INSIDE THE COLLEGES

Saysians? Blackbull? Groups tighten college circles

BY SARAH RIVAS
STAFF REPORTER

During the spring semester of her freshman year, Eshi Nair '27 decided to go on a beach trip with Saybrook College's Asian affinity group, Saysians. While the beach was "miserable and cold," Nair said, she huddled up on a picnic blanket eating Trader Joe's snacks with other members of Saysians.

Nair was amazed to meet so many Saybrook upperclassmen who were eager to become her friends, which transformed a bad beach day into one of her "best experiences," she said.

"I think already having different residential colleges sets up students coming to Yale to feel like they have a family, they have like a group. But having affinity groups kind of takes it a step further," Nair, now a co-president of Saysians, said.

Saysians isn't the only residential college-specific club on campus. A select number of residential colleges have student-led organizations that promote connection across grade levels and through cultural identity — clubs ranging from the Stiles Knitting Circle to Trumbull's Black affinity group Blackbull.

That opportunity, however, is not available across the board. In many colleges, clubs do not exist or have become dormant, leading some students to wish for more investment in college-specific groups.

Zara Chinwuba '29 said in a phone interview that while the peer liaison program was a "great opportunity," it didn't give her "access to any of the upperclassmen that could share in that same identity." Yale's peer liaison program connects first years with older students who can introduce them to identity-based groups, such as cultural centers.

Chinwuba said that a lack of Branford-specific clubs has created "a gap" between the different classes.

Many students who participate in residential college-specific organizations agree that they can offer intimate social experiences.

Ifeoluwa Olorunlogbon '28, a member of the executive board of Blackbrook, Saybrook's Black affinity group, said that many Black students in Saybrook enjoy attending events hosted by Blackbrook or the Afro-American Cultural Center.

Olorunlogbon added that at a school where "everyone's proud to be part of their resco" and "everyone's proud of their identity and their ethnicity," Blackbrook offers her a chance to celebrate "the intersection" of things she's "really proud of."

"I'm not just proud to be Black. I'm not just proud to be Saybrusian. I'm proud to be one of how many Black Saybrusians," Olorunlogbon said.

Nair added that residential college-specific affinity groups were "less intimidating" than University-wide ones due to their smaller scale, which allows them to function like a "family home."

Nair said that she enjoyed meeting people with a "similar background" and "exposure to food and culture" through Saysians. Since the group's events are open to "everyone," they are a great way for people unfamiliar with Asian culture to "learn about other people's cultures," she added.

Many students whose colleges do not have affinity groups expressed a desire for them.

Nelly Cepeda '29 said that Pauli Murray College "would benefit" from affinity groups. Cepeda said that because the peer liaison program is "restricted to first-years with one senior PL," she was concerned about meeting other Murray students with a similar identity once she finishes her first year.

Kyler Parker '29, a student in Murray, told the News that the college has a "lack of culture" among its students and believes that the issue "could be easily solved" by the formation of residential college groups.

"I just think that there's absolutely no reason that such a vibrant space as Murray, full of vibrant people, couldn't organize in these ways and build new connections between different affinity groups," Parker said.

Alexa Parchment '28 said that it is more difficult to attend events at the Af-Am House because it is "on the polar opposite side of campus" from Benjamin Franklin College, but an affinity group in Franklin could help ease that concern.

Claire Billings '29, however, said that she feels satisfied with the peer liaison program, which offers her a "point of contact" to engage with other Asian students in Franklin.

"I think if you have an affinity group, you need a certain number of people to be attending or to be involved. Whereas if you have PLs, it's less consequential to the impact of the program if you don't have a lot of people tapping in," Billings said.

Billings added that she questioned whether "dividing it up further" into affinity groups was helpful within the small residential colleges.

For Peyton Nguyen '29, although Pierson does not have affinity groups, the college has a strong sense of community "because Pierson's so small and kind of in the middle of nowhere."

Although groups can easily become dormant, it is also relatively easy to restart college clubs if students are interested in doing so.

"It is kind of a revolving door in the sense that a lot of them will like, there are ton that exist, and then as people want to start more, the college is pretty welcoming for people restarting or starting new clubs," Emma Popowitz '27, the president of Silliman's Student Activities & Administration Committee, said.

Kaya Basnet '27 said she was able to restart the Stiles Garden Council, which was "really big" in the "early 2000s," but had "ended around 2010."

Basnet said that doing activities with other members of her residential college has "genuinely" made her feel like Stiles is her "home" at Yale.

"Whenever I do things in Stiles, it's like, I know every single person who's like, here around me, and it's like, we're just doing this little thing that belongs to us," Basnet said.

The Stiles Knitting Circle was established in 2018, according to a Stiles website.

