

A HOUSE SYSTEM FOR MESSIAH COLLEGE

“In the context of student living, the challenge of creating an enthusiastic community of learning must be carefully considered. Are living arrangements simply a convenience or do they contribute to collegiate goals?” —Ernest L. Boyer¹

It is important to celebrate the many good things about campus life at Messiah College, especially our gifted student body, our committed community of educators, and our deeply shared values. Among the strengths of Messiah’s campus community is its ability to step back from the busy pace of daily life and engage in self-examination. We do this frequently as individuals, but from time to time we need to reflect together on the social structures that are intended to further our common goals as an educational community.

The explosion in size of the student body and faculty at Messiah over the past 40 years is exactly the sort of challenge that calls upon our powers of self-examination as a community. The recent growth at Messiah brings with it the opportunity to have a wider influence on the world beyond Grantham; however, size alone does not determine the kind of influence that Messiah will have.

How can Messiah best achieve its educational mission? As alumni, students, faculty, and friends of Messiah College have considered this question, we have discovered common concerns about the lives of students outside the classroom. As we have examined these issues further, we have become convinced that Messiah’s educational mission would best be achieved through the adoption of a House system² (what is often referred to as a “residential college” system). This is a model for integrating the academic and social life of the College by organizing the residence halls into decentralized, diverse, long-lasting, educator-led societies. Ultimately these societies are patterned after the colleges of the venerable English universities at Oxford and Cambridge, though this flexible model has found new life in the United States and throughout the world in recent years.³ We would like to highlight the academic, social, and spiritual benefits of a House system for everyone on campus.

ROOTLESSNESS V. STABILITY & CONTINUITY

Social stability leads to continuity: consistency over time and across generations. Traditions symbolize this continuity and, in turn, facilitate the maintenance of social stability. It is no secret that there is a stark lack of traditions at Messiah College, an institution that is fast approaching its 100th anniversary. This is not due to a lack of creativity on the part of past students and educators but rather to a lack of meaningful, locally controlled units of community,

¹ Ernest L. Boyer, *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 212.

² We believe the House nomenclature is most appropriate for residential colleges at Messiah. We have elected to capitalize the word House throughout this essay to remind readers who may not be familiar with the concept of residential colleges of the distinctive use of this term in this context. It was one of the original terms used for the Oxbridge colleges and was adopted for Harvard’s residential college system as well as for the “Greek” (fraternity & sorority) societies here in the US. The term was used at Messiah, during the 1970s, to refer to a particular floor of a residence hall. The use of the term has a well established precedence and should help to avoid giving a false impression of curricular or legal autonomy.

³ Robert J. O’Hara, *The Collegiate Way: Residential Colleges and Higher Education Reform*; <http://www.collegiateway.org>; accessed 20 November 2001.

which would provide stability in the face of natural institutional growth and change.

In his book, *College*, Messiah's most esteemed alumnus, Ernest Boyer, criticized the "certain rootlessness" that characterizes student life in centrally operated dormitory systems.⁴ In a centrally operated dormitory system, students lack both a sense of belonging to their environment and the ability to influence their environment for good. Any culture that begins to form in spite of the system is obliterated by the next campus-wide dorm lottery. Boyer commented on this rootlessness while talking about Colby College, which enrolled about 1,800 students at the time it began to move toward a residential college model.⁵ Messiah, which aims to exceed 3,000 students in the near future, is long overdue for a similar move.

We have noticed a profoundly disturbing pattern. Most freshmen arrive at Messiah visibly excited about finding others to commit to as friends and co-educators, but by the time they are upperclassmen most students seem utterly detached from campus life. Many juniors and seniors actually exhibit bitterness toward higher education and the idea of community life. In fact, 28% of all Messiah College freshmen never graduate.⁶ This is shocking, especially when we consider that 93% of our intercollegiate athletes do graduate.⁷ Messiah athletes are not smarter than the average Messiah student. We believe they are more likely to graduate because they are part of a group that existed before them and will continue after them, that knows them by name and relies on their consistent contributions.⁸ Why isn't Messiah able to nurture and harness the natural propensity toward collegiate values that we observe in new students? One answer lies in the nature of the current residential system.

In the past, a group of more than 20 sophomores and juniors from the third floor of Miller Hall deliberately sacrificed their standing in the housing lottery. These idealists decided to stay together in Miller for one more year rather than split up and move on to greener pastures. The apartments do offer a sanctuary in comparison to the dorms, where it is often difficult to study or to maintain a regular sleep schedule. The decision to stay in the dorms was a significant sacrifice for the sake of community. We applaud the ideals evident in such acts of sacrifice, but we also recognize that the problem is much larger than such individual acts can solve. The structure of

⁴ Boyer, *College*, 209.

⁵ "Colby regrouped its living units, including the former fraternity houses, into four distinct communities, which are called Residential Commons. Each common houses between three hundred and five hundred students, and varies in makeup from four dormitory units to eight. Each common also has: a dining room, adequate social space, at least one Faculty-in-Residence apartment, a group of eight to fifteen Faculty Affiliates . . ." (Boyer, *College*, 210).

⁶ U.S. News, *America's Best Colleges—Rankings Index: Northern Comprehensive Colleges—Bachelor's*; http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/college/rankings/cbach/ccnorth/tier1/t1cbach_n.htm; 19 January 2002. This is over a six-year period. This bests the pitiful national average of less than 50%, but that average only points to a nation-wide scandal that our values at Messiah should not allow us to tolerate. College is a more significant investment, in terms of time and money, than buying a new car. We would not be satisfied with a car loan default rate of greater than 25%. Neither would we be satisfied with a "lemon" rate this high.

⁷ Jack Carey, USA Today, *Awards Recognize High Athlete Graduation Rates*; <http://www.usatoday.com/sports/college/2001-07-27-grad-rates.htm>; 17 January 2002. This is also over a six-year period and proves beyond question that we are setting standards too low for college-wide graduation rates.

⁸ "[Students] are understandably more committed to organizations that are flexible, responsive, and 'cause related,' as one student put it. But even though open time and private space are crucial, a college, we believe, must be something more than a holding company of isolated enclaves. We found it significant that even with athletics and all of the student-sponsored projects, almost two out of five of today's undergraduates still do *not* feel a sense of community at their institution" (Boyer, *College*, 191).

Messiah's current residential system does more to tear apart communities than it does to nurture commitments to stability and continuity in community. Until this structure changes, individual idealists will be fighting a losing battle.

Messiah administrators have recognized for many years that the rapid growth of the student body and faculty lends a sense of urgency to the goal of cultivating more manageable and intimate units of community on campus. In light of this need, Messiah has recently taken an important step by reorganizing the academic departments into five multi-disciplinary schools. Each school provides a focused context conducive to creative scholarship. The new school deans nurture the departmental communities and push forward the most promising ideas for collaborative projects. Nevertheless, many students will not find their way into a department or school until after two years of study at Messiah, and the schools do not affect residence hall arrangements. Messiah students need established communities that welcome them their first day on campus and stick with them until graduation. A House system offers co-curricular, residence-based communities of manageable size, which complement the new schools and promote the holistic and liberal arts educational objectives of Messiah across a four-year program and across generations. The Houses ensure that every student has a home and colleagues—peers and superiors—who recognize a shared responsibility for intellectual and spiritual growth throughout their tenure at Messiah.

“Providing students with basic social stability is essential if we wish to encourage them to risk intellectual instability.”⁹ This risk is necessary if students are to grow in an honest and intellectually rigorous fashion. “Education for life does not come from watching sensitivity videos and attending panel discussions; it does not come from a couple of hours each week in a classroom; it comes from shared experience and sustained conversation in close quarters for years at a time.”¹⁰ While conducting interviews on how to improve the poor quality of student life at Duke University, Willimon and Naylor noted that “conversation within the fraternities and sororities tended to be more incisive, more honest, and more focused than conversations in [their] random, lottery housing dormitories. It really made a difference to have people in conversation who actually knew one another.”¹¹ It really does help to have a place “where students can be together in face-to-face, intimate, sustained ways.”¹²

Continuity in society provides the means for one generation to affect future generations positively. We cannot expect the current generation to make meaningful investments in community if continuity is absent or tenuous. As O'Hara notes, students must be able to identify “something that existed before them and will continue after them. The life of each year must build on the life of the year before, and students must know that their contributions to their college will endure and be remembered.”¹³ A House system allows older students to interact with younger students, knowing that these younger students are likely to grow up to help other younger students. In such a system, the tenth generation benefits from nine generations of learning and receives a much richer education. In the process, traditions are born and cherished.

