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# Honors Housing: Castle or Prison?

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## CHAPTER 13

# Honors Housing: Castle or Prison?

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In its “Basic Characteristics” of fully developed honors programs and colleges—lists that have become increasingly prescriptive over the years—the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) identifies “best practices that are common to successful” honors programs and colleges (2014a). One of those practices includes the establishing of separate honors residential opportunities for students, despite the fact that such dedicated space is a bad idea in many instances. In light of the old saying that “one man’s castle is another man’s prison,” I will lay out some of the reasons why honors housing is not a good in itself. I hope to complicate the understanding of the benefits and risks of cordoning off honors students from the rest of the campus population in the hopes that programs and colleges considering honors residential arrangements might interrogate their own assumptions about the value of such a move. Doing so will help those groups ask hard though useful questions about

student learning and development, the allocation of resources in challenging financial times, and the way in which honors relates to the campus-wide community.

The argument for honors housing goes something like this: similar to members of other special populations (athletes, international students, etc.), honors students have particular needs that can only be met by herding them under the same roof. They study more and thus require quiet residential settings; they benefit from the intellectual mentoring of upper-class high-achieving students; they are less interested in the typical after-hours shenanigans of the regular undergraduates; and they can continue their enlightened conversations from classes in the comfort of their residence halls. In short, the story goes, the academic and social development of honors students is enhanced when individuals with similar backgrounds and aims live together. Could anyone object to this rosy narrative? Well, let me try.

The most obvious objection to honors housing is that such dedicated space segregates a specific population from the rest of the student body. Such isolation can create problems of perception for honors programs as well as introduce difficulties related to personal and academic growth. Honors has sometimes been attacked on the grounds of elitism, of giving much to a special few in ways that reinforce distinctions and unequal power relations; if a program or college has struggled with this charge, creating separate honors housing will only exacerbate it. As Celeste Campbell (2005) has noted:

The arguments against honors programs stem largely from the feeling that they are elitist—that they isolate the top students from the rest of the academic community, that they lack diversity, and that they are at least partly responsible for the growing extent to which merit-based scholarship and programming funds are taking precedence over need-based awards and other deserving programs. (p. 98)

In many respects, honors housing becomes a physical representation of all that critics find wrong about honors. Such a separation is

particularly tricky if a program buys into the tradition that honors should raise the bar for everyone on campus, an ethos that has been a cornerstone of the NCHC “Basic Characteristics” since their inception. This role for honors is so significant that it is mentioned twice in the “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program,” in terms of the program’s ability to model excellence for populations across campus and as a place where faculty can experiment with new pedagogies that will then become institutionalized across campus. Situating honors students (and faculty, for that matter) behind specialized walls, however, would seem to suggest a trickle-down model of excellence rather than one that evolves out of equal standing, collaboration, and shared purpose.

Honors programs and colleges also might want to question whether the most effective environment for the emotional, psychological, social, and intellectual growth of students is one in which individuals are housed among students of like academic accomplishment and cultural background. While themed housing based on a shared academic interest or ethnicity or race has been popular on campuses for many years, a recent meta-analysis of dissertations on residential life in higher education suggests this research, according to James H. Banning and Linda Kuk (2011), “reinforce[s] the need to attend to diversity as a major area of emphasis within the residential experience” (p. 98). Diversity is a cornerstone of most academic institutions because of the rich learning that typically takes places when students and faculty from different backgrounds interact inside and outside the classroom. Additionally, write Vanessa D. Johnson, Young-Shin Kang, and George F. Thompson (2011), “it is widely understood that college and university residence halls provide the greatest opportunity to expand students’ cultural knowledge about one another” (p. 39). Since data show, observes Catherine Rampell (2009), that a strong positive correlation exists between family income and student performance on standardized tests like the ACT and SAT and the majority of programs and colleges overweight the role of such scores in shaping their honors classes, there is already a built-in bias towards homogeneity in the honors experience. If anything, honors programs

should be spreading their students around campus rather than gathering them together. Would educators ever imagine, for example, that segregating all of an institution's low-achieving students under one roof would be a good idea?

A relatively new honors program that has thought creatively about housing is the one at Quinnipiac University in Hamden, Connecticut, which intentionally matches a pair of incoming honors students with a pair of non-honors students in a freshmen residence hall called Ledges. Each group brings different strengths to the quad rooms, which end up truly embodying the belief that growth comes from encountering difference. This model, asserts Campbell (2005), also seeks to address previous research suggesting honors participation may encourage isolation of honors students from their peers as well as resentment from non-honors students (p. 98). In addition, the living arrangement represents a recruiting opportunity for Quinnipiac's honors program, for current honors students often identify especially promising applicants for the second round of admission in the spring of the freshman year. Interestingly, these second-round applicants apparently are more engaged and retain at a higher rate than those from the regular application process. It helps that the university has an excellent residential life program complete with its own learning outcomes tied to the core values of community, diversity, service, and responsibility.

One of the reasons the NCAA banned athletic dorms in 1991 was because of the negative effects on athletes' personal development when they lived together. College presidents who helped to enact the change, which went into full effect in 1996, believed that athletes would benefit from being better integrated into campus life. While I am not suggesting that honors residence halls will lead to the sort of behavior like that at the University of Oklahoma in the late 1980s—where a rape, a shooting, and drug sales that occurred in athlete housing led to the ouster of the football coach and prompted the NCAA to act—it does strike me as curious that honors programs that base their academic philosophies on the notion of challenge would turn around and argue for residential arrangements that emphasize the comfort that comes from

homogeneity. That students learn the skills to negotiate living with people who are different is especially important because that reality will confront students in their post-collegiate lives even as corporate interests in the media and technology world attempt to comfort consumers by delivering them content that reinforces their beliefs rather than challenging them. In fact, for the past few years, Google algorithms have so personalized searches that users are directed to content based on interests tied to previous searches. According to one activist, Eli Pariser, such a practice “locks us into a specific kind of pixilated versions of ourselves. It locks us into a set of check boxes of interest rather than the full kind of human experience” (as cited in Parramore, 2010). Never before have people lived in such a resounding echo chamber in which they incessantly hear opinions and arguments that seem so much like their own. Honors residential life policies that calcify students might fortify this state of affairs.

In one of the most extensive discussions of honors housing, Anne Rinn (2004) speculates about the benefits of such residential arrangements, emphasizing that honors students presumably reinforce each other’s social and academic development. Along the way, though, she introduces a note of caution, pointing to research showing that high-achieving students perform well “regardless of their living arrangement,” that “living in a small residence hall does not provide a better community atmosphere than living in a large residence hall,” and that honors students themselves indicate a sense of “isolation from the mainstream student body,” which like theme dorms promote a kind of “self-segregation” and wall off honors students from students of “other ability levels” (pp. 68, 69, 72–73). Rinn notes in conclusion that while “research literature generally provides support for the positive academic and social effects of living in college or university residence halls . . . , evidence concerning honors residence halls is far less clear” (p. 75).

There are other reasons to think twice before plunging into the honors housing pool. Many programs and colleges use the prospect of dedicated residential honors space as a perk during the recruiting process to entice high-achieving students. Along with distinctive

advantages like priority registration and honors scholarships, access to special housing is typically featured in glossy brochures that are mailed by the thousands around the country. Yet this marketing strategy sends a message of entitlement to students who often have already received many benefits during their high school careers and risks building an incoming class shaped around questions like “What can you give me?” rather than “What is unique about your approach to learning?” It is no wonder that students who come for perks drift away in huge numbers from honors as they move through their academic careers: after having secured housing, scholarships, and early registration, they have little left to gain. It did not surprise me to learn from a recent honors graduate of a large state university program that she was one of 13 honors students to graduate from her entering honors class of over 150. And yes, the program offers honors housing. Completion rates of 20%–25% at similar institutions are not uncommon. In a thoughtful recent piece for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, University of Florida Honors Director Kevin Knudson (2011) laments the fact that many families now see honors as akin to flying first class; he confesses that he has moved away from the “perks” model of recruiting and now emphasizes to potential students that “honors is a challenge, not a reward, and that moving from high-school honors to university honors is shifting from a culture of achievement to a culture of engagement.” I would argue that the best kinds of engagement and most challenging ones are those in which students interact with individuals who possess different backgrounds, values, and belief systems.

Some programs or colleges might not need honors housing because the outcomes that honors directors expect such residential arrangements to deliver have already been achieved. For example, if a particular honors program already possesses a strong sense of community and identity on campus, honors housing might seem redundant or even make the honors group appear excessively cliquish. Indeed, for programs with an especially strong bond, having students out amongst other communities is usually healthy, as anyone who has ever witnessed stressed-out honors students preparing for final exams can attest to. This situation is certainly

evident at Westminster College. Programs or colleges that suffer from financial challenges, that do not wish to participate any more in the facilities arms race in higher education, or that can imagine other uses for a donor's money that might have a more powerful effect on student learning and development should not feel pressure to blow their budgets on capital expenditures, even in spite of the language in the NCHC "Basic Characteristics." Many programs have been successful in designing other forums to facilitate bonding, like an intense learning-community environment in the classroom, a robust peer-mentoring program, specialized orientation programming, experiential-learning opportunities, or outside-the-classroom meetings in which the entire honors class comes together regularly.

Some people might ask: "If honors is designed to reward exceptionalism, why wouldn't honors have separate dorms?" Honors can be about exclusivity and separation, but it does not have to be. If honors is based on a distinctive learning design featuring interdisciplinarity, service, leadership, global studies, and/or team-teaching, the emphasis is on learning differently rather than being exclusive and separate; if this is what is stressed, special treatment in the form of dedicated residences somehow rings hollow. The University of Wisconsin College of Letters and Science Honors Program embodies this approach, for it does not use standardized tests scores as a criterion for inviting students to apply; instead, all students who have been admitted to the college are offered the chance to submit an application, since the program is designed around specific learning outcomes that ask students to challenge themselves in a variety of areas tied to academics, leadership, and service. Such egalitarianism is particularly attractive because it encourages students to self-select into the program and puts students on an equal footing at the start of their academic careers rather than codifying differences even before students arrive on campus.

It makes sense, of course, that directors and deans of large college and university programs may feel the need for such segregated housing. These are often places where community building is more of a challenge due to the considerable scale of such operations,



missions that are much less coherent than at smaller schools, and the difficulty of bringing students together on campuses that may stretch across hundreds of acres. While the roots of honors education and dedicated housing for students involved in that academic project can be traced to the British university model of residential colleges, such segregation by interest and background can be taken too far. Are we going to see the day when all students who, say, own guns should be housed together? Actually, that time already arrived in 2012, when a state Supreme Court ruling caused Colorado's flagship institution to establish a separate residential unit for students who possess a concealed carry permit ("Campuses Define," 2012). (I wouldn't want to be the RA in that dorm on a Saturday night.) While it makes sense to imagine honors housing as a potential solution, I also want to suggest that there is a built-in bias in documents like the "Basic Characteristics" toward such programs, especially in the emphasis on inputs and resources rather than things like learning outcomes, as if the solution to any problem involves locating money and expending those funds on more "things" for students. Part of this tendency grows out of the reality of honors program having been historically underfunded relative to other academic enterprises, but that ethos has also generated some of the problems documented by Kevin Knudson at Florida. The "Basic Characteristics" reflect a fairly narrow perspective that this essay is attempting to expand and thus the reference in my title to castles and prisons suggests that neither is an attractive option for young people seeking authentic learning experiences.

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