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# Honors Living-Learning Communities: A Model of Success and Collaboration

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## INTRODUCTION

All too often on college campuses, academic affairs and student affairs work in near isolation from each other. In their traditional roles, academic affairs promotes students' learning in the classroom while student affairs cares for students' personal development outside the classroom. Yet, if higher education aspires to graduate students who can meet the challenges of the modern world, then universities have an obligation to launch collaborative projects that bring together the disparate facets of students' lives. Living-learning communities, a model for collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs, can meet that goal (Schroeder & Mabel, 1994).

Prior research on the effectiveness of living-learning communities has showcased the positive effects of living-learning communities on students' cognitive and psychosocial development while providing a blueprint for both academic affairs and student affairs to follow (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Boyer's (1987) research on the experiences of undergraduate students highlighted a necessity to build communities in which students are treated both as individuals and as members of a community of developing scholars. In his foundational work, Boyer called for students to approach their academic work through their connections with each other, their living space, and their experiences together outside of the classroom. Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991) research reviewed over three thousand studies that addressed cognitive and affective domains of undergraduate students and found positive gains in motivation, persistence, and retention, as well as in other psychosocial domains, by increasing students' engagement with peers in smaller groups, primarily in their housing arrangements and co-curricular activities. Astin's (1993) widely cited research and analysis of over two hundred institutions of higher education, consisting of over twenty thousand student participants, illustrated the positive impact that linking certain types of courses (notably writing and history) with certain environments (such as the residence halls) in intentional student-student and student-faculty settings can have on cognitive and psychosocial development. Ultimately, all of these studies praise the components of

what is known today as the living-learning community, in which students live together in a residential environment and share common courses, projects, and experiences while being actively engaged by faculty and staff.

Depending on their design, which can be organized by curricular interests, by career intent, or even by various themes, living-learning communities operate at the intersection between the classroom and the residence hall. As such, they help students to bridge the sometimes difficult gap between the academic world and the so-called real world, and they can bring together faculty and students in exciting ways, allowing faculty to inhabit the world of the students and not always the other way around (MacGregor, Smith, Matthews, and Gabelnick, 1997). Yet to create such an environment is no easy task; it requires space, funding, programming, organization, and, perhaps most of all, a common goal for academic affairs and student affairs.

Honors programs are not exempt from these challenges. Indeed, as Nancy L. Reichert (2007) has observed in a recent article in *Honors in Practice*, not all universities embrace the advantages of honors housing, the cornerstone of any honors living-learning community (111). Yet, according to the results of her survey, the majority of honors administrators believe that honors housing creates community among honors students, aids in the recruitment process, and promotes student success (115–16). This data helped Reichert move forward her plans to secure honors housing on her campus, but, at the close of her article, she issues a call to the honors community to share other strategies for convincing campus administrators to commit space and funds for honors housing. The present essay, which addresses housing alongside other aspects of living-learning communities, responds to that call for more information.

A few years ago, Mississippi University for Women, a small liberal-arts institution in the South, launched an honors living-learning community with the shared vision that academic affairs and student affairs should combine the curricular and the extra-curricular with the aim of promoting student success. This level of collaboration between respective areas was, to the best of our knowledge, unprecedented on our campus. In what follows, we share the evolution of this honors living-learning community from a one-semester experiment to a two-year multi-faceted program. In doing so, we demonstrate how the program evolved in response to meeting student needs as we evaluated assessment data and drew on our individual expertise. We offer our experience as a model for collaboration in the design of successful honors living-learning communities.

### YEAR ONE

The honors living-learning community at our university began as a one-semester experiment. The Vice President of Student Services thought that a living-learning community could be successful on campus and, moreover, thought that the Honors College might be the place to start. Indeed, for better or for worse, honors programs often become laboratories for new experiments on college campuses. To explore the feasibility of this project, the Vice

President of Student Services called together an *ad hoc* committee comprised of representatives from academic affairs and student affairs. The committee decided to invite fifteen first-year female students from the larger cohort of incoming honors students to participate. Considering our institutional size of just over 2000 undergraduate students, our predominantly female student population, and our restriction to single-gender housing under current statewide policies, the makeup of this group was both logical and practical. Because the honors living-learning community was an experiment without precedent on campus, the committee had no way to gauge the initial response to the program so, with funding for brochures and applications from the Office of Student Services, the committee sent out an open invitation to all qualified students. The response being better than expected, the committee decided to admit twenty, rather than fifteen, first-year female honors students.