⁹ Robert J. O'Hara, *Back to the Future: Residential Colleges and the Reform of Campus Life*; <http://members.home.net/mshapiro2/comments-11-1-01.htm>; accessed 20 November 2001.

¹⁰ Robert J. O'Hara, *The Collegiate Landscape of the Future*; <http://collegiateway.org/future.html>; accessed 22 November 2001.

¹¹ William H. Willimon and Thomas H. Naylor, *The Abandoned Generation: Rethinking Higher Education*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 150.

¹² *Ibid.*, 149.

¹³ O'Hara, *Collegiate Landscape of the Future*.

In a large, centrally operated dormitory system an ephemeral *context for learning* is the best we can hope for and is difficult to achieve. Messiah students deserve the giving and receiving that occurs across generations in a true *culture of learning*, which a decentralized House provides.

ANONYMITY V. DECENTRALIZED HOUSES

As Ernest Boyer points out, the deficiency of a centrally operated dormitory system goes beyond the “rootlessness” it produces; it also leads to a campus characterized by “anonymity.”¹⁴ It “fails to promote a community which can both reinforce students’ sense of themselves and also welcome and incorporate diversity and individuality. It fails to grant all students both the responsibility and the satisfaction of collective control over their environment.”¹⁵

Cardinal Newman captured the ideal when he said that a college should be “an Alma Mater, knowing her children one by one, not a foundry, or a mint, or a treadmill.”¹⁶ The greatest catalyst for apathy, violence, and vandalism on campus is anonymity. While the following is a personal testimonial, many Messiah alumni could make a similar statement:

I’ll never forget when I was a freshman living on the third floor of Miller. We were approaching finals week when a genuine riot broke out. Among other dangerous acts, students doused a police officer with a bucket full of water, urine, and feces. I remember that all I wanted to do was study my Greek and go to sleep, because finals were coming up. Instead, because of the noise, all I could do was stare out my window in bewilderment, until things began to split up around 2:00 AM. The whole event had started as a pretty fun water-fight between Miller and Naugle. But things got out of hand when a bunch of drunk and bitter seniors from Fry and Kelly apartments decided to come out and stir things up. I will NEVER forget my confusion at seeing friends that I knew, liked, and up until that day had respected taking part in the nonsense down below. It confused me even further when after that night these friends claimed that the event had been fun. It didn’t seem important to them that several people had been purposely injured, that good students were not allowed to get their rest before finals week, and that other students were arrested or suspended from campus. That was the first time I had ever observed a mob in action. It was incomprehensible to me how the individual people relinquished responsibility for their actions and how a sense of anonymity became the catalyst for some of the most vile acts I had ever witnessed. I could not understand the bitterness of the seniors I had witnessed that day, and I hoped I would never become like them. After that riot my freshman year, it was not nearly as surprising to hear of other acts of vandalism at Messiah (including the smearing of human feces around public bathroom showers and walls, theft, spray-painted messages, etc.).

“By replacing the anonymous campus mob with small and stable homes, a [House system] will raise up generations of men and women of mark who will serve not only their colleges, but also

¹⁴ Boyer, *College*, 209.

¹⁵ Colby College Commission on Campus Life, as cited in Boyer, *College*, 209-210.

¹⁶ John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University: Defined and Illustrated* (London: Longmans Green, 1896), 144.

the greater society throughout their lives.”¹⁷

If we hope to maintain a diverse and stable community over a four-year period and beyond, largeness and anonymity are our most formidable foes. Based on historical examples and the natural dynamics of human interaction, the ideal size for a House is in the range of 250-500 students.¹⁸ By working diligently, one person can learn to know 100 students every year, but this task becomes impossible as the classes increase to more than 125 students every year. For this reason the system begins to break down with more than 500 students per House. Something in the 400-500 range is probably most feasible for Messiah given financial concerns and the logistics of regrouping the current residence halls. With a student body approaching 3,000, Messiah is already large enough to have 5-6 Houses.¹⁹

