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CHAPTER 10

Pick Your Battles: It Is Possible to Have Belonging without a Space to Belong To

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When Wartburg College began its new honors program 10 years ago, its architects thought they had done everything right. They sent a team to the National Collegiate Honors Council National Conference. They studied the “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program” (National Collegiate Honors Council, 2014). They even decided to start small. Unfortunately, even meticulous preparation cannot overcome all difficulties. One of the characteristics, however, is to have a location to house the honors program. Wartburg’s 10-year saga of honors locations and lessons learned about honors space has produced this wisdom: honors directors and supporters should never give up in their search for a home, and they should not compromise if the space does not match the needs and the goals of the program.

Wartburg College is a small, liberal arts college in Iowa with an enrollment of approximately 1,600 students. Because it has a high medical school placement rate, a large majority of the honors students are science and math students. The program admits 30 first-year students. The students will take, at most, two independent courses within the honors program and then fulfill the rest of their honors course requirements using contract courses.

The year before the first honors class of students matriculated, the program was assigned a room in a new, upper-division residence hall on campus. The idea seemed promising because the director of the program was in a department whose offices were also moving to the same building. The room was not large enough to be a classroom, but it would have made a nice lounge, especially for the honors students who would be housed in the building. Unfortunately, this vision never materialized: the first director resigned before any students arrived. I became the new director, but my office was in a building on the opposite side of campus. Additionally, first-year housing for the initial honors class ended up being across campus from the new residence hall; thus the space was inconