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CHAPTER 7

## Where Honors Lives: Old Central at Oklahoma State University

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### **ALWAYS HAVE A WISH LIST!**

The story of where honors lives at Oklahoma State University is one of a series of twists and turns over the years and in many ways actually reenacts the proverbial rags to riches story.

Until 1988, honors space at Oklahoma State University (OSU) was limited to the office of the faculty member who had the title of Honors Director in the College of Arts and Sciences (A&S) and received 0.25 FTE reassigned time for his honors duties. When one of the co-authors of this chapter was asked to become A&S Honors Director in 1988, he already had an administrative office on the A&S Dean's office floor and one of his requests was that a new Honors Program Office be situated on that floor as well. He also requested 0.75 FTE reassigned time along with a part-time student assistant to keep the office open during regular business hours

and make it accessible to current and prospective honors students. The answer to these requests—and to every other request he made before taking the job—was “yes,” and he thus learned an important lesson of honors administration: his list was too short. Over the years his constant advice to honors colleagues has been this refrain: “Always have a wish list!” The story of OSU’s current honors space, which consists of all of historic Old Central, is proof that this piece of advice sometimes pays big dividends.

The initial A&S Honors Program Office in 1988 was a converted second-floor science laboratory that had been refurbished as a conference room some years earlier. The honors staff laughingly referred to the chemical disposal sink with running water, which occupied what is now closet space in one corner of the room, as the “honors wet bar.” The rest of the room had a desk, telephone, and computer terminal (not yet an actual computer in those days) for the director at the window end of the office, while the student assistant occupied the end of the large oak conference table (a remnant from conference room days) at the end of the office near the entrance door from the hallway. However humble, the A&S Honors Program now had its own space for the first time, and it was space that gave the program substantially more visibility than it had enjoyed in previous years.

Because student participation grew over the next few years, the A&S Honors Program added a professional advising position and moved its office across the hall, which had a corner office for the director and an adjacent office for the honors advisor. While an improvement, this space occupied part of a larger suite shared with other offices housing a variety of members of the A&S Dean’s staff. Not until the university made the transition in 1989 from Arts & Sciences Honors to the OSU University Honors Program—a move made to create campus-wide honors opportunities for students in all six undergraduate colleges—did the next major phase of honors space development come. The A&S Honors Director added the title of University Honors Program Director, the position for the first time became a full-time position with a 12-month appointment, and the honors offices moved to the fifth floor of the Edmond Low

Library in the center of the OSU campus. In addition to an office for the director, a second office housed the coordinator (later to become the assistant director's position), and a third, the honors advisor. In addition the space contained a computer laboratory for students and a newly furnished student study lounge that was open from 8:00 a.m. until 10:00 p.m. As honors enrollment continued to increase, a second honors advisor's office was added, and then eventually a third. Although the space definitely was an improvement, the office configuration was still rather cramped for the five individuals who made up the OSU University Honors Program staff.

The addition of the computer lab and study lounge dramatically increased the student traffic in and around the honors program offices, but the honors space was located in an out-of-the-way corridor on the top floor of the library. This location was difficult for prospective students and their families to find—so naturally the wish list included more and better space.

## **MEANWHILE ELSEWHERE ON CAMPUS—A BUILDING WITH A STORY**

The iconic building at OSU is Old Central, the original College Building that was completed in 1894. After a period of disuse, the Oklahoma Historical Society (OHS) entered into a long-term lease with OSU to reopen the building for use as a museum of Oklahoma higher education. A curator on the OHS staff kept the building open for several hours a day, but the building's physical condition deteriorated until it had to be closed.

With a story nearly as long as that of the university itself, Old Central has served as stoic witness to periods of profound change and development on the Stillwater campus. Abraham Lincoln's signing of the Morrill Act in 1862 paved the way for the development of land-grant institutions of higher education, and although the town of Stillwater struggled for survival in 1890, the 480 residents recognized the unique opportunity for economic and educational progress associated with the location of a land-grant college in their small town. The first legislative assembly of the Oklahoma Territory

designated Payne County as the location for a new college, and as a result of the efforts by Stillwater leadership, a 200-acre plot owned by four homesteaders was transferred to the Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College Board of Regents in 1891 for the establishment of a permanent structure dedicated to higher education.

Construction of Old Central or “the College Building” originally cost \$25,000, and it opened for student use in September of 1894. It housed the Oklahoma A&M College faculty and administration, library, chemistry laboratory, classrooms, a large assembly hall, and the night watchman’s room. The building’s existence, however, has been a precarious one: Old Central has endured at least three fires, a tornado, and repeated threats of demolition. Fortunately, Old Central has had its share of advocates, too; each time the building faced destruction in the name of campus progress, members of the Stillwater community, recognizing the building’s historic importance, came forward to fight for its survival.

