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The Honors Community: Furthering Program Goals by Securing Honors Housing

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INTRODUCTION

Many of us involved in honors programs and colleges assume that honors housing plays an important role in creating an honors community on campus. Some of the institutions for which we work agree and do not necessarily insist that we make the case for honors housing on campus. However, my experience this past year in attempting to bring honors housing to my campus for the second time in three years indicates that those who are involved in the decision-making process do not necessarily support honors housing. This article concerns the methods I used as Director of the University Honors Program at Southern Polytechnic State University, a small university just outside of Atlanta, Georgia, to bring honors housing back to campus after a private housing operation was given control over all campus housing. My hope is that this information will be useful in two ways: 1) documenting the roles of honors housing in honors programs, and 2) helping others who wish to bring honors housing to a campus find the support necessary to do so.

BACKGROUND

In the fall of 2002, the faculty and administration at SPSU decided to create an honors program and to hire a director. An Honors Committee was formed, and I became Director in the spring of 2003. The Honors Committee had already determined to grow the program one class at a time; therefore, we only solicited applications from freshmen students for the fall of 2003. One of the directions I received was to secure honors housing for the entering freshmen. I was able to do so with relative ease and was even able to work with the Director of Housing to plan how the housing would expand as the number of students increased in the years to come. SPSU provides housing through two residence halls on campus: Howell serves the freshmen students, and Norton serves the upperclassmen. In the fall of 2003, there were also several apartment buildings called the Courtyard Apartments on campus that were run by a private company. The Director of Housing and I determined that we would place honors students together on a floor in Howell Hall for the first year and that we

would move all honors students to Norton Hall once the Honors Program began to accept upperclassmen.

The Honors Program accepted twenty-three students into its program for the fall of 2003. Around half of these students had determined they would live on campus, and they were placed on an honors floor in Howell. They formed a small, tight community. They supported each other and the off-campus honors commuters by studying together.

In the spring of 2004, SPSU decided to add more apartments on campus in order to create more housing options for students. It also hoped that the additional housing would help to create a better sense of community for the students at large. Later that year SPSU decided to refurbish the residence halls. Because Howell's refurbishing was not complete before the fall of 2004, freshman students were placed in the new apartment buildings for the fall semester. The Director of Housing and I were only able to assure that the new honors freshmen had honors roommates. We were not able to move forward on our plans to extend honors housing. Plans went further askew in the spring of 2005 when the SPSU administration decided to hire the private company that managed the apartments on campus to manage the residence halls as well. The private company was also placed in charge of the tutoring services and the academic program run from the residence halls. Therefore, the private company took over the First-Year Resident Experience Program (FYRE). SPSU uses this program to track the progress of freshman students and to provide academic tutoring and study hours for these students.

The change in management was troubling for me because it meant establishing relationships with new people and attempting to re-establish plans that had already begun to be implemented; however, it was troubling for other reasons as well. While there may be private housing companies that work well within academic settings, the mission of such companies is not necessarily an academic mission. Instead, their mission is tied to making a profit. That the private company reports to the Vice President of Finance instead of the Vice President of Student and Enrollment Services at SPSU seems to indicate that SPSU administration agreed that the mission was about profit as well.

I began once again to work on honors housing issues, this time with the leasing manager of the private company. It was clear from the beginning that she did not want to support honors housing beyond the freshman year, so I decided to start there once again. I turned in the list of freshman honors students, and it seemed all was set for the fall of 2005. However, for reasons unknown to me, the private company did not assign honors students to room with other honors students. I found out this information through freshman students who were complaining about their roommates and about problems in the residence hall. For the entire school year I worked to resolve housing issues I had not encountered previously. It was a frustrating time. The Honors Program had grown to just over sixty members, and not one of them was in honors housing. It was hard to maintain the sense of community as the program grew and

students had only the Honors Office Suite, which included a study room, in which to meet outside of class.

In the fall of 2005, I reported my concerns to the Vice President of Student and Enrollment Services. Because he no longer played a direct roll with student housing, he was unsure of what he could do to help. However, he told me to discuss the issue with the Property Manager instead of the Leasing Manager. In other words, he was telling me to by-pass the Leasing Manager, and I did so. I made an appointment with the Property Manager, and we discussed the problems that had occurred and began to look at rectifying these issues for the fall of 2006. In January of 2006, I collected data from current students that indicated that students who were living on campus were interested in honors housing, both in the residence halls and in the apartments. I ensured that the Property Manager received this data, and in the spring of 2006 I began to send the housing office updated lists of current honors students. Discussions with the Property Manager in the summer of 2006 began to indicate that the Property Manager and I were not in agreement for fall plans, and I decided to take action. With over eighty students now in the Honors Program, I did not want to miss the opportunity for offering honors housing for a second year.

While I still am not completely sure why honors housing has lacked support, I considered the following issues as I determined my next moves:

1. In the fall of 2005, the private housing company was dealing with housing issues for the residence halls for the first time; therefore, it was their first time placing students with roommates. Students entering the apartments would have already selected their roommates.
2. As stated earlier, the private housing company reports to the business office. It seems to have a weaker working relationship with the Vice President of Student and Enrollment Services and the Dean of Student Affairs as well as the academic programs.
3. While I have received vocal support from the SPSU officials mentioned above, I have had a hard time ascertaining how deeply these officials support honors housing. I originally assumed that all agreed on the importance of honors housing since no one ever indicated the contrary, but I decided that I needed to ensure that I knew where these officials stood.

I decided three things were necessary to create buy-in: data supporting the roles honors housing plays in the honors community, a five-year plan, and a meeting that would bring all of these people together to discuss the data and the plan.

DATA COLLECTION

I determined to gather data from a short survey I would send to the National Collegiate Honors Council's listserv. Looking back on the survey I created, I wish I had done two things differently: 1) I wish I had created a more

formal survey tool; however, the survey did elicit the types of information I needed; 2) I wish I had found a way at the time that I ran the survey to ascertain the total number of schools that have residential life housing on their campuses and who have members participating in the NCHC listserv. Thus, I would have been able to ascertain if the forty-three responses I received were an adequate sampling of the larger pool. For my purposes at SPSU, the number was sufficient.

I sent the following questions to the NCHC Listserv on June 16, 2006:

1. Do you offer Honors Housing on your campus? (If you don't offer Honors Housing, skip to question 5.)
2. If so, do you locate all levels of Honors students in one location?
3. Do you have a wing of a dorm set aside or an entire dorm?
4. How important do you consider Honors Housing for the following:
   a. recruitment
   b. student success
   c. community?
5. If you don't offer Honors Housing, but do have a residential life program, why don't you offer Honors Housing? Do you think not offering it has any impact on a, b, c of question 4?

Forty-three people from different institutions responded to the above questions, and I created the following two graphs to demonstrate how the respondents answered the questions. Figure 1 concerns the availability of honors housing. It indicates that honors housing is available to all honors students at 74% of the institutions and that it is available to at least part of the honors population at another 14% of the institutions. Thus, 88% of the respondents indicated that some form of honors housing is available on their campuses. In 91% of the cases where honors housing is available, residence halls or wings of residence halls are designated for honors students. Of those who responded, 42% locate all their honors students in one location or, if they have more than one residence hall dedicated to honors students, locate honors students in the dedicated halls. Of the respondents, 19% who offer honors housing to all students indicated that they locate upperclassmen in one location and freshmen in another.

Only five respondents indicated that they do not offer honors housing. Of these, two indicated an interest in honors housing at a later date. One respondent currently did not offer it because of the newness of the honors program, and the other did not offer it because honors housing was still in the planning stages. Another respondent indicated that Residential Life offered a number of other living and learning communities and that the honors college decided not to steal from the other communities. He stated that honors students tended to congregate in two of these programs. One respondent did find a lack of interest among students, but he also indicated that students were questioned about their interest in honors housing after they were settled into the residence halls.

He stated that he is now considering a survey of incoming freshmen before they arrive on campus.

Figure 1: Availability

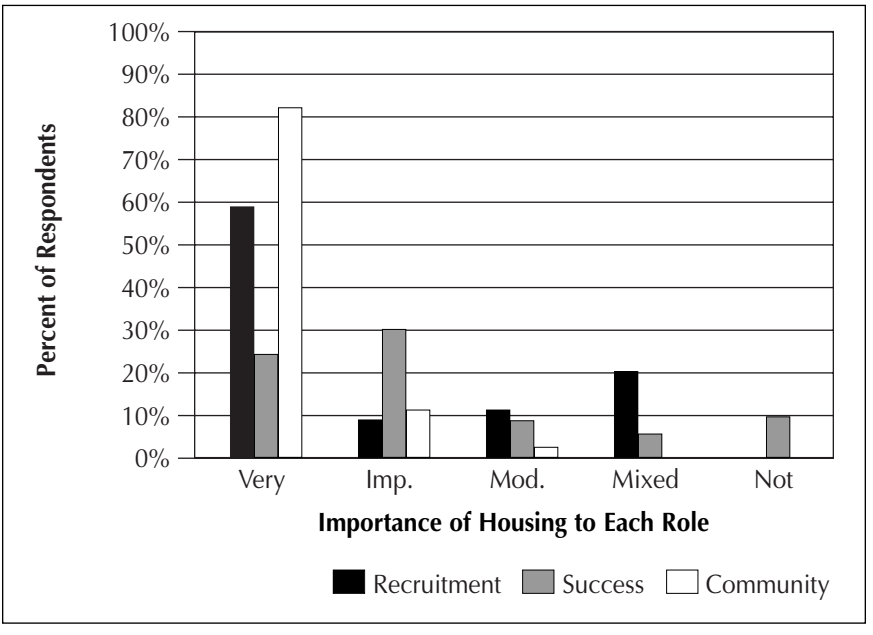
Figure 2 concerns the roles that honors housing serves for honors programs. I consider this the key graph because the results of the survey indicate the importance of honors housing to recruitment, student success, and community. This graph indicates that community is the biggest winner. Of the respondents, 83% felt that honors housing was very important to creating a sense of community for the honors program. An additional 14% found it to be important to creating a sense of community. Thus, 97% of the respondents found that honors housing is important to very important for building community in honors programs.