With the members of the community selected, the committee needed to identify a living space for the community. At the time, our university did not have the luxury of reserving an entire residence hall for one community, especially one comprised of only twenty students. Yet the committee wanted to house the students in a residence hall that was intimate, recently renovated, and well located because the committee felt strongly that, in order to get the program off to a good start, the community deserved the best space possible. Thanks to the cooperation of the Office of Community Living, the housing department under the umbrella of Student Services, the committee identified one floor in a small residence hall close to major academic buildings. The residence hall already had resident assistants, but the committee felt that the community needed the mentorship of upper-level honors students who could guide the participants through their first semester at the university. To that end, the committee identified two senior female honors students who, though not formally interviewed for the positions, seemed equipped with the necessary academic and social skills to promote student success. The committee asked the mentors to interact with the community primarily on programming nights but, due to the mentors' previous housing obligations (one living on campus and the other living off campus), did not ask the mentors to live with the community. The mentors were paid hourly wages by Student Services.

Turning to the academic side of the program, the representatives from academic affairs on the committee took the lead. The committee decided that program participants would take together honors English Composition and honors History of Civilization along with an honors section of our freshman seminar. This choice was practical: English Composition and History of Civilization are typical first-year courses. The choice was also convenient: one of the most enthusiastic committee members was then head of the Division of Humanities, where those courses were housed. Because these students would have most likely taken these courses as honors or regular sections, even if the living-learning community had not existed, the Humanities Division incurred no additional costs. The division head simply earmarked those courses for the community

and selected, in coordination with the honors director, two of the division's most dynamic, student-centered faculty. In addition to taking these courses together, students participated in bi-weekly programming, typically course-related discussions, with either their faculty or their mentors. The Honors College compensated faculty for their work in the residence hall with modest stipends.

At the end of the semester, students completed evaluations comprising open-ended questions. (See Appendix A for sample questions.) According to evaluation results, students found community-building, academic and social support, and the mentors among the most positive aspects of the program, though some students did not find the bi-weekly sessions particularly beneficial. Why is not entirely clear because the comments do not reveal clear trends. However, it appears that some students may not have understood the goals of some sessions and thus became frustrated. Nevertheless, other students enjoyed the overall program so much that they requested a separate section of honors history the next semester.

### YEAR TWO

As a result of positive feedback, we decided to replicate the experiment the following fall. We repeated the previous year's program in every way—curriculum, participant demographics, and so forth—with two exceptions. The previous year's mentors argued that their work could not be easily quantified in terms of hourly wages, so Student Services compensated the mentors by paying them modest stipends for the semester. In addition, due to some changes in Community Living, the program moved from its home on one floor of a small residence hall to one wing of one floor of a larger residence hall that housed over one hundred and thirty students. The latter change proved unexpectedly decisive.

The effects of the change to a larger residence hall appear in the end-of-the-semester evaluations. In those evaluations, many students cited, once again, community-building and support networks as positive components of their program experience while some students claimed that the bi-weekly programming lacked structure and goals. However, they leveled new complaints against the residence hall. These evaluation results illustrate that the location of the residential component of the program, in this case the choice of the residence hall, can have a great effect on a program. Indeed, from aesthetics to size and location of the living space, the residence hall can make or break a program. No matter what the Honors College hoped to accomplish in the area of curricular and co-curricular programming, everything could falter if the students' living space—the place where they studied, met, and socialized—did not support the programming. The students also leveled complaints against one of the mentors. Their complaints taught us about the importance of the mentor selection. In years one and two of the program, an *ad hoc* committee selected mentors who seemed suited for the position without a formal interview process.

In year one, the selection was a success; in year two, one mentor lacked the academic and social skills to promote a cohesive community. Despite these rather disappointing evaluations, some participants did indicate a desire to continue at least some facets of the program, not just for another semester but for a second year.

### **YEAR THREE**

Building on prior success, but aware of some shortcomings, we decided to overhaul the program significantly in year three. We gave the program a distinctive name to differentiate it from other living-learning communities formed on campus. Indeed, once others on campus saw the positive effects that living-learning communities could have on student success, they wanted to launch their own communities. Along with the name, we made substantial changes to the program in response to student evaluations. We expanded the program from one semester to two years so that participants could benefit from the positive effects of the community for a longer period of time. The selection of participants also changed dramatically in an effort to improve the match between participants and program. We incorporated the program recruitment process into the overall recruitment and scholarship process for the Honors College. As part of that process, prospective students wrote essays and sat for interviews in which they were asked questions about the importance of community, their role in a community, and so forth. The essays and interviews thus allowed the Honors College to assess the appropriateness of the students for the program while communicating to them more clearly the goals and features of the program.

Not only did the participant selection change, but the living space also changed. As a result of academic affairs and student affairs working more collaboratively with a shared commitment to student academic and social growth, the Honors College moved into its own residence hall. Well placed near major academic buildings and the honors office, the small and intimate honors residence hall houses approximately forty freshman and sophomore honors students. In year three, this group was composed of twenty students drawn from the larger pool of incoming freshman honors students as well as some students drawn from the pool of rising sophomore honors students, giving priority to students who had participated in the community the previous fall as freshmen. After we had filled the residence hall with twenty incoming freshmen and some interested sophomores, room still remained. Thus, we invited additional freshman honors students who were not in the full living-learning community to participate in the residential part of the program only. While that decision may at first seem to create a division in the program, it had the benefits of keeping class sizes at twenty, having interested students available for the full program in case of mid-year attrition, and, most of all, spreading the benefits of the residence hall to as many students as possible. Participants included both female and male students because new university housing policies made it possible for female and male students to live together in one building. This change alone

illustrates how university housing can have profound effects on academic programs and how student affairs and academic affairs should work collaboratively to create a more synergistic effect on student growth and development. With a place that it could truly call its own, the Honors College was better positioned to plan programs and promote community.

The community was not complete without the mentors, whose selection and role also underwent change in year three. Because of the problems we experienced with one of the mentors in year two, the honors director asked an honors faculty member to join him in interviewing the mentors to assess their appropriateness for the position. In so doing, we could ensure that they had the skills necessary to nurture the academic and social lives of the students. We also asked the mentors to live in the residence hall to promote community-building. Once we moved the mentors into the residence hall, we had to decide how to compensate them. The Honors College took over the role of paying the mentors their stipends, while Community Living gave the mentors free rooms. We also had to decide what role the mentors would play. On the one hand, the Honors College needs a staff with skills in academic and social mentoring. However, Community Living needs a staff capable of handling emergencies, behavioral problems, and maintenance issues. We decided, on a trial basis, to give the mentors the primary role of mentorship and to ask them to report residence-hall issues to a resident assistant living in a nearby residence hall. This decision created an additional unnecessary layer of communication for maintenance problems; it also naively assumed that honors students would stick to their books and stay out of trouble. We were wrong. One student in particular challenged housing policies as well as the prerogative of the mentors, whom the student did not recognize as authority figures. As a result, we were faced with a dilemma: The student's social behavior merited reprimand or even expulsion, but the student's academic performance did not deserve dismissal from the academic part of the living-learning community. Which part of the program—the living or the learning—trumps the other when different campus policies regulate those parts and when the two parts are, after all, so closely intertwined? Without precedent, we favored the academic over the residential that time, but this situation has taught us to consider in advance the implications that violations in one area can have on another.

We altered the curriculum and enhanced the programming to match our great expectations for this newly revised program. We retained honors History of Civilization, expanding the offering to include the entire two-semester sequence, and, in response to the increasing number of students with credit for English Composition, we enrolled these students in a two-semester survey of English literature. Both sets of courses ran during the first year of the students' participation in the program. We also retained the honors section of the university's freshman seminar. The most innovative curricular change, a study-abroad program in London, became the culmination of the first year of the program. For four weeks, program participants joined their honors faculty in

London for honors seminars that built on their learning from the previous year. To offset at least some of the students' expense, Student Services generously supplied a pool of scholarship money that, once added to students' regular university scholarships, enhanced the Honors College's ability to recruit top students for the program.

