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## Behind The Curtain: Decision-Making at Hamilton College

By RYAN BLOOM  
GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

Over the past few years, Hamilton College has suggested and implemented drastic changes to social and residential life policies which, in almost every instance, have *outraged* students and alumni. In 2014 the college imposed a requirement that all students must live on campus, subjecting them to the patronizing and infantilizing attitudes that the college assumes regarding social activities and personal responsibility. While it is easy to understand the considerations leading to this specific decision, there has been talk among administration, faculty, and trustees (whom I will refrain from naming) about sanctioning students who choose to pay for on-campus housing, as required, but live off-campus in personally rented apartments. In other words, some decision-makers at Hamilton want to control and punish students' personal leisure activities and police their financial decisions made autonomously and independently of any institutional impositions.

Every year since the prohibition of off-campus housing, the college has increased the number of substance-free dorms without input from students. Of the seventeen residential halls available to upperclassmen, currently three are fully substance-free, one with its top floor designated as substance-free, and one with its top floor designated as a "quiet floor." Because substance-free dorms not only prohibit loud parties, but also prohibit the possession of alcohol in any form and by any student *and* prohibit students from being intoxicated in their own dorms even if alcohol was not consumed there, these dorms create a dichotomy on campus between "alcohol-friendly" and "alcohol-antagonistic" spaces. Consequently, many non-substance

free dorms, especially those like Bundy and South, which are heavily populated by sophomores, gain the reputation of being "alcohol-friendly" dorms. This type of reputation becomes a dangerous self-fulfilling prophecy that, arguably, is responsible for most of the "dangerous drinking" on campus. Despite this, the creation of these difficulties by increasing substance-free housing has yet to be publicly acknowledged by any member of the administration.

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And right now, only a quarter of the way through the semester, we've already seen an unwarranted crackdown on the Woolcott Co-op and residential advisors who merely set foot in the building on the night of September 1. As most, if not all, students on campus are aware of the issues with the Co-op, I will not go into the details of the situation. The point is that it demonstrates yet another instance where the Office of Residential Life has taken an unwarranted hard-line approach in dealing with students.

All of these issues share a common thread: lack of transparency. Though the decision requiring that all students live on campus was made before I matriculated, to the best of my knowledge students were not consulted beforehand and input after the fact was largely ignored. And though there may be an increased demand for substance-free housing, the number of students who enroll in the housing lottery simply "as a way to avoid Bundy" or to get a single room as an underclassman, for example, cannot be ignored and should be considered when making future decisions. Finally, there has been no public apology to the residential advisors, or to the rest of the student body, about the incendiary

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## Common Ground

By FRED POLLEVICK  
STAFF WRITER

Among the countless e-mails Hamilton students received last week, one in particular caused me to jump for joy. It told of the availability of a free ticket to "Common Ground featuring David Axelrod and Karl Rove, moderated by Susan Page." However, my joy quickly turned to apprehension for this coming event when I shared my excitement with another student. The student commented in reply: "Karl Rove really is a terrible person, though." I was struck by the gravity of this statement. I realized that the event could lead to campus-wide protests.

I remembered the events last year at the University of California-Berkeley as well as our fellow NESCAC school, Middlebury College. Last February, former Breitbart editor Milo Yiannopoulos was invited to speak at Berkeley. The campus did not respond well to the idea, and a protest resulted that according to a CNN report caused over \$100,000 in damage. These protesters "tore

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down metal barriers, set fires near the campus bookstore and damaged the construction site of a new dorm." In another case, people at Middlebury blocked Charles Murray, a libertarian and social scientist, from speaking on campus. As a result of another round of "protests," Murray feared for his safety and a faculty member was seriously injured in an attempt to defend him.

So here we are, Hamilton. There's no need to sugarcoat it: Our campus is strongly liberal, at least socially speaking. Yes, Karl Rove was a senior advisor to George W. Bush, a Republican. But this essay is not in defense of Mr. Rove's views. I am not a

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COMMON GROUND *cont.*

Republican, and am not stating that I agree with the views of Mr. Rove. What I am trying to say, and warn about using the examples above, is that Mr. Rove has the First Amendment right to freedom of speech. The purpose of this event is to allow two of the most prominent minds on each side of our political spectrum to discuss political

topics that are tearing our nation apart. It's also to invite a community of intellectuals to listen, and observe what two giants in the political field have to say. You may not agree with Mr. Rove, and you hopefully won't always agree with Mr. Axelrod, but hear them out. Hamilton has a wonderful opportunity to establish a reputation as a left-leaning college that allows free

thought and discussion, as opposed to schools like Cal and Middlebury. So I urge you, fellow Hamilton students: Hear them out. Let Wednesday, October 18, 2017 be an evening when Karl Rove and David Axelrod hold an epic debate in the field house. Do not let it be the opener to a *New York Times* article the next day about an unruly and violent protest.

BEHIND THE CURTAIN *cont.*

and unduly confrontational language used by members of the Office of Residential Life in the recent incident. The only public acknowledgement of these issues from the administration was at Student Assembly last week (September 25), where Dean Martinez equivocated on student concerns about the lack of transparency.

The Dean relied on the classic authority-figure trope: "My hope is to continue to have conversations." But, as Harry Dubke '19 noted, most students never see the results of these "conversations." More importantly, the students who are able to have these conversations are, more often than not, selected either by members of the administration or by the Student Assembly president and vice president. While the latter option seems to have democratic undertones, we ought to remember that the Student Assembly represents a very small, homogeneous group of Hamilton students. While I have no intractable qualms with the current Executive Board or the rest of the Council, it can never be considered a truly democratic process if two people have the sole authority to decide who ought to engage in these types of important discussions.

Further, it may seem that students are more involved in the drastic policy changes since all-campus emails are sent soliciting nominations for members of related committees or working groups. However, serving

on the "Imagining Hamilton" strategic planning committee made me aware that the student view is categorically ignored, objected to, or even ridiculed by faculty members and trustees. In this case, it wasn't just *my* ideas that were shot down, but the ideas of dozens of students who reached out to me with big ideas and issues they thought were important. Moreover, no student on the strategic planning committee was included in the summer working groups that looked at the practical implications of the suggested policy changes—despite the fact that all students on these committees had ensured their availability by phone over the summer.

I have held my tongue for most of my Hamilton career. As an underclassman, I naively defaulted to trusting the administration's vague rationale because I did not understand how the changes would negatively impact campus culture. As an upperclassman, I hoped in vain that I just needed more opportunities to get involved, and then I would finally come to a position where I could speak with relative authority on the state of social life on campus in a respectful dialogue with administrators. So in my

time here, I have been an organization leader, a tour guide, the chair of the Judicial Board, a Student Assembly representative, the Student Assembly treasurer, a student representative on a strategic planning committee, and a member of Hamilton Alumni Leadership Training. These various positions have given me the opportunity to speak one-on-one with trustees and members of the administration, but unfortunately my experience in each of these capacities suggests to me that student desires and concerns are consistently written off as the lowest priorities.

If anything in the school's policy-making processes concerns you, Student, it is your *obligation* to voice that concern and to engage in polite discussion with authority figures at this school; complacency and tacit acceptance get us nowhere. So yes, Dean Martinez is right that we need to continue having "conversations," but these conversations need to be demanded and driven by students, not simply offered in an effort to dodge a question. Harry Dubke '19 compiled nine clear and convincing suggestions for the Office of Residential Life and the Dean of Students to use in launching this conversation. Let us start there, and let us start now.

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## CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

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#StartTheConversation

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#CommonGround