

SENATE HOUSING POLICY COMMITTEE

Annual Report 2014-2015

1. The Senate Housing Policy Committee has experienced a quite moderate attendance record this year, and in the spring semester it lost one of its members, a highly valued history professor, when she resigned because she had accepted a job at Berkeley (a decision influenced to a significant degree, she said, by Columbia's failure to satisfy her basic housing needs). The committee concerned itself during the year with three issues or groups of issues, which (in rising order of complexity) are the following.

2. Student members of the committee have suggested ways in which the university's Housing website could be made more useful to graduate and GS students seeking initial housing allocations or transfers. Administration observer James Wang has entered into discussions with the student representatives about detailed changes.

3. Faculty and administration residents of Columbia housing on Claremont Avenue complained to the committee that the rebuilding of Lehman Hall by Barnard College will diminish the amenities of their apartments, since it will be much higher than the existing building. They pointed out that this negative effect will diminish the appeal of apartments that have in the past been used to attract and retain faculty. The committee discussed the matter with Provost Coatsworth, and heard a presentation from Barnard COO Robert Goldberg. It is clear that the tenants' concerns are justified, and that Barnard in response has made no concrete concession. But Barnard is apparently within its legal rights, and the committee is powerless to help the Claremont tenants in question.

4. The committee has repeatedly discussed the current administration policy of raising rents faster than the increases in the CPI. It has been aided by a detailed presentation of the university's housing income, debt and operating costs provided by James Wang. Questions have included the equity involved in keeping rents within bounds at a time of

steeply rising open-market housing, the ability of the Arts & Sciences to attract and retain faculty in a period when Manhattan housing is becoming more expensive, and the wisdom (or otherwise) of steadily reducing the university's housing debt by means of rent increases. These discussions are linked to the perceived shortage of "family-sized" apartments (three bedrooms or more). The committee needs further information about several of the matters mentioned in this paragraph, and will continue to pursue these issues next year.

5. At the committee's meeting on April 27 Provost Coatsworth presented and discussed two draft policy proposals. The first, concerning detailed changes in the tenure-track faculty rent program, met with the committee's informal approval. The second proposal, concerning the Housing Mobility Program, i.e., policies aimed at incentivizing tenants, in particular the tenants of larger apartments, to vacate university apartments, was discussed at length. The committee plans to provide a written response to this proposal.

Respectfully submitted,
William V. Harris
Committee Chair

April 30, 2015