyes Community
and Recreation
Center

2008 4
Flora Rose House

2008 4
Keeton House

The West Campus Houses were constructed in four phases and share a consistent architectural language—the narrow buildings bend at different angles, allowing student rooms to have views of the surrounding hills. The green roofs covering the dining halls create further connection to the landscape.

However, the non-academic nature of the projects was less appealing to donors in general. By 2014, Cornell had raised \$41 million out of the hoped for \$100 million through a portion of the 10 naming donations. The naming donations that were given claimed North Campus buildings, leaving the West Campus Houses to be named after notable faculty. As a result, Cornell was left to pay off its initial loans beyond the initiatives' completion, with final payments scheduled in 2029 according to a 2014 estimate. The resulting debt and the economic crisis that began in 2008 were factors in Cornell's decision to change its funding policy for future buildings. As one University administrator commented:

We now will not put a spade in the ground without all the money up front, or at least a signed pledge with a guarantee for five years. We [also] have to provide the backstop, so we have to sequester any reserves. That certainly was not what we did with West Campus.

DEVELOPING A MASTER PLAN AND PROJECT BRIEF

While additional fundraising was being pursued, the University developed a master plan to move the West Campus project forward. The development of the master plan was included in a \$107,000 Atlantic grant to the University to support planning and programming from 1998 to 2000. An initial plan was created by Michael Dennis and Associates that reflected an earlier 1914 plan to build Gothic dormitories on West Campus, which would create a very rigid set of buildings and quads. Kieran Timberlake was then hired as the project architect, and was tasked with completing the development of the master plan, while adhering to a detailed design brief compiled by Cornell's project team. As they began to examine the feasibility of developing the Michael Dennis master plan, however, the architects discovered that it contained some critical errors that would affect the quality of life for the building occupants. For example, some rooms in the plan were located underground and were not oriented to optimize daylight, meaning they would be poorly lit and take more energy to heat and cool. As a result, Kieran Timberlake's team was tasked with producing a new master plan that resolved these issues and diverged from the traditional university quad design.

The development of a second master plan resulted in a schedule delay and a need for increased funding. According to the architect, these challenges might have been avoided if the University had invested in a single firm to be responsible for seeing the design through to completion, as in this scenario the master planning team would have been more sensitive to the ultimate feasibility of the plan. Nevertheless, by the end of the process, Cornell's project team arrived at a master plan that it felt aligned with the University's vision for West Campus.

DESIGNING FOR LIVING-LEARNING EXPERIENCES AND DISTINCT RESIDENTIAL IDENTITIES

The final plan for the West Campus Residential Initiative featured a series of five bar-shaped living-learning Houses, each designed around a dining hall and complemented by a shared Community Recreation Center.

The Houses would accommodate approximately 350 students each. This size was informed through extensive upfront research on residential college systems at peer universities—an investment made possible through Atlantic's \$107,000 planning grant. Totalling 500,000 square feet, the new buildings would double the square footage of the U-Halls and expand the University's West Campus to serve more students and faculty.¹¹ In alignment with its goal of enriching the student experience and improving campus life, Cornell focused on dedicating the added floor space to common areas such as libraries, dining halls, lounges, and seminar rooms. Common spaces would be flexible, hosting classes during the day, office hours for faculty at night, or study space for students. By embedding teaching and study spaces into the Houses, the aspiration was that students would no longer have to return to the academic core of the campus to study at night.

To facilitate the living-learning mission of West Campus, the spatial layout of the Houses would reflect the academic and extracurricular programming. Each House would include a full apartment for a House professor-dean, who would be in charge of leading the House's educational program, and his or her family. Also included in the layout were residences for a House assistant dean, who represents Student Affairs, and graduate resident fellows, who would act in lieu of resident assistants. The House professor-dean apartments would be positioned around a large living room used for hosting regular events with students. The Houses would also have suites for visiting lecturers or artists-in-residence. Student and Academic Services staff members were motivated by the project's potential to improve campus life, while faculty members were excited about extending academic engagement beyond the classroom. The layout of the buildings and the living-learning programming would reflect both these aspirations, and expose students to new opportunities for learning and inquiry.

The Houses would express slightly different personalities through the materials and finishes featured in the common spaces of each, but all would share the same exterior look and programming spaces to communicate a sense of unity. Sloped paths and sightlines would extend between Houses, creating a sense of connectedness across West Campus and to the main campus. The dining halls would feature expansive glass walls that opened spaces to the natural landscape; the angled walls would maximize views and natural light.

Faculty members describe the Houses' dining halls as the cultural and intellectual centers of each residential community. As explained



Top. The new buildings emphasize communal spaces, such as dining halls, to create a sense of community on campus.
Above. Shared spaces are designed to encourage academic engagement beyond the classroom.



Left. The five West Campus Houses feature similar exteriors to communicate unity.

by one House professor-dean, “[the dining halls are] a really critical part of the story. If you’re eating in your own building with the people that you live side-by-side with in the hallways, it creates a whole different environment.” Despite the fact that the dining halls in each House added significant expense to West Campus’ operation and maintenance costs, faculty fought for their inclusion because they were seen to be central to the project’s purpose. Another House professor-dean recalled the concept coming from an idea of family: “Where is community built at home? It’s at the dinner table . . . [We hoped that] this would be the heart of the community.”

CONSTRUCTING THE WEST CAMPUS HOUSES

The West Campus Residential Initiative broke ground in 2001. Due to the large scale of the project, Cornell initially approached the construction in five phases in order to maintain the number of beds available for students. The phasing presented additional advantages. Because the master plan was based on five variations of the same design, the project team and builders were able to learn from early phases, allowing them to iteratively refine layout, switch to a local source for construction materials, and become increasingly efficient on later Houses.

Eventually, Cornell’s project management team consolidated the construction timeline into four phases in order to reduce costs reacting to escalating steel prices—and to limit the effect of noise and other associated construction activities on students living in newly completed Houses. In order to combine the final two construction phases, the team had to reduce the size of the remaining two Houses, and the primary contractor, Welliver McGuire, hired subcontractors and assumed a broader construction management role. Despite the reduced size of the two remaining Houses, consolidating the project into four phases ultimately allowed Cornell to complete the West Campus Residential Initiative two years ahead of schedule.

Impact

The initiative has added an aesthetically attractive housing alternative for students who are both educationally and socially driven. All residents have the opportunity to take advantage of expanded living-learning and mentorship experiences, even as individual perspectives and interests affect the culture of the Houses.

OFFERING AN ATTRACTIVE HOUSING ALTERNATIVE

The new Houses opened as they were completed, between 2004 and 2008, and have been successful at attracting upperclassmen residents. Students come to West Campus for a variety of reasons: It offers a well-maintained, comparatively affordable alternative to Greek or independent off-campus housing; a convenient location near both the center of campus and Collegetown; and an included dining plan. The Houses accommodate a range of singles, doubles, and suites, which are designed to offer a modern feel with large glass windows and views of the surrounding hills.

A number of student residents are interested in the West Campus living-learning vision and holistic campus experience, but most are initially attracted to the Houses because of their proximity to classes and new appearance. For some faculty members, the fact that many students were primarily attracted by the “niceness” and convenience of the dormitories, rather than the living-learning mission, came as a surprise. As one House professor-dean attested:

We thought that what would attract the student was the [living-learning] idea and the vision that [the faculty] had. What we didn't expect was what was going to be most attractive to them was that these were new buildings . . . It was the physical appearance of the buildings as opposed to the ideas behind them.

INTEGRATING INTELLECTUAL, CULTURAL, AND ARTISTIC LIFE

While the living-learning mission may not be the primary factor for why students are attracted to reside on West Campus, administrators explained, “Once they're here, they are more likely to take advantage of the program.” Weekly events and programs planned by professors, graduate students, and undergraduates have created an opportunity for students to engage in a range of learning experiences. Each House offers a wide variety of programming, from conversations with renowned scientists to fieldtrips to local farms. Students participate in West Campus' program offerings at differing levels. One of West Campus' early administrators estimated that about a quarter of residents do not care about programming, a quarter are really excited and engaged, and about half come and go, taking advantage of some opportunities and not others.

Beyond planned program offerings, West Campus has created opportunities for more casual and diverse interactions between House members. The centrally-located common areas bring together undergraduates, graduates, and faculty members and provide many chances for connection between these often-separated groups. This exposure has built relationships between students and faculty and allowed some undergraduates to access additional mentorship and career support. As one former professor-dean described, the new

West Campus system “makes students more comfortable interacting with you, and creates a more open exchange.” Another professor-dean observed that his relationships with students tend to be more personal than in a classroom setting: “[Classroom interactions are] all focused around academically shaped content. It doesn't tend to be holistic . . . One of the things I really enjoy is actually getting to know the whole person behind the student.” According to faculty members, strengthened relationships with students in turn produce better teaching. In the words of one professor, “the more professors get involved here, the more attentiveness and sensitivity increases, and the more people become better teachers and advisors.”