Decentralized Houses provide a stable point of contact for relating the curriculum to the co-curriculum and for encouraging personal investments by students, educators, alumni and friends of the College. Houses welcome faculty as needed colleagues, scholars, and educators in the co-curricular environment. We contend that this role is not a legitimate option within the current centralized residential system. It would be inappropriate for faculty members to seek such a role without the invitation of the senior administration. The adoption of a House system functions as an official invitation, and individual faculty members will begin to see the difference they can make within the context of a small, stable House society. In addition, decentralization gives educators and students ownership of co-curricular space, allowing them to feel more comfortable in these places and to use them to their fullest. A far greater number of individuals, both faculty and students, will begin to initiate improvements in relationships, social programs, and facilities that further the educational mission of Messiah and make daily life more enjoyable.

¹⁷ O’Hara, *The Collegiate Landscape of the Future*

¹⁸ The Oxford and Cambridge colleges range from c. 200-500 undergraduates, with the majority having 300-400. Yale’s colleges range from 400-450. Harvard’s houses range from 330-450. Rice’s colleges average 310. Middlebury’s “commons” average 400 (information from respective institutional websites). Willimon and Naylor “estimate the optimum-size undergraduate learning environment to be an academic community consisting of no more than two thousand students subdivided into English-style residential colleges of around three hundred students each” (*The Abandoned Generation: Rethinking Higher Education*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI, 1995, pp. 103-104).

¹⁹ With 2,785 undergraduates, Rice has 9 residential colleges. At the time of Harvard’s transition to a residential college system, it had about 3,500 undergraduates. Yale had about 3,000; it had 2,645 when benefactor Edward Harkness graduated and recognized the need (Mark Ryan, *A Collegiate Way of Living*, Jonathan Edwards Trust: Yale, 2001). With just under 2,000 students, Middlebury College has recently instituted a system of residential colleges (called “commons”). At first Middlebury did not decentralize dining facilities, but it has recently decided it must do so in order to realize the potential of the system (*History of the Commons*; http://www.middlebury.edu/commons/enhancing_commons.html; accessed 19 January 2002; see Willimon and Naylor, *The Abandoned Generation*, 105, for discussion). It should be noted that the American liberal arts college was intentionally patterned after the Oxbridge colleges. Decades of stability were followed by rapid growth, and in that process the original model was neglected. Instead, the German research university became the de facto model for the American university. This has left us with lingering collegiate values, but no means for achieving our ideal.

We must not continue to confuse the location of Messiah College with its size. The terms “rural” and “small” are often associated, but they are different terms. The term rural has negative connotations for many. Nevertheless, we need to be clear about the fact that while Messiah’s campus is “pastoral” the student body is not “small.” The typical student has about twelve close friends and a couple hundred acquaintances. Beyond that, people are strangers.

Also, we must not let our shared Christian identity distract us from nurturing educational communities. Our shared faith may be a tool, a resource to be harnessed, but it guarantees nothing educationally. In fact, because the typical student only talks seriously with their 10 or 12 closest friends, dramatic differences in theology and world view usually go unnoticed at Messiah.

A truly collegiate community will develop as students and educators share responsibility for the holistic development of the finite number of fellow human beings within their House. Such a context “gives all students the opportunity to develop their personal abilities, to try different roles within a community that knows them and that will appreciate their service.”²⁰ Rather than letting peer pressure appeal to the lowest common denominator, decentralization promotes responsibility, consideration of others, and accountability: in sum, the development of moral character. Such decentralization also provides stable points of contact for alumni and friends of Messiah to interact with the College in meaningful ways over a lifetime. Most residential colleges appoint members of the local community as “senior fellows” who take part in regular social functions. At Messiah, one can easily imagine that local pastors, business leaders, and some residents of the Grantham Heights retirement center would enjoy being connected with a stable, intimate House community in an official way.