Old Central’s sandstone and brick masonry, heating and cooling systems, and ventilation were thoroughly modern at the time the structure was completed in 1894, but its unstable foundation required the installation of stabilizing tie-rods as early as 1914. Unseen cracks in the walls caused its popularity among students and faculty to fall quickly, and the campus newspaper deemed Old Central unsafe a year later. The founding members of Stillwater and their families petitioned to save the building, declaring it a monument to the courage of the college’s founders and to the future of education. Old Central was condemned in 1921, but when Henry G. Bennett became president of the college in 1928, he formally declared his intent to preserve the campus icon. He initiated desperately needed refurbishment and restoration of Old Central, and this period of renewal re-energized the campus community.

After Bennett’s death in 1951, however, Old Central’s future again hung in the balance. Efforts by the next president to demolish it concerned a small group of alumni and faculty who once again advocated for protection of the campus treasure. Repairs began in 1962, but despite the updates, the office of President Robert B. Kamm retired Old Central from student and administrative use

in September of 1969. In 1970, OSU entered contract negotiations between the Old Central Committee, an ad hoc group of university personnel, and OHS for the preservation of Old Central and its repurposing as a museum of higher education. Following the necessary approvals, the Secretary of the Interior placed Old Central on the National Register of Historic Places on July 27, 1971, formalizing its designation as an irreplaceable symbol of higher education in Oklahoma and a property worth preserving. With additional financial resources now available, the next phase of Old Central's restoration lasted from 1971 until 1983.

OHS maintained an office in Old Central for approximately 30 years and played a key role in the rehabilitation project that began in October of 2007. Members of the OHS staff joined a team of representatives from the office of Long-Range Facilities Planning, the honors college, TAP Architecture, and CMS Willowbrook Construction to tackle issues ranging from stabilizing the foundation to designing and furnishing classrooms and offices. The status of Old Central as an historic building required that the original spaces be preserved to the maximum degree feasible, that the turn-of-the-century feel be maintained, and that all elements of structural restoration replicate the 1894 appearance of Old Central. The OHS worked closely with the architects on every painstaking detail down to the tiles on the roof, the Victorian green belfry, the textured windows, and the age and type of wood used for repairing the woodwork. The rehabilitation project also included extensive updates to comply with building codes for ventilation, fire system requirements, and ADA regulations, but the architectural planners took great care to incorporate the modern modifications while maintaining Old Central's original look. The use of glass to create virtually invisible walls now preserves the sense of the original space in the main hallway while newly created advising offices (located in the original library) and a glass-walled elevator allow visitors to see the original sandstone foundation and interior structure of the building.

The honors college staff also had the opportunity to work with the architectural firm on the plans and to tour Old Central at various

stages throughout the rehabilitation, even venturing to the top of the scaffolding to enjoy the signs of progress and the view. Because interest in the preservation effort significantly raised Old Central's profile on campus, students and university officials often joined the touring group. The mission to restore Old Central revitalized the campus and community's enthusiasm for the safeguarding of OSU's history, and after nearly two years the project reached completion in the summer of 2009.\*

## **HOW WE GOT FROM THERE TO HERE**

The objective of securing an honors college building was one of the two top wish list items, the other being a naming gift that would endow the college for the future. As this chapter is being written, the record remains one for two, but hope springs eternal because the wish list exists.

With the arrival of a new provost on campus in 2003, the honors college arranged for a tour of the abandoned Old Central with the object of putting honors on her radar screen in the event that funding for the building's rehabilitation, as the National Register of Historic Places terms it, would present itself. Absolutely nothing happened for several years. Apparently several of the college deans on campus had their eye on Old Central for no-doubt worthy projects related to their own academic units, but at the crucial meeting of the campus space allocation committee, the provost indicated that rather than allocating Old Central to one of the six undergraduate colleges, her preference would be to make it the home of the OSU Honors College because it served students from all undergraduate colleges and academic majors. Her suggestion met with immediate acceptance: the OSU Honors College would have its own building. Planning began in earnest in 2005, and four and a half years later, in the summer of 2009 just before the start of fall classes, the honors college moved into its new home. The renovation had taken two

\*For more about the history of Oklahoma State University and the building itself, readers may enjoy Fischer, Leroy H. (1988). *Historic Old Central*. Stillwater, OK; Board of Regents of Oklahoma State University.

years of construction and an expenditure of \$6.7 million dollars to overcome the challenges involved in bringing a nineteenth-century building up to twenty-first-century standards.

## **OLD CENTRAL IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

Old Central now houses offices for the honors college staff, two classrooms, a student lounge and computer lab, a conference room, the Assembly Hall, and historic recreations of the original president's office and the night watchman's room with furniture provided by OHS. The original 1894 bell hangs in the belfry, complete with its original clapper, and although according to tradition students once rang the bell for hours after football victories, hairline cracks now limit its ringing to special occasions such as honors college award ceremonies and visits by prospective students, families, and alumni.

The offices of the director and assistant director are located on the main floor of Old Central and open onto the central hallway. Both offices have 14-foot ceilings, heavy oak doors, and transoms over the doorways. The director's office is furnished largely with period furniture, including an antique eight-foot-nine-inch grandfather clock, with a mercury-filled compensating pendulum, that once belonged to Governor Henry Johnston. The assistant director's office has some period pieces of furniture along with more modern items. The showpiece is a handcrafted breakfront china cabinet (now used as a bookcase) that was created in the Oklahoma A&M cabinet shop and once resided in the university president's office across campus.

