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CHAPTER 17

Winging It:
Why Offering Honors Wings Works
at Oral Roberts University

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Perhaps the first feature visitors notice about the campus of Oral Roberts University (ORU) is the drama and bravado of its futuristic architecture. With symbolic, gold-plated buildings and a Prayer Tower positioned at the campus' center, ORU's structural design certainly stands as a testament to the Jetsons-esque flavor of its 1960s and 1970s origin. ORU is a private Christian university located in Tulsa, Oklahoma. For many parents, one of the main draws of the school remains its strict policy against co-ed housing.

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Unlike some of its peer institutions, ORU only offers unisex dorms, which are divided into floors or wings. Every wing has a resident advisor, a chaplain, and a peer advisor assigned by the housing department. Each floor is then paired with a floor from the respective dorm of the opposite gender, forming a brother-sister wing.

The Oral Roberts University Honors Program officially began in August 2001, more than three decades after the university's founding. Since that time, ORU has offered honors students the option of living on four floors or wings that serve as honors housing. ORU requires that all students live on campus unless special circumstances exist. The housing office grants a policy exemption based on marital status, health concerns, or parents who live in town. Based on figures for the 2013 to 2014 school year, residential students make up about 70% of ORU's undergraduate population. Some residence floors at ORU are designated to specific sports, such as the volleyball floor or the baseball floor. These designations are not absolute; students do not have to be on the volleyball team to live on the floor, nor do they have to live on the floor if they are on the volleyball team. Besides sports, the only other designated floors are those for the honors program. Like the other designated wings, the honors floors are also open to non-honors students after honors students have first claim to open rooms. The non-honors residents are, of course, welcome members of these blended honors communities on the four wings.

Of the nearly 250 students in the honors program, 192 are residential and 54 are commuters. With the bulk of honors students living on campus, these four wings act as touchstones of the program's tradition-making, social interactions, and distinct cultural rhythms.

Honors housing at ORU generates a distinctive culture compared to other housing options. While our impression was that honors floors do something special for the honors population, we wanted to know exactly why that was, as well as why other students also thought it was this way. We created an in-depth questionnaire about honors housing at ORU, which alumni and current students completed. (See the Appendix.)

In keeping with the spiritual subtleties infused elsewhere in the ORU culture, students have given the four honors dorm floors off-beat but significant names: Bliss, Consuming Fire (CF), Brigade, and Lambda Phi. Residents refer to these bro-sis wing pairs as CF-Bliss and Bri-Phi. Honors students are not required to live on the honors floors; in fact, the designated honors floors can only accommodate approximately half of the students in the program. Offering the option of honors housing but not forcing anyone to utilize it lets each student decide what manner of housing would be most beneficial to him or her.

The composition of the honors wings tends to be predominantly freshmen because the veteran honors students are apt to become involved in campus leadership and typically fan out to other floors. Many upperclassmen note the strength and durability of the relationships with their wing-mates from freshman year. Christabel Jaiyeola, a senior, observed that “it allows students to form a support system” because these bonds formed when living together as freshmen extend throughout the entire college experience (personal communication, June 25, 2011). While the freshman honors students benefit most from the mentoring of the few upperclassmen who live on the honors floor, the great advantage of this arrangement is that the incoming students form a tight-knit group of friends who experience the highs and lows of freshman year together.

Upperclassmen generally take an extremely proactive role in making sure floor conventions are passed to the next generation of students. Consuming Fire, for example, passes the torch in the form of a 70-page manual complete with a detailed floor history, odes to successful former residents, explanations of traditions, and a rather lengthy defense of community. This often tongue-in-cheek document helps floor newcomers to feel a part of the legacy and tradition. A sense of community and the particular wing’s traditions are key to creating a distinctive honors culture. The brother-sister wings go on retreats, have game nights and sports nights at houses of alumni, organize annual Christmas parties, participate in intramurals, and organize service projects together. In addition, the student

officers on the Honors Program Council (HPC) work closely with the honors floors, either through members of the HPC who live on the floor or through the student leaders placed on the floors by the housing office. These students are normally, but not always, in the honors program. The honors housing network allows the HPC to contact honors residents directly through announcements distributed via the housing office, which probably reaches half of the university's honors students and leads to increased attendance at the events. Senior Eleanor Turk agrees:

I was better informed about honors events because they were a part of the lives of every person on the floor. I had strong friendships with people on my floor, and was more inclined to attend honors events and participate in the honors program. (personal communication, June 25, 2011)

Honors housing benefits the honors program by forming cohorts of students who are more likely to participate in honors events because they are more likely to hear about them and because all of their friends are attending. The honors program also now has a Facebook page through which all honors students and faculty may communicate about activities, events, questions, and important news.

Although ORU is a relatively small school with limited housing capacity, the benefits of housing dedicated to honors in terms of the advice, recommendations, and community provided for the incoming honors freshmen are significant and justify the preservation of the program. The honors wings play an important role in helping students pick classes, buy books, and navigate honors course assignments. They also help incoming freshmen reach their potential academically and socially.

The danger that comes with separate honors housing, however, is that the residents will see themselves as a separate and privileged group, possibly becoming insular as a result. Because this environment can create a sort of honors bubble that is not beneficial for the growth of a student, each floor intentionally tries to ensure that its residents do not become a clique that fosters the belief that its members are somehow better than other students. Thus honors

students are highly encouraged to become involved in leadership positions, intramurals, and service activities across campus. Much of this motivation comes via the mentoring of upperclassmen who either previously lived on the honors floors or are living there currently. The blended culture of honors and non-honors students on the floor also encourages students to forge valuable relationships beyond the confines of the honors program. Students clearly value the diversity this policy adds to their experience of living in designated honors housing.

As a university that promotes a holistic—spirit, mind, and body—education, Oral Roberts University encourages and supports positive peer influences. Alumni remember developing these healthy peer relationships as part of the blended communities on honors floors. Many alumni stay connected with the friends made from their time in honors housing and network with current students. Alum Karl Utz offers the following reflection:

Living on an honors wing was the best decision I made when coming to ORU. It opened doors to friendships that I will cherish for a lifetime. The advantage of an entire honors floor, rather than just an honors roommate who shares these traits with you, is having a safe, nurturing, caring environment. Fellow honors students recognize and empathize when school takes priority over other matters, and there is no fear of hurt, rejection, or ridicule. . . . Being on an honors wing allowed me to thrive during my time at ORU. The community gave me a safe place to discover who I was and then allowed me to fully express myself within the community. (personal communication, September 3, 2012)

APPENDIX

Questionnaire for Current Honors Students and Alumni

1. How would you describe living on an Honors wing?
2. How has living on an Honors wing affected you academically and/or socially?
3. Do you believe Honors students require particular kinds of space to best reach their academic and social potential?
4. What benefit/loss is seen from blending honors students and non-honors students in residential situations?
5. What benefit/loss results from giving honors students a “dorm (wing) of their own”?
6. How has living on an Honors wing impacted the brother-sister wing relationship?
7. Please comment on whether or not you view the Honors floors as predominately freshmen and the pros/cons you see to this.
8. How would you describe the Honors culture on the wing to someone from another university?
9. How are Honors floors related to the Honors Program in terms of attendance and announcement of events on floors vs. off the floors?
10. If you’ve lived on both an Honors wing and a regular wing, please respond to the following: The Honors wing did or did not . . . compared to the regular wing.
 - . . . have enhanced academic help (including study groups).
 - . . . lead to more personal friendships.
 - . . . had respected quiet/study time and also social time (including intramurals).

. . . had meaningful brother-sister wing interactions (including wing retreats).

11. Do you have any suggestions for the Honors Program and future Honors students regarding the Honors wings?
12. Please include any further thoughts that you have regarding Honors housing.