TRUE DIVERSITY

Universities often promote the value of ‘diversity’ in education, but the diversity they promote is usually shallow and superficial and based on little more than broad ethnic and racial categories. And while they promote the value of this superficial diversity with one hand, with the other they often actively segregate students according to temperaments and interests, thereby denying those students the benefits of deep diversity.²¹

Sometimes it is important to have groups that are focused in terms of interests, such as in academic departments. But the real world is never entirely segregated in this fashion. If Messiah aims to produce servants and leaders for the real world, we must structure learning communities that are diverse in terms of ages, ambitions, personalities, backgrounds, and academic interests. To overcome the tendency toward segregation at a school the size of Messiah all students should be part of an intimate community that embraces diversity in all its facets.²² This diversity is important because a fundamental goal of a liberal education is to learn about a vast array of issues from the perspectives of others. Houses provide such intimate, diverse communities; in a fully implemented system, every student is part of one.

As O’Hara notes, the greatest segregation that exists on every university campus is segregation by age.²³ It is critical that Messiah take a leadership role by demonstrating how to overcome this problem. Ernest Boyer, when speaking to Messiah on the occasion of its 75th anniversary, felt it important to comment about this trend in society at large: “I worry about the generation gap in which the older and the younger somehow do not communicate with each

²⁰ O’Hara, *The Collegiate Landscape of the Future*.

²¹ Robert J. O’Hara, *Foundations for the Reform of University Life*; <http://collegiateway.org/foundations.html>; 22 November 2001.

²² It is worth reminding ourselves that “Yes, colleges and universities aspiring to be communities must be exclusive—exclusively committed to those who desire an education as defined by the university. We cannot be all things to all people” (Willimon and Naylor, *The Abandoned Generation*, 151). Nevertheless, there is immeasurable value in structuring educational communities that encompass the full range of diversity within the College rather than promoting segregation. As Boyer points out, “Separateness in the name of individuality and personal preference may be another name for ignorance and prejudice” (*College*, 212).

²³ O’Hara, *The Collegiate Landscape of the Future*.

other.”²⁴ If we cannot overcome this rift within our idealistic, self-reflective community, how can we produce servants and leaders that will truly make a difference in society? Messiah College needs social structures that counteract the effect of the apartments, which lure upperclassmen away, never to be seen or heard from again by underclassmen. Upperclassmen, just like faculty members, need the intimate, stable point of contact provided by a House to encourage participation in the co-curriculum and investments in the next generation.

Age-based segregation is detrimental to any educational system. Clearly it thwarts continuity, as we have already discussed, but there are also more immediate implications that are just as tragic. From a Vygotskian “zone of proximal development” perspective, younger students at Messiah are currently separated from some of their most effective teachers, older students. To use a simple illustration: if a freshman student is at point A, and a professor is at point D, the professor may find it difficult to meet the student halfway. An upperclassman, on the other hand, would be at point B or C and could easily help the student move to point B. This type of learning may happen with little or no effort,²⁵ and is more likely to be the life-changing learning that justifies the enormous investments we make in higher education.²⁶ This learning is often touted as the advantage of having students reside on campus.

Interaction across age groups also benefits older students by allowing them to give from what they have learned. We are, in essence, cheating older students when we do not allow them to fill this unique role, which can provide them with a healthy sense of accomplishment and perspective. Older students—sophomores, juniors, and seniors—must all play an important mentoring role to freshmen, learning how to be teachers of new students. As the time-honored saying goes, “you only really learn something when you have to teach it.” Would it not be wonderful to have older students dialoging with freshmen as they struggle with an idea encountered in an Introduction to Biblical Studies course, helping them edit a paper and learn to write more proficiently, inspiring them to consider a senior thesis, or encouraging them to write for the student paper? By fostering age-based segregation in its current residential system, Messiah is depriving older students of a service-learning opportunity that would clarify their place in the world while profoundly influencing the future of younger students.

Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development applies just as well to the relationship between students of the same age, with diverse characteristics, as it does to older and younger students. Often peers with different backgrounds and interests can be powerful co-educators. A House system uses living arrangements to hold together a diverse group of individuals for educational purposes. These communities must be arbitrary, so as to encompass diversity in all its dimensions, but they must also be meaningful. There is no better way to accomplish this than through residential societies—Houses; yet it has become increasingly popular to implement special interest accommodations, such as athletic team floors, the international student house, isolated upper-class apartments, and “theme” halls. We recognize that the recent living-learning floor approach is a much needed improvement over the current system. Such communities do help students to feel less lost in the dormitory system, and they do provide a point of contact for integrating the activities of the classroom with the co-curriculum. On the down side, they serve

²⁴ Ernest L. Boyer, *Retaining the Legacy of Messiah College*, (1984); <http://www.boyercenter.org/bio/legacy.pdf>; accessed 20 November 2001.