The three honors advisors' offices and a reception desk are located across the hall in a room that in 1894 housed the entire university library and the English faculty. As part of the rehabilitation process, the architects designed glass walls with acoustical barriers to separate the three advising offices; extremely tall bookcases built into those walls provide the ambiance of a library setting. With the exception of the bentwood chairs in these offices, which harken back many years, the new furniture is modern but with a traditional style.

Although the classroom across the main hall from the assistant director's office has a capacity of 24 students, enrollment for honors sections is typically restricted to a smaller number. The room is furnished with movable tables and chairs, and honors faculty members frequently rearrange the furniture to suit their own teaching styles. A signature feature of this room is the slate blackboard that runs around the entire room, making it a favorite for professors who teach honors calculus.

The basement classroom has an identical footprint to that of the main floor classroom, but it lacks the blackboards. Its most noticeable feature, black iron pipes, once carried water and gas into the room when it was used for teaching chemistry. Today these pipes, like the steam radiators still found around the building, are completely inoperative; they remain in place to keep the building true to its original style and character.

Although the entire building has wireless Internet, the students' study lounge, which is adjacent to the basement classroom, houses a dozen desktop computers, a laser printer, and even two IBM Selectric typewriters still used by students on the rare occasion of filling out an application form that cannot be completed on a computer. Providing a nice contrast to the more modern technology are the 1911 Singer sewing machine (still operative, but with the needle safely removed) and the 1912 Remington typewriter (also operative); these museum pieces are reminders that domestic sciences were once taught in that room.

Other rooms in the basement once housed additional offices and small classrooms as well as the original boiler room, but now all the modern heating, air conditioning, and ventilation equipment required by current building codes occupy that space. The room is exceptionally tight, with all this modern equipment taking on the feel of a World War II submarine because its heavy masonry walls are weight-bearing structures that could not be altered. One alumnus visiting the building pointed to what is now the mechanical equipment room and commented, "Mrs. Ospovat flunked me in English in that classroom." His eyes actually twinkled when he saw how the room had been academically demoted.

The staircase from the main floor to the top floor offers the opportunity to view the student night watchman's room on the stairway landing. Although today's students would no doubt be appalled at the conditions, in 1894 this room was the only on-campus housing to be had—and no doubt the student appreciated having both the job and the place to live.

At the top of the staircase a conference room (also equipped with movable tables and the historic bentwood chairs) provides space for staff meetings as well as a place to meet with small groups of prospective students and families. The room also contains a barrister's bookcase stocked with copies of Dr. Fischer's *Historic Old Central* for alumni and other interested visitors. Adjacent to the conference room is a staff room for computer equipment for the classrooms, storage space, a sink, refrigerator, and microwave oven. Because of the building's status as an historic museum, no food and drink are allowed in the public portions of the building, and students and faculty have been understanding about the need to preserve Old Central's pristine condition following the multi-million dollar project to rehabilitate it.

The crown jewel of Old Central is Assembly Hall on the top floor of the building. With its arched ceiling and decorative curved beam across the top, it was the grand location where the college's first six graduates walked in 1896. In addition to an historic podium, the Assembly Hall features an 1852 square grand piano donated by an OSU alum along with an upright piano and a pump organ. Unfortunately, none of these instruments are in tune any longer because no top-level piano tuner is willing to attempt the task due to the risk of damaging the antique instruments in the process. Because the current fire code allows a seating capacity of 123 persons, the Assembly Hall is used for combined class sessions when multi-section honors seminar classes gather for a special speaker or presentation and for the Honors College Hooding Ceremony in December. The space is also available for a wide variety of special events sponsored by other campus entities. Among the more notable Assembly Hall events in the last few years have been the installation for OSU's chapter of Phi Beta Kappa, a meeting of the Provost's External Advisory Council,

a gathering of the OSU Black Alumni Association, and several weddings. The Assembly Hall, unlike many venues on campus, does not have a facility rental fee; however, those hosting the event must hire an OSU police officer (who has full law-enforcement authority on campus and by reciprocal agreement with the municipal police department) to open the building, be present throughout, and close the building at the conclusion of the event. Those using the space must, of course, also return the furniture to its original space if any of it has been moved.

Old Central continues to feature prominently in campus culture as well. Rumors abound regarding sightings in Old Central of ghosts of former faculty members and students who are reluctant to leave their alma mater. In the fall of 2012, a reporter from the campus newspaper invited a paranormal investigation team to spend a night in the building, and the resulting story described unusual activity such as temperature fluctuations, variations in electromagnetic fields, and unexplained sounds. Likely more legend than reality, such ghost stories only contribute to the character and historic presence of Old Central. As the home of the OSU Honors College, Old Central serves as an effective venue for recruitment. Each morning prospective students and their families can tour the building and explore the very origins of Oklahoma State University.

This remarkable space, truly the best space on campus, came to the OSU Honors College because it had a wish list handy and never hesitated to ask for what would best serve its constituents. Although honors programs or honors colleges may not always get their wish, the story of Old Central demonstrates that sometimes the dreams on a wish list do come true.