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Paul Strom

University of Colorado, Boulder

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CHAPTER 23

Anomalies and Ambiguities of a Faculty-in-Residence

PAUL STROM

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO, BOULDER

The idea of housing faculty with college students on a campus can certainly be traced back centuries to the college structures within universities such as the University of Paris, Oxford University, and Cambridge University. To be a faculty-in-residence at a modern university requires a conscious decision to live in an ambiguous and sometimes anomalous space that connects housing operations and academics. I occupy such a space, along with my wife and dog, a Golden Retriever, at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

Here is a most curious anomaly—that there exists a faculty residence at all within the domain of the Department of Housing. The Department of Housing is a business. Staff members keep careful accounts of costs and returns per square foot. A residence space for faculty, without rent for human occupants, without charges for utilities, and without a required meal plan, is a drain on the housing

business and contrary to a basic business plan. Thankfully, providing new spaces for faculty residences on campus fits somewhere in their calculations. According to the administrators that I have talked with in the Department of Housing, no structure or schedule exists for conversations between that unit and the academic side of the university on the matter of a shared vision of what higher education should look like here in the faculty apartment. The organizational lines merge somewhere, but such a connection does not exist at any level where faculty and students reside. The organizational lines connect only in the exosphere of administrative hierarchies. The money streams of housing do not mingle with the money streams of academics. Thus, having free space devoted to academics in the residence halls is anomalous indeed.

Although I serve as the director of the residential component of the honors program, I am still not clear who decides who is to live in this nice space my family occupies and for how long. The director of the honors program and one of the deans in the College of Arts and Sciences are involved in such decisions as well as several administrators in the Department of Housing, but no one (or maybe each one) claims ultimate authority. What in-residence faculty members are obligated to do and to whom they answer remain murky at best. No one seems to know and no one has, thankfully, asked for an accounting from me. Both the director of the honors program and the associate dean inquire occasionally about how it is going, but mostly they seem to be satisfying a curiosity rather than determining if I am meeting clear expectations. Colleagues in the College of Arts and Sciences cannot quite believe that a member of the faculty would choose to live in a residence hall and enjoy it. For their part, the Department of Housing requires a signed lease from us, but there is no mention of duties, no mention of the length of occupancy, no mention of utilities, and no regular financial obligations except for a lease for dog “guardians” in the faculty apartment, which requires a non-refundable payment of \$300 and then an additional \$30 a month pet rent: a most peculiar anomaly, especially in the otherwise liberal and pet-friendly city of Boulder.

As a faculty member in the College of Arts and Sciences, I continue to be inspired by the ideals of a liberal education described variously by many, but beautifully by John Henry Newman in the mid-nineteenth century. A liberal education, he observes, fosters “a habit of mind which lasts throughout life of which the attributes are freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom” (as cited in Palfreyman, 2008). A formal classroom, 15 weeks of attendance, examinations, lectures, and grades are, perhaps, necessary elements to the acquisition of a good liberal education, but they are not sufficient. The residential honors program is committed to the corollary notions that kitchens, unscheduled conversations among the diverse residents, the sharing of pizza or ice cream, and the modeling of curiosity and imagination from peers are also essential to a liberal education. A further step, it can be argued, is the addition of in-residence faculty members who model the attributes of a liberal education, who encourage pursuit of a liberal education in informal as well as formal contexts, and who provide a gracious welcome to undergraduates into a genuine home on campus. The hope is that a residential space that was once a warehouse for high-achieving 17- and 18-year-old students becomes an integrated community of scholars that includes at least one adult scholar.

While Newman’s list of the attributes of a liberal education appear reasonable and desirable to the maintenance of a civil and secure community of young people, the element of “freedom” as an academic goal introduces, I believe, another ambiguity and an element of instability. The ideal of freedom requires, essentially, a reflective anarchy, a questioning of authority, and thoughtful challenges to accepted orthodoxies and structures. Faculty members who encourage freedom and adventurousness and who model such lifelong commitments become a wild card in a residence. Their behavior and influences are not entirely predictable even if they are civil. The precision of a Newtonian-style social structure gives way to social groupings more like the probability clouds of quantum mechanics when faculty promoting the ideals of a liberal education are placed in-residence. The hope is that faculty and students will,

together, and through experience, find creative ways to integrate living in a community and learning in that same community.

My Partner-in-Residence and I, along with the Dog-in-Residence, have hosted honors faculty meetings and departmental functions. We have hosted meetings of administrative staff. We have welcomed spontaneous gatherings of students that were enhanced with pizza or homemade desserts. We visit with student neighbors in the hallway. We have handed out candy to costumed residents in October, and our kitchen was used to prepare a Thanksgiving dinner for about 30 students. One of my favorite planned events is modeled after the *Café Scientifique*. We call it *Café Arete*, employing an important term from Aristotle meaning “excellence.” One of our honors faculty members makes a 15-minute presentation in our apartment on some area of his or her research. A dozen students are invited to attend and respond to the presentation over dessert. Faculty are happy to have another opportunity to become acquainted with students. The faculty also report their appreciation for the opportunity to articulate something essential in their life of the mind in just 15 minutes and in a context where grades are not given. Honors students, who have only known faculty in formal settings, are delighted to discover that their instructors are passionate and curious about many things and that they have histories and families. We have had talks about growing up in Ireland, the social life of bees, and climbing adventures in the Tetons. Recently, as one student was departing and thanking us, he remarked: “I have got to come to more of these.” One student connected with an anthropology professor after her talk and joined the professor’s research team. From my perspective, *Café Arete* celebrates the intellect, experiences, and curiosity of students as well as faculty. *Café Arete* highlights how some in our community have embraced lifelong habits of the mind that exhibit freedom as well as equitableness and wisdom. Several of my colleagues have declared to students, without the least shame, that they “fell in love” with history or anthropology when they were undergraduates because of the encouragement of a faculty mentor. An apartment within a residential academic community is a wonderful place for such transformative experiences—with chocolate cake.

No single blueprint exists for organizing structures and programs consistent with the ideals of a liberal education. I certainly do not have any such blueprint; I am making much of this up as I go along. Academic stakeholders operate in the realm of ambiguity. Important to this creative experiment is that I am consciously in dialog with my student neighbors about these complexities. Despite the ambiguities and anomalies, the inclusion of faculty-in-residence provides a wonderful opportunity to create a self-replicating community of learners who offer some hope of manifesting the loftiest ideals of human education. Such a community is an antidote to the disturbing trend at institutions of higher education to balkanize learning into narrowly defined academic disciplines insulated from the lived experiences of students. Inclusive residential academic communities are an opportunity to fracture the hierarchies of power and age-based segregation that are too often a part of the experience on university campuses. Genuine learning communities will be those that succeed in integrating, in an organic and self-conscious way, a wide diversity of lived experiences as well as educational ambitions into a residential context.

REFERENCE

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