In addition to revising the curriculum, we enhanced the biweekly programming. In response to students' complaints about the purpose and content of the programming, the Honors College added group dinners, films, and field trips. Not only were these new programming features more socially and academically stimulating, but they also provided students with more opportunities to bond as a community on and off campus and with more occasions to enrich their learning in the classroom, especially in preparation for the study-abroad experience. For instance, going to a regional museum allowed students to connect aesthetic traditions back to their literature courses on campus and to draw on those connections while in national galleries in London. To fund these off-campus programs, Community Living offered a budget of a few hundred dollars that the Honors College supplemented.

These changes clearly put the program back on the right track. Indeed, evaluations, which shifted from open-ended questions to Likert-scale questions, prove that point. According to evaluations, 88% of respondents were very or extremely satisfied with their physical environment while 78% said they were very or extremely close as a community. Moreover, 70% found the bi-weekly programming in and around the honors residence hall very or extremely engaging, and 81% found taking honors courses together very or extremely beneficial. Finally, 96% found the mentors very or extremely adequate. (See Appendix B for sample questions. For the sake of convenience, the evaluation results from fall and spring semesters were combined above into composite percentages. Also, both freshman and sophomore students completed the surveys.)

## YEAR FOUR

In the program's fourth year, the freshmen from year three took the sophomore spots in the residence hall, and we invited twenty incoming freshman honors students to participate in the full program and a couple of other freshman honors students to participate in the residential part of the program only. As new students came into the program, the program did undergo some changes. On the academic side, the Honors College decided to stretch out the honors courses over two years to match the students' length of residence in the honors residence hall. Although this curricular decision had the disadvantage of reducing the number of courses that the community took together in a given semester and thus reducing the intensity of that learning experience, it had the advantages of reducing potential course conflicts for twenty students and of filling out the sophomore year, in which the honors curriculum was otherwise thin. The Honors College also dropped the honors section of the freshman seminar because some students complained that, despite the benefits of the

community, they spent too much time together—a common downside of living-learning communities. Thus, the Honors College will need to balance the merits of community-building with the need to diversify social contacts. On the student-affairs side, Community Living doubled the amount of programming money that it allotted the Honors College as a way to show its faith in the program and its desire to promote it. In response to the problems that they experienced the previous year, the mentors were made resident assistants so that they could communicate maintenance and behavioral problems directly to Community Living. Their dual role as mentors and resident assistants underscores the cooperative nature of this program.

With these changes in place, the program continued to show signs of success on student evaluations, which indicated that 78% of respondents were very or extremely satisfied with their physical environment while 74% said they were very or extremely close as a community. Moreover, 80% found the bi-weekly programming in and around the honors residence hall very or extremely engaging, and 80% found taking honors courses together very or extremely beneficial. Finally, 91% found the mentors very or extremely adequate. With the exceptions of the physical environment (the rating for which went significantly down) and the bi-weekly programming (the rating for which went significantly up), evaluations remained virtually the same from year three to year four.

### RETENTION DATA

Student-satisfaction surveys are not the only way to assess program success. Retention both in the program and at the university can also indicate the degree to which a program keeps students engaged academically and socially. For program retention, we examined the first-to-second-year retention rates of honors students, both in the living-learning community and not in the community, who entered the Honors College their first year and returned to the Honors College their second year, even if they left the community for the general honors population by the second year. (The reason for broadening the definition of honors participation in the second year from specific tracks within the Honors College to the Honors College as a whole is that the program length of the community has varied from year to year. Thus, the broader definition allows for greater ease of comparison among the cohorts. Each of the four entering cohorts described below corresponds to a program year as described above.) The honors community in cohorts one, two, and four outpaced other honors students by approximately 10% each year, and the honors community in cohort three outpaced other honors students by approximately 33%. Thus, living-learning community students returned to the Honors College at a higher rate than did honors students not in the community, suggesting that something about the multi-faceted intentional programming of the community encourages students to remain in the Honors College. However, the lack-luster retention of the students not in the community is troubling. Part

of the reason for this dip in retention may have resulted from the possible division between two groups of students that we explain in a later paragraph.

