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Residential Housing Population Revitalization: Honors Students

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INTRODUCTION

Construction is not an uncommon sight on college and university campuses today. Such importance is placed on facilities that erection, addition, and modernization costs totaled more than 14.5 billion dollars in the United States during the 2005 calendar year (Agron, 2006). Collegiate administrators have come to realize that prospective students and their guardians focus not only on the academic quality of an institution but also on the vehicle through which that product is conveyed (Hanish & Romano, 2003).

The physical environment of a campus plays an important role in the eventual selection of an institution. Students spend a great deal of time and energy discerning the distinctive merits of housing amenities before finalizing their selection (Baltic, 2001). If academic programs are comparable between institutions, any edge a college or university has with its physical plant might sway an undecided student. Of the funds devoted to erection, addition, and modernization of campus facilities, 18% were devoted to residential buildings in 2005 (Agron, 2006). Residential students are no longer willing to accept older or outdated facilities, especially when other schools or off campus competitors are more amenable to provide them what they seek (Whittington, 1974). With numerous options from which to choose, the student as a consumer must be taken seriously.

Students who choose to live on campus have more interaction with the surrounding campus facilities than those who do not. Additionally, residence halls have been shown to have a strong effect on students' satisfaction with their new environment (Forrest, Jr. & Schuh, 1976; Strange, 1991). A study by Foubert, Morrison, & Tepper (1997) concluded that residents' satisfaction with the physical facilities of the hall predicts 30% of the variance in overall hall satisfaction. Satisfaction with the residence hall experience influences selection of the living accommodations for the next year.

Given that facilities matter in forming satisfaction judgments, it makes sense that a new residence hall would attract students. Demand is high for a living environment that is equal to, if not better than, the environment with

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which the student is already familiar (Amenities Matter, 2005). Assuming the perceived economic viability is high, a new structure is likely to be at or near capacity when classes begin.

At the campus in which this study was conducted, many of the newest residence halls have special programmatic opportunities. A seamless learning environment may be created in a residence hall in the form of themed housing, such as a living learning community (Inkelas, et al., 2006). These communities can integrate curricular and co-curricular student experiences and help remove the division between work and play.

One type of living and learning environment is the honors residence hall and corresponding honors program. This study is focused on the effects a new residence hall complex had on the number of honors program students choosing to live on campus at a large, midwestern state university. The overall attractiveness of on-campus housing for honors students will be investigated through historical residential participation data. Honors program growth will be discussed along with the programmatic issues resulting from this type of configuration.

BACKGROUND

The description of an honors program offered by Stewart (1980) largely mirrors that of the current state of the honors program in this study: offerings of specialized instruction, a more intimate classroom setting, enhanced student/faculty interaction, and co-curricular activities. Opportunities exist for studying abroad as well as engaging in individual research endeavors such as a senior thesis.

This honors program first began in 1933 and in 1965 was transformed into a separate college. The program has been housed in many locations, most recently in a three-building complex on the periphery of the campus. In recent years, this complex has been underutilized by honors students largely because of the room amenities and its physical location. For the first time, in Fall 2006, the opportunity for homogeneous housing assignments for honors students emerged with the completion of a new residence hall complex. This complex was constructed to house all offices for honors college staff as well as several classrooms for in-building instruction.

The new facility was constructed with the promise of housing only honors students. Prior to this point, the existing three-building complex was designated as an honors area, but there were no restrictions precluding a non-honors student from living there. Heterogeneous housing assignments (both honors and non-honors students) became expected over time even in the complex specifically allocated to the honors college; there just was no demand for their facilities. Honors events and other coordinated programmatic activities

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were still mainly centralized in the designated honors area despite the fact that more than 85% of all residential honors students historically lived elsewhere on campus. Table 1 shows area percentages of honors students living somewhere other than in the specified honors complex. The new honors facility, denoted by Area F, became part of an existing multi-building residence hall area, hence the prior year totals.

Several decades separate the completion dates of each honors facility. As might be expected, the amenities of the newer complex are superior to the older one. Table 2 shows a comparison of the two facilities. There are also advantages beyond the physical facility itself. The perceived benefits or characteristics of the newer building can be compared to the perceived benefits of the existing facility in a process Bonnici, Campbell, and Frendenberger (1992) call benefit segmentation. This process encompasses a more holistic approach to the selection of a residence hall. Rather than looking only at amenities provided, students may see a value in the new honors complex on a psychological and emotional level. The social climate of the building may be more conducive to fostering an academic environment of which they desire to be a part. Participation in an honors college and exclusively honors residence hall environment may create an automatic peer group to ease the burden of the college transition (Rinn, 2004).