²⁵ From a Vygotskian perspective this is due to the proximity of the teacher and learner in terms of developmental level. In addition, Houses are a place of rest where education happens in non-competitive and non-evaluative ways, so that students may not even realize they are learning. This too is in keeping with Vygotskian educational theory, which emphasizes the importance of play to the development of higher cognitive functions.

²⁶ Lev S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, Ed. M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scriber & E. Souberman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

only a self-selected part of the student population and last only one or two years. A House system improves on living-learning floors by offering genuine diversity (rather than segregation), continuity (they last more than one year), and the inclusion of all students (no student from any class—or any other group for that matter—is left out).

Continuity in a diverse community is most possible if the members are living, eating, playing, and learning together. As soon as they move apart, the connections weaken and disappear. This is the reason a residential campus is important, and it is a powerful argument for decentralizing the residential system into Houses, especially when working with a student body as large as Messiah's.

FACULTY INVOLVEMENT & LEADERSHIP

We are all familiar with the truism that the Church is not the building, but the people. The same is true for Houses. Though they need appropriate buildings to support their work, Houses are first and foremost educational societies; as such, it is critical that they have faculty involvement and leadership. Some of the benefits of this type of increased faculty involvement were highlighted in the preceding sections. In addition, House administrators and faculty fellows serve as a bridge between students and the Community of Educators. On one hand, they can bring quality education into the House, and on the other, they can relate the needs of students to the faculty and to the administration. As members of the faculty themselves, faculty fellows should have the experience, clout, and network of relationships necessary to do so effectively.

We emphasize that our call for a House system is not an indictment of current residence life professionals, whose role would only be enhanced within the House communities. Rather, we are arguing for a change in social structures that is long overdue. To curb the trend toward the marginalization and exclusive professionalization of residence education, Messiah College should open up positions in the residence halls and co-curricular programs that are legitimate positions for all scholars. Making the head of each House (often called the “master”) a senior-level faculty member will make the House an attractive context for all educators, no matter what their level of education, field of expertise, or current rank within the college bureaucracy.²⁷ “Detached from the academic structure of the university, [professional residence education] officials have not been able to create meaningful educational environments for students. Even more noxiously, some universities have come to see campus dormitories as income-generating tools analogous to parking lots and vending machines.”²⁸ The understood purpose of residence facilities must change from that of business investment to educational investment, from income generating machines to essential tools for a quality education. Decentralized, diverse, long-lasting, educator-led Houses will enable the College to manage facilities, enrollment, and educational quality in healthy ways. They will provide bottom-up pressure for quality rather than expediency. Such an arrangement ensures that Messiah keeps its sights set on “creating an enthusiastic community of learning” as opposed to “convenience” as Ernest Boyer argues we must.²⁹

²⁷ The masters' positions represent the primary cost associated with the move to a House system. They could be half-time positions. Depending on how current positions are rearranged, they could increase the number of terminal degree faculty on campus at relatively little additional cost.

²⁸ O'Hara, *Back to the Future*.

²⁹ Boyer, *College*, 212. Colby College has fallen short in this area, emphasizing student leadership over faculty leadership. The result has been something halfway between “Greek” societies and true residential colleges. If Boyer were writing today, we suspect he might reference the commons system at Middlebury College—which seems to be improving over time—rather than the one at Colby—which seems to lack full institutional support.

SUMMARY

Houses are decentralized, diverse, long-lasting, educator-led, residence-based societies. While a dormitory is organized to provide for basic physical necessities (i.e., food and shelter), a House is organized to provide for each student's intellectual, social, and spiritual development throughout four years of study.³⁰ Houses provide a point of contact for relating the curriculum to the co-curriculum and serve as a quality control mechanism on both fronts. Throughout lifetimes and across generations these stable points of contact encourage personal investments on the part of *all* current students, educators, alumni, and friends of the College.