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Intramural sports stoke spirit for some — not most

BY ANNA KOONTZ
STAFF REPORTER

Before the cross country race even began, Katie Meine '27 stood out from all the other contestants. She was wearing a fake white beard, rocking a floppy red hat and practically radiating Davenport College pride.

Meine is one of Davenport's five intramural secretaries. The week before, she had reached out and advertised the meet to her peers.

"They'd respond with 'Do I have to be fast?' The easy answer to this was, 'No, of course not, I'm going to be running it in a gnome costume,'" Meine wrote to the News. "I think we got a lot of people who wouldn't normally participate to show up that way."

Intramural sports, known as IMs, have been a part of the Yale College experience since the early 1900s. Students competed by class year until the introduction of the residential college system in 1933, when intramurals became a college bonding experience.

The popularity of intramurals has fluctuated throughout Yale's history. In 2011, the News reported that 25 percent of undergraduates regularly participated in intramurals that year — up from 54 percent in 1942, the article noted. Last year, 19.4 percent of undergraduates participated in an intramural at least once, according to data provided by head intramural secretary Natalie Haase '27. Despite the historical decline, a subset of the student population continues to embrace these sports and introduce new recruitment strategies to sustain them.

"I think they are a great source of residential college pride," Matthew Chen '27, the Yale College Council's communications director, wrote to the News. He added that he participated in intramural volleyball a couple times during his first year. "Win or lose, students can feel closer to each other and the college they are representing knowing that they participated in this joint effort."

Decades of recreational sports at Yale

Brighton Risch '28, an intramural secretary for Jonathan Edwards College, has noticed that students' relationship with intramurals has changed over time.

"Student enthusiasm, participation, and rates have definitely dropped. In JE, if you walk around the basement, you will see many pictures of IMs from the past, and it's clear it isn't quite the same today," Risch wrote to the News.

The JE buttery boasts framed memorabilia of the 1977-78 intramural ice hockey team. A group photo shows 18 people, including the team's founder, smiling on the rink and identified by name. Another frame displays an alumnus' jersey alongside a descriptive gold plaque.

The Berkeley College buttery also contains several black-and-white photos of intramural football teams, dating from 1942 to 1956. Each shows upwards of 20 male students posing formally in uniform.

Through the eras, recreational sports at Yale have served evolving purposes. At the turn of the 20th century, the motivation for intramurals seemed to center on the need to improve students' physical fitness.

A 1918 News article included a listing of Yale's intramural offerings: baseball, crew, track, tennis and lacrosse. In another article, a year later, the professional sportswriter Hugh Fullerton presented his support for intramurals.

"It always has been a shock to me to attend a big game at New Haven or at Cambridge and see fifty wonderfully prepared, perfect physical men representing five or six thousand fellows, four-fifths of whom were flabbily-muscled and physically unfit," Fullerton wrote. "To me the majority represented the school — the others represented the skill of hired coaches."

Student teams were organized by class year until Yale established the residential college system in 1933. That same year, three alumni donated the Tyng Cup, which has since been bestowed each academic year to the college that wins the most points through intramurals.

Recreational athletics today and onwards

Anna Calkins '27, an intramural secretary for Morse College, wrote to the News that intramurals let students form new bonds across their college.

"First-years can meet and connect with upperclassmen, and it's a great way for people living off campus to stay connected to the college community," Calkins wrote.

A News article in 2011 assessed the long-term trend of declining intramural participation and credited the shift to the relatively recent increase in extracurricular activities, giving students less free time in their schedules for cornhole or a soccer match. It also pointed to a drop in varsity athletes' off-season participation in intramurals.

Nevertheless, intramural secretaries have developed strategies to encourage more student participation. They range from Meine's dressing up as a gnome to simply reaching out to friends when a team needs a couple extra players.

Several colleges use social media to advertise intramurals. The Saybrook College intramural Instagram account has over 30 posts from this semester, featuring edited videos with dramatic music. One song contains specialized lyrics, listing other residential colleges and saying "they don't wanna be us."

In Trumbull College, an Instagram account promotes weekly intramural schedules and spreads information about the time and location of upcoming games.

Several intramural secretaries noted that a team's culture varies year to year as new students enter and older ones graduate. The frequent turnover can provide fresh energy.

Meine spoke to the contributions of new first years, writing that their "new talent and passion" is what "keeps the excitement alive."

At the other end of the undergraduate experience, intramurals still carry weight for those in their final semester.

"There's a sense of urgency to participate before graduating," Asher Barondes '26, a Saybrook intramural secretary, wrote. "That feeling of 'this is our last shot' naturally energizes our class, and I believe that enthusiasm has had a trickle-down effect."

Ezra Stiles College currently holds the Tyng Cup as the 2024-25 champion.

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