The graph also shows that many of the respondents found honors housing helpful in recruitment and student success. Of the respondents, 58% found honors housing to be very important to recruitment and an additional 8% found it important to recruitment. Thus, 66% of the respondents found honors housing to be important to very important for recruitment. Of the respondents, 24% indicated that honors housing was very important to student success. An additional 31% indicated it was important to student success. Therefore, 55% of the respondents agreed that honors housing was important to very important to student success in college.

The data I collected from the survey proved to be invaluable. The SPSU administration had already targeted a better sense of community on campus as one of its goals for its most recent strategic plan; therefore, the data indicating the importance of honors housing for creating community was crucial. The

comments respondents made were invaluable as well, for they clearly indicated the extent to which honors housing was important. Until I received responses from the survey, I was not fully aware of the degree to which some universities and colleges have created exemplary honors housing. The comments were eye opening. One respondent said, "Since opening our Honors Village we have seen the numbers of students and parents interested in our program grow. Over 80% of our incoming students choose to live in the Honors Village."

Figure 2: Roles Housing Plays



Another respondent stated:

> I also should mention that our honors residence hall is the newest and best on campus—all rooms are doubles (no triples allowed), larger than average, and air-conditioned. Also, there are spacious and well-equipped study lounges on each floor which are suitable for honors seminars, dinners (there are adjacent kitchens), and special honors programming. Our administration feels that the honors students deserve the housing benefits because they are academic role models for other students on campus and the very students we want most to retain.

Some respondents indicated how much the honors housing aided in recruitment. One respondent said, " I am afraid it is a key to our success. I wish it were just the curriculum . . . " Another said:

> [Honors housing is] a powerful recruitment tool. When the parents and students know that we have Honors housing, they are very excited. They tour the residence, which has a common lounge, and an academic lounge with computers (4), a copier, conference tables, fridge and microwave, and our administrative offices. The average SAT in Honors has risen every year, by 22 points last year and 64 points this year . . .

Student success was the most difficult category for respondents to assess. Of the respondents, 21% were sure that honors housing aided in student success, but they had not found a way to measure it. Thus, their responses were not included on the graph. However, several respondents were able to tie honors housing to student success. One respondent supplied a graph that showed a jump in GPA average for residential students. Students living in the residential hall were averaging a 2.9 GPA before honors housing and 3.6 after honors housing was offered. Another respondent supplied data that indicated not only high achievement from students living in the honors hall, but also high on-campus participation in organizations and activities. This respondent said, " The Honors hall helped insure student success but also gave back to campus in a disproportionately positive way."

THE FIVE-YEAR PLAN

My second strategy was to create a five-year plan. I began my plan with the ways honors housing is connected to SPSU's Strategic Plan. I was determined to use every strategy possible to ensure better cooperation in the future. SPSU's Strategic Plan has three major goals and I tied honors housing to two of these: 1) to increase enrollment and 2) to increase the sense of ownership in the success of the university among members of the university community. I addressed two specific objectives listed under the second goal: the first encourages participation across the campus, and the second encourages the development of a supportive physical environment. I then used the data I collected from the NCHC listerv survey to show how honors housing would help the university reach its goals. I emphasized the ways in which the data supported the roles honors housing might play in recruitment, community, and student success. Because one respondent had indicated the ways students in honors housing have given back to campus in a "disproportionately positive way," I made sure to indicate that a strong honors community would help the broader SPSU community. I made sure to indicate the ways honors students were already serving the campus through academic teams and organizations.