For university retention, we examined the first-to-second-year retention rates at the university, whether the students stayed in the Honors College or not, for students in the community and not in the community as well as for first-time-full-time freshmen as a whole for comparison purposes. Both groups of honors students outpaced first-time-full-time freshmen every year. In fact, the honors community in cohorts one and two outpaced the freshmen as a whole by approximately 20%, the honors community in cohort three outpaced the freshmen by approximately 19%, and the honors community in cohort four outpaced the freshmen by approximately 7%. However, the difference in retention rates between the two honors groups was less dramatic and consistent. The retention rates of the two groups in cohorts one, two, and three were within approximately two to three percentage points of each other while the students not in the honors community in cohort four unexpectedly outpaced the honors community that year by 25%. The retention data for cohort four is perplexing. Although more honors-community students in that cohort are remaining in the Honors College than other honors students, more students not in the community are returning to the institution than honors-community students. Certainly, we should be glad that, even if the Honors College could not retain the students not in the community, they remained at the institution, suggesting that the Honors College may have instilled some positive habits even if the students left the program. However, we would have assumed intuitively that the benefits of the community would promote even greater persistence in its participants than it did. Clearly, the Honors College will need to track the students who enter and leave the program and the university to learn if cohort four is an anomaly or if the Honors College needs to revise its programming. (All data come from Honors College records and from institutional fact books.)

## CONCLUSION

Like all learning innovations, this honors living-learning community will continue to evolve. Part of that evolution may occur while rectifying a possible division in the honors population. Indeed, as we have experimented with one subset of honors students, we have unintentionally neglected the rest of the honors students. As a result, it now appears that a split has emerged among our honors students, who, according to anecdotal evidence, perceive a division between learning-community and non-learning-community students and between students in the first two years and students in the last two years of the program. In brief, non-learning-community students claim that they lack the benefits of the residence hall, in particular the in-house discussions, the field trips, and the study abroad. Former participants in the living-learning community who reach their junior and senior years complain that, after their first two years, they have lost the benefits of the first two years and, with those benefits, their cohesive community. To rectify this problem will require creative energy

and financial resources. On the academic side, the Honors College could create a new curriculum that would allow students to move through a set of common required courses so that they could build a shared body of knowledge. Yet, as we all know, curriculum changes take time and, though exciting, sometimes meet resistance. On the student-affairs side, Community Living could locate a larger four-year residence hall that could accommodate virtually all our honors students. Unfortunately, current resources do not permit such a strategic move. Nevertheless, if the two offices could meet these challenges, the living-learning community could hypothetically encompass the entire Honors College. Ironically, then, the living-learning community may come full circle: an experiment for a group of honors students may end as a wholesale renovation of the Honors College.

This one-semester experiment, which later metamorphosed into a two-year Residential Honors Program, began under the auspices of an *ad hoc* committee that included neither one of us; we came on board as administrators just before and just after the program's first year. Now both of us have assumed new positions, one on another campus. In the interim, we have worked with numerous faculty, administrators, and students who have shaped our thinking and facilitated our work. Indeed, the 'we' in this article often includes them, but the 'we' also refers to us, the authors of this article, whose joint goal of promoting student success has brought us together in a common mission. Being willing to communicate and to share our respective expertise has benefited our students as they navigate a successful program. Yet this collaborative experiment has benefited us as well. Without this project, we might never have had the opportunity to work together and to learn from each other. Perhaps, without even realizing it, we have been more than program administrators working on the sidelines of this successful living-learning community. Indeed, we have fulfilled one of the outcomes of any honors program: to promote life-long learning. For that experience, we are both grateful.

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## APPENDIX A

### **Sample open-ended questions used in years one and two of the program.**

1. Describe your experience of taking UN 101, EN 101, and HIS 101 with other Learning Community students? Were there advantages or disadvantages of doing so?
2. Describe your experience of living with other Learning Community students in the residence hall? Were there advantages or disadvantages of doing so?
3. Describe your interaction with the mentors. What were the advantages and disadvantages of having mentors?

## APPENDIX B

### Sample Likert-scale questions used in years three and four of the program.

1. How would you rate the quality of the physical environment in the residence hall?

not at all satisfactory	somewhat satisfactory	moderately satisfactory	very satisfactory	extremely satisfactory
1	2	3	4	5

2. How would you rate the overall sense of social community in the residence hall?

not at all close	somewhat close	moderately close	very close	extremely close
1	2	3	4	5

3. The mentors served the role of assisting with the bi-weekly programming and of assisting with the overall social dynamics for the community in the residence hall. How would you rate their overall performance in those roles.

not at all adequate	somewhat adequate	moderately adequate	very adequate	extremely adequate
1	2	3	4	5