The impacts of West Campus' living-learning mission extend beyond improved student-faculty relationships. One unanticipated outcome from the initiative has been an increased opportunity for cross-disciplinary networking and collaboration between faculty members. Faculty affiliated with West Campus said these connections have been important at a time when fewer community-building interactions between faculty members exist in general. Reflecting on the weekly events he hosts for graduate students and faculty in his apartment, one House professor-dean commented, “Many treasure that hour. It's a time when they get to interact with each other . . . And that's changing the University, too. I'm not sure that that was on the radar of the people who founded the system.”

PERSISTENT CHALLENGES TO COMMUNITY IDENTITY

While the design and programming of West Campus have supported opportunities for more frequent and informal interactions between House members, differences in vision between faculty and administration, a randomized admission process, and the large size of the buildings have challenged the University's ambition to foster cohesive residential communities and identities.

Differing institutional interests between faculty and Student and Academic Services (Student Services) and maintenance staff have contributed to a “disadvantageous programmatic effect” and “impact community building profoundly,” according to some faculty members. The program was developed around a strong faculty-led vision, but day-to-day operations are overseen by Student Services, and tensions between faculty members and Student Services administrators developed throughout the course of the project, affecting the governance of the Houses. As one faculty member involved in driving the West Campus vision reflected:

Every inch of the way, we had to fight Student Services people . . . Faculty have become subordinate to Student Services people in running the Houses, which is opposite to the original idea that faculty would run it and be assisted by Student Services people.

Individuals from both groups expressed that these differences in vision have detracted from the overall impact of the initiative. Some administrators felt that the faculty-led residential governance structure conflicted with Student Services' established areas of expertise and authority, while some faculty members suggested that Student Services neither understood nor supported the fundamental precepts behind the living-learning Houses.

Faculty members feel that these institutional struggles have also affected the project's vision, including reduced dining hall hours and randomized housing admissions. From the outset, the project team recognized that individual dining halls would cost more than a centralized cafeteria model, but in-House dining was deemed as a vital component of the West Campus mission. Shortly after opening, however, it became clear that the five dining halls were too expensive to operate at full capacity. As a response to the market and a need to reduce waste, Cornell scaled back operations, retaining dinner service in all the Houses but providing hot breakfast in only two. Faculty leaders were unhappy with this move, as they felt it would undermine the role of the dining halls in creating cohesive House identities. Even with this characterization, however, the dining halls on any given night remain lively and full.

In the eyes of the faculty, the decision to randomize housing admissions also undermined community-building efforts. Because of the demand for the Houses and the finite amount of on-campus housing, Student Services administrators opted to use a lottery rather than a point system or written application process to assigning residential spaces. As a result, students are not guaranteed housing on West Campus and may not be able to stay for more than one year. The resulting degree of annual turnover detracts from the project's objective of creating consistent and lasting community identities within Houses. The consequence, according to one graduate resident fellow, is that "students leave West Campus and there really isn't a tie to it."

The students themselves expressed a range of perspectives regarding the communal identity of the Houses. Some students felt that the size of the Houses may not foster the sense of community envisioned by the original project team. One resident commented that the Houses are "a little too large to have the same camaraderie that you would with 60 or 70 students." Nevertheless, many students conveyed an appreciation of West Campus' emphasis on community building. A current House assistant dean summarized what she often hears from students: "This place saved me. It is so nice to have a community to come home to."

Overall, students have expressed that there have been improvements in the sense of community on campus. According to an annual student survey conducted by Cornell's Office of Institutional Research

and Planning, student satisfaction with campus life has increased significantly since the late 1990s:

In 2014, 21 percent of responding seniors were 'very satisfied' and 52 percent were 'generally satisfied' with the sense of community on campus, compared to 8 percent 'very satisfied' and 37 percent 'generally satisfied' seniors in the 1998 Senior Survey.¹²

REMAINING COMPETITIVE THROUGH A HOLISTIC FOCUS

As of 2016, West Campus has retained its appeal to students. Even with a housing capacity increase of 250 beds,¹³ every House had a waiting list at the time of writing this case study. While it is unclear whether the Residential Initiative has impacted Cornell's competitiveness among elite universities, it developed at a time when higher education institutions were renewing their focus on the undergraduate experience, and has ultimately contributed to a model of residential housing that reflects Cornell's aspiration to be a place where "any person can find instruction in any study."¹⁴