SPECIFICS OF IMPLEMENTATION

Houses should have a high degree of freedom to manage their own space and social programs. Each House would have its own dining facilities, common social and recreational space, "library" (study and computer lab), "chapel" (prayer room), living space for resident senior fellows, and office space for faculty fellows. Most of these facilities already exist. The House system will arrange these facilities coherently and will illuminate the need for some additional facilities. Messiah's residence halls could be reorganized into Houses as depicted on the campus map below.³¹ The "master" (a senior-level faculty member and the chief administrator of the House) and "dean" (a respected educator and a counselor for student fellows) would live in the House with their families. Individual Houses could develop their own endowments over time and "buy" faculty-fellow time from the College, as managed by the master. The masters need to be appointed early in the transition to a House system, so they can cultivate an educational society and lead the discussion regarding changes in facilities that would best support the work of the House. The current residence directors (RDs) could serve as the first deans.

Houses would not determine the curriculum, but they could help the university to instantiate its ideal curriculum, especially the common learning portions of it.³² As such, we believe that it is not only appropriate but critical that a serious, campus-wide discussion of the House model proceed in concert with the discussion about common learning and the curriculum.³³

We also propose that Messiah name the first purpose-built residential college "Boyer House," in honor of alumnus Ernest Boyer. It would be a fitting tribute, since Boyer would certainly have been one of the most energetic champions of Messiah's move to a House system.

³⁰ Mark B. Ryan, *A Collegiate Way of Living: Residential Colleges and a Yale Education*, (Yale University: Jonathan Edwards College, 2001).

³¹ Grouped this way, the Houses would currently range from 485 to 715 students. Messiah should work with the larger Houses to reduce their size to 400-500 students. For these larger Houses, common space for study, meals, and other social gatherings could be created within existing buildings. In the smaller Houses, structures may need to be added—such as a dining hall connecting two residence halls.

³² As growth continues, Messiah can do it in premeditated steps (i.e., by establishing a new House), without interrupting the cultural continuity of the existing Houses or abandoning the core curriculum everyone is working so hard to define.

³³ For example, House members might take several core curriculum courses together, and core curriculum professors could be assigned to a House. Faculty fellows could hold seminars, meet one-on-one with senior thesis students, or organize workshops in which older students tutor younger students.

Facilities for the Boyer Center could be incorporated within Boyer House. This would be an excellent way to market the transition to a House system. Boyer House would be the symbolic first step toward a model of truly holistic education at Messiah, and the House system would position Messiah as a leader in higher education. This system would renew our Anabaptist commitment to community, involving students and faculty members as colleagues within the co-curriculum. It would allow the College to talk about a Messiah education as distinctive, holistic, and academically rigorous. Planning would need to begin very soon for Boyer House, and a master should be appointed to guide the process.

Finally, we must be frank in stating that we are raising this issue now because we believe the current plans for a large, centralized student union will further commit the future of the college to a “state university” or “European research university” model not in keeping with our history, values, and educational mission.³⁴ We are pleading with the leaders of Messiah College to give us a year to hold a serious campus-wide debate on this model.

While we realize that we have neglected countless details important to the implementation of a House system, we hope we have illustrated, in broad strokes, the potential benefits of a House system at Messiah College. As we are confident that the merits of adopting such a system are self-evident, we are even more confident that Messiah’s leaders are well prepared to tackle such a task.

The “campus map” graphic has been posted online to facilitate the downloading of this document in PDF format. To view the map, to learn more, and to participate in the conversation, please visit the Messiah Houses website: www.messiahhouses.org.

³⁴ The student union, as currently construed, would invest in centralized facilities that should be decentralized to support the work of the House communities and bring each House closer to its optimal size. It will also take up critical space for the development of the Houses in the future. For example, Smith House currently accommodates 650 students. To bring the number down to a more manageable 500 students, money-making dorm rooms will need to be converted to common spaces largely redundant with facilities in the proposed student union. Since the student union is unlikely to be converted to other uses, it would complicate the adoption of a House system. The student union would also require the destruction of at least three readily available masters’ residences (two of which could serve Smith House and Crist House), and it would eliminate the only potential space for the development of Smith House in future generations.