In an attempt to recognize the private company's interest in creating a profit, I also outlined the ways honors housing might help to promote residential life on campus. Because SPSU began as a commuter campus, it still recruits a good number of students who commute to campus. According to SPSU Institutional Records, 57% of freshmen and 22% of undergraduates lived in college-owned or college-affiliated housing in the 2004–05 school year, the most

recent year for which there are data. The data suggests that students who live in the halls their first year are unlikely to do so in future years; instead, they find less expensive apartments near campus. Data from the results of the NCHC listserv in several cases indicated that students often chose to remain on campus and in honors housing after their freshman year, and I used this data to suggest ways that honors housing might help keep students on campus in later years, thus creating more profit for the private housing company.

I then used the five-year plan to outline what I would like to see happen for the fall of 2006 as well as for the following four school years. For the fall of 2006, I outlined a plan that would place freshman honors students on the fourth floor of Howell Hall and asked for an honors Residential Assistant. The Property Manager had indicated in a previous conversation that she was concerned about how to handle honors students who had already requested non-honors roommates. I stated in the document that the Property Manager should honor their housing requests but should still place these students on the fourth floor. I requested better enforcement of Quiet Hours during exam weeks since I had received complaints from students concerning this issue in the spring of 2006.

For the fall of 2007, I outlined a plan that would place all honors students who live in the residential halls to be placed in one hall. I indicated my preference for Norton, the upperclassman hall, but I indicated that the Honors program would consider the freshman hall if certain "perks" such as an honors study room, kitchen, and social events were added to the current setup. In the plan I also indicated that I would like to see an Honors Living Community established in the Courtyard Apartments.

For the fall of 2008 and 2009, I outlined a plan that would expand growth through the above options as well as by finding ways to increase the "perks" of these locations. I set the fall of 2010 as an assessment year in which to thoroughly examine the honors housing issues and to see if growth has led to the type of success I wish to see. The plans would be modified according to what is learned.

THE MEETING

I met with the Property Manager, the Vice President of Student and Enrollment Services, and the Dean of Student Affairs soon after I had collected the data and had created the five-year plan. I used information from the data and from the five-year plan at the meeting. The meeting itself was important because all seemed to want to assure the others and me that honors housing did make sense. There even seemed to be an indication that the data I had collected was not necessary for the discussion. However, I made sure to discuss the data thoroughly since they are quite compelling and since they indicate that SPSU does not even begin to embrace the types of housing that other institutions support. While SPSU is a small school, I suggested that thinking big on this type of issue might help draw students to campus. I also made sure to discuss thoroughly the ways in which Honors housing ties into SPSU's strategic

plan. Only after these items were discussed did I ask everyone to look at the five-year plan, which I knew would be the most controversial issue. Finding ways to move past the freshmen housing seems to be one of the larger issues for SPSU and the Honors Program.

While the Dean of Students did not say he would not support honors housing for upperclassmen in Norton Hall and the apartments, I did sense reluctance to establish honors housing beyond the freshmen year. The Property Manager and the Vice President of Student and Enrollment Services both seemed more invested in the discussion of how honors housing could be expanded in future years.

THE RESULTS

The results of these three strategies opened the door to getting honors housing back on track at SPSU. I think the data were compelling, especially since they often showed to what degree we were not competing with other schools offering honors programs. I will return to the data in the future to remind those involved about the benefits of honors housing. The immediate result of the meeting was an honors floor in Howell Hall and an honors Resident Assistant for the floor. We also made arrangements to take advantage of using housing facilities to aid in social activities for the Honors Program.

Another result of the meeting is that I now have a better idea of where support is lacking. As I said earlier, resistance to honors housing that goes beyond the freshman experience seems to come from the Dean of Students, who believes that it is important to have all freshmen students in one residential hall. He cites the First-Year Resident Experience Program (FYRE) as one of his concerns, but it has been close to defunct since the private company took over the residence halls. The Dean of Students seems to have a strong belief that this program will be resurrected even though SPSU has handed it over to the private company to run. While the private company has information concerning FYRE on their website, they do not list a staff member who directs this program.

The Dean of Students also seems to believe that placement of all freshmen in one residential hall is beneficial to this community in and of itself. While I understand his resistance to moving freshmen out of Howell Hall, I'm not sure why he seems to be resisting honors housing for upperclassmen. Before I meet with this group once more, I will research his concerns more fully.

CONCLUSION

One of my many realizations while writing this article was that several institutions have worked quite hard to document the benefits of honors housing for honors students. However, this information needs to be better documented for the larger honors community. The wealth of information I received from NCHC listserv participants was more than what could be summed up here. While I used three solid strategies (data collection, long-term planning, and bringing all the principle players to one meeting), I am sure there must be

additional strategies others have used. It would be especially interesting to know how others have worked with their foundation offices or other groups to raise funds for a residential hall designated for honors housing.

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