Conclusion

In addition to creating an attractive alternative to off-campus and Greek housing, West Campus' design and programming reflect Cornell's values of equity and inquiry. According to one professor-dean, the Houses' egalitarian atmosphere supports a living-learning model that is "much more down to earth than other [residential college systems], which are often more encrusted with tradition." As he expressed, mixing students and faculty will leave students "understanding that knowledge is ordinary, that knowledge is being produced by ordinary people like them." Despite some tensions that have affected the governance of the Houses, this democratic atmosphere aligns with the University's broader aspiration to create communities that value equality and learning. As one faculty member articulated, "the structures and what's in them have had an even wider transformative effect" beyond the footprint of the initiative.

The West Campus Residential Initiative has not only played a role in transforming the University's on-campus housing model, but demonstrates how capital projects can solidify and advance institutional values. The design and programming of West Campus reflect Cornell's culture and provide an example to other universities of how residential facilities can achieve a programmatic mission.

Lessons from the West Campus Residential Initiative

Envision greater possibilities for impact.

An opportunity to create a new model: Capital projects span a wide range of scales, aspirations, and complexity. Projects that are bold in vision or large in scope may present opportunities to create more transformative change when compared with more piecemeal efforts. However, organizations must carefully consider the synergies as well as challenges of undertaking such significant initiatives.

At Cornell, a strategic decision to consolidate all freshmen on North Campus created an opportunity for the University to rethink West Campus and develop a new model for housing upperclassmen. The North and West Campus initiatives took place in succession and were able to build on one another. Because the two initiatives represented such a large portion of the University's on-campus housing, together, they were able to change Cornell's undergraduate housing model more substantively than if they had been undertaken independently. Furthermore, the close timing between the two projects allowed the West Campus Residential Initiative to harness resources and lessons learned from North Campus, contributing to a smoother project process.

However, concurrently undertaking two large and expensive capital projects also posed some challenges. The projects entered construction before fundraising was complete, and some anticipated donations failed to materialize, forcing Cornell to take out loans to pay off the North and West Campus initiatives. While the financing of the two initiatives left the University with debt to pay over multiple years, it did allow the two projects to be completed in quick succession and bring rapid change to Cornell's on-campus housing system.

Combine inside knowledge with outside expertise.

Shared internal accountability promotes integration: Project teams can be structured to combine knowledge across an organization and bridge disparate groups, particularly in the case of large institutions. The project team for Cornell's West Campus Residential Initiative was set up to enable collaboration across different University administrative departments. The initiative was overseen by two project managers, one from Facilities Management and one from Student and Academic Services. The two individuals worked side-by-side in the same office space through the project's duration, which allowed them to clearly define their roles and working relationship, understand the perspectives and priorities of the two departments, and combine their individual expertise. This structure was mirrored at the executive level as well, with the assistant vice president of Student and Academic Services collaborating directly with a faculty leader counterpart. By creating a team structure that encouraged collaboration rather than siloed roles, Cornell was able to effectively steer the implementation of the West Campus Residential Initiative.

Lessons from the West Campus Residential Initiative

See financial realities beyond opening day.

Missed cost projections have consequences: For capital projects to maintain lasting impact, physical and programmatic planning must occur in tandem; and relevant stakeholders must have a shared vision and a clear understanding of roles. In the case of Cornell's West Campus Residential Initiative, administrative and academic staff worked together to develop a new residential housing system and guide the design of the Houses. Student and Academic Services staff were motivated by the project's potential to improve campus life, while faculty were excited about extending academic engagement beyond the classroom. The layout of the buildings and the living-learning programming reflect both these aspirations; these dimensions of the initiative have exposed students to new opportunities for learning and inquiry.

Since opening, however, differing perspectives and priorities have resulted in tensions that affect how the Houses are run. Faculty members, who drive the programming, are focused on maintaining the integrity of the living-learning vision; while Student and Academic Services, who control the administration, are focused on West Campus' financial and operational sustainability. These contrasting agendas have made certain decisions contentious—including changes made to the residential admissions process. The Houses' founding faculty members envisioned a housing system that would cater to students attracted by the living-learning programming, and thus felt that students should apply for residency; whereas Student and Academic Services administrators believed that an application system would be too unwieldy, and ended up implementing a lottery system. West Campus illustrates the importance of creating a shared vision during the planning process, and anticipating its implications on the long-term operation and management of capital projects.

End Notes

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