A more desirable living environment is what DeCoster (1966) sought to define in one of the first studies of housing assignments for those of high ability. The reluctance to disperse the majority of the honors populace to other residence halls is an acknowledgement of the value of the intellectual

Table 1. Percent Honors of Each Residence Hall Cluster

Area	Fall 2002	Fall 2003	Fall 2004	Fall 2005	Fall 2006
A	0.00%	0.60%	0.22%	0.39%	0.68%
B	15.46%	15.14%	12.44%	14.98%	10.64%
C	20.08%	15.94%	17.56%	16.54%	9.29%
D	4.02%	20.52%	20.44%	19.26%	13.85%
E	6.83%	3.59%	7.56%	5.84%	3.55%
F**	5.82%	3.59%	5.11%	5.45%	44.76%
G*	21.49%	11.55%	12.22%	12.84%	0.68%
H	17.07%	17.73%	14.67%	15.56%	9.12%
I	9.24%	11.35%	9.78%	9.14%	7.43%
Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

* denotes previous honors area ** denotes current honors area

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atmosphere created in the honors classes and community (Angell, 1960/2001). Still, the exclusivity of an all-honors residence hall does not come without antipathy. The segregation that occurs may create feelings of

Table 2. Facility Comparison

Facility		
Dedicated	1967	2006
Buildings	3	1
Total Floors	9	3
Capacity In Beds	223	230
Student Room		
Average Square Footage	160	265
Electrical Outlets	6	28
Air Conditioning	Yes	Yes
Lights	1	4
Flooring	Terrazzo	Carpet
Network Connection	Yes	Yes
Wireless Connection	No	Yes
Cable TV	Yes	Yes
Microfridge Provided	No	Yes
Electronic Door Locks	No	Yes
Bed Frame	Bunk	Loftable
Restroom		
Location	Communal In Wing	Private In Room
Shower	5:1	2:1
Stall	5:1	2:1
Sinks	3.75:1	2:1
Common Areas		
Open	6	3
Closed	2	8
Total Square Footage	7102	4505
Flooring	Terrazzo	Carpet
Washers	5	8
Dryers	5	8

isolation in high ability students (McClung & Stevenson, 1988). At the university in this study there are more residential honors students than what the exclusively honors complex can accommodate. Therefore, freedom of choice for the student exists, and they are able to decide if a homogeneous assignment is in their best interests.

The new 230-bed honors-exclusive facility opened for the 2006 academic year without incident. At the conclusion of the first week of classes, occupancy for the building was at a level above 96%, one of the highest on campus. The three-building complex that was formerly designated as recommended honors housing stood at approximately 69% occupied. The interest in the new complex was evident, but an unanswered question was how the new building affected the overall popularity of residential housing among high-ability students. Did the increased visibility of the honors program and subsequent promotion affect the overall numbers of honors students within the residence halls or simply congregate them in one area?

METHODOLOGY

The data for this study were acquired via the university's Office of Research, Planning and Institutional Effectiveness and Department of Residence Services. Consecutive semester records for the fall term were provided beginning with academic year 2002. Included within this material were aggregated data regarding overall institutional honors participation, historical residence hall occupancy, and class-standing breakdowns of honors students in on-campus housing. All provided information was taken from the university's official fifteenth-day census.

On the basis of this information, the specific residence hall areas that honors students populated were isolated. The relative percentage of honors students in each of these areas was calculated, culminating with the final proportions for each academic year. Over time, the percentage of students in housing who were honors students remained fairly constant (Fall 2002, 7.86%, $n = 498$; Fall 2003, 7.50%, $n = 502$; Fall 2004, 6.81%, $n = 450$; Fall 2005, 7.70%, $n = 514$; Fall 2006, 9.24%, $n = 592$) with the exception that Fall 2004 was below the expected value and Fall 2006 above. To determine whether or not these differences were statistically significant, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was employed, with the appropriate post-hoc tests.

RESULTS

Over time, significant differences were observed in the number of honors students as a percentage of on-campus residents ($F = 7.109$, $p = .000$). To discern significant year-by-year variations, the results of Tukey's Honestly

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Significant Difference (HSD) are displayed in Table 3. This table demonstrates that honors students comprised a significantly greater percentage of on-campus residents in the Fall 2006 term. No significant differences were found during the four previous academic years. With the addition of the 2006 academic year, the mean differences compared to all other semesters showed findings worthy of additional inspection.

Calculating the net difference in honors students in residential housing for Fall 2005 compared to Fall 2006 revealed an increase of 78. In that population there were 22 juniors and 22 seniors who in Fall 2005 did not live on campus and did so in Fall 2006. This increase of 44 upper-class students who

Table 3. Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD)

Origin Year	Comparison Year	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
2002	2003	.004	.005	.937	-.01	.02
	2004	.011	.005	.168	.00	.02
	2005	.002	.005	.997	-.01	.01
	2006	-.014(*)	.005	.031	-.03	.00
2003	2002	-.004	.005	.937	-.02	.01
	2004	.007	.005	.576	-.01	.02
	2005	-.002	.005	.991	-.01	.01
	2006	-.017(*)	.005	.002	-.03	.00
2004	2002	-.011	.005	.168	-.02	.00
	2003	-.007	.005	.576	-.02	.01
	2005	-.009	.005	.303	-.02	.00
	2006	-.024(*)	.005	.000	-.04	-.01
2005	2002	-.002	.005	.997	-.01	.01
	2003	.002	.005	.991	-.01	.01
	2004	.009	.005	.303	.00	.02
	2006	-.015(*)	.005	.010	-.03	.00
2006	2002	.014(*)	.005	.031	.00	.03
	2003	.017(*)	.005	.002	.00	.03
	2004	.024(*)	.005	.000	.01	.04
	2005	.015(*)	.005	.010	.00	.03

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

formerly found alternate accommodations suggests the new residence halls increased the popularity of residential housing for the high-ability students.

DISCUSSION

The addition of 78 honors students living on campus is meaningful beyond a simple numerical tally; the percentage of the increase tells a more interesting story. Overall students living on campus dropped between the semester of Fall 2005 ($n = 6671$) and Fall 2006 ($n = 6408$). Despite this 4% decrease, the yield of honors students choosing to make residence on campus increased significantly.

This one-year 15% increase of honors students in housing corresponds directly with the new residential complex opening. There are different possible explanations how the new facility might have contributed to the increase. One explanation is the promotion and marketing of the new residential facility and actual honors program. (Based on operational information given by the college, the majority of students in the honors college are recruited by the college itself; it is not nearly common that students already at the university decide to pursue the honors track.)

While recruiting the incoming class, the college distributed promotional literature and information to prospective students that contained information on the new housing complex. These promotional materials might have caused a slight increase in the total number of honors students, but, since an informal enrollment cap in the honors program limits large variations in the incoming freshman class, these materials seem an unlikely cause of the on-campus honors student increase, certainly to the extent of the observed variation.

What is likely, as Table 1 shows, is that high-ability students had previously sought out other locations on campus not because of their dislike of a homogenous assignment but because they desired a room with the perceived benefits and amenities to which they were already accustomed. The former honors-designated area had not received major renovations since its dedication nearly four decades earlier. With many on-campus alternatives as well as a large off-campus apartment market, honors students chose the more desirable non-honors accommodations over the less well-accommodated honors residence. This pattern of housing preference was altered with the opening of the new 230-bed facility, which honors students filled to near capacity for the start of the new academic year. Now honors students who had filled many of the high-demand non-honors halls before, caused a migration of residence hall assignment. More accommodations in desirable non-honors halls were now available to honors students desiring heterogeneity in their housing assignment since additional space became available. Both upper-class and

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lower-class honors students proceeded to select those rooms when they otherwise might not have.

LIMITATIONS

The data were gathered at a large, state-supported, residential campus. There are many housing opportunities outside the university but not to the extent of a commuter campus integrated into a more metropolitan or urban area. The locality of the school certainly guided the demonstrated results.

In addition, freshman and sophomore students are required by university policy to live on campus unless special exemption status has been granted. Nevertheless, over half of the net increase of honors students in residence was due to upper-class individuals not bound by this policy. Universities without such mandates might find different overall housing numbers, and a new facility might not face the high demand found in this study.

At this institution, a scholarship for residential housing may also be awarded to qualifying honors students. The overall dollar value in the pool of scholarship resources has not changed in value from academic year 2005 to academic year 2006. However, the total number of scholarships given to incoming students increased by fourteen students, decreasing the average relative size. This incentive could have had an effect on the number of incoming students and their eventual housing selection.

CONCLUSIONS

Statistically, the recent addition of the honors residence hall complex positively affected the number of high-ability students living on campus. Many of these high-ability students are now living in a homogeneous environment that provides the opportunity to increase social integration. Social integration in turn increases institutional commitment, which has been shown to be linked to persistence (Helland, Stallings, & Braxton, 2002). As previously mentioned, however, the debate in the literature continues regarding socialization outcomes of honors residence halls (Rinn, 2004). Segregation from the general student body may or may not adversely affect a high-ability student. What is unique in this case study is that the institution provided its honors students an alternative. While the new complex was near its 230 person capacity, 362 honors students found on-campus housing in another area. These students were able to choose the environment they felt best fit their needs and interests, and the net result has been the growth of the on-campus residential honors population.

For a senior honors administrator, new construction and/or renovation of existing facilities provides the opportunity to attract high-ability students to the residence halls. As this study indicates, there is empirical support for the

concept that a new facility encourages students to live on campus and can create a more vibrant academic community populated by honors students. For those administrators interested in ways to expand and promote their honors program, facility improvements can accomplish programmatic revitalization.

The new facility also has intangible value for the honors program. A newly constructed modern physical environment is important to communicating the character of the institution (Banning & Strange, 2001). To be awarded a new facility, a functional area must be regarded highly enough to merit sought-after resources. Space alone can communicate that an effective and vital program resides inside (Brown, Jr., 1991). This honors college was successful and respected before the new construction, but a highly visible honors facility helps perpetuate its growth and excellence (Cohen, 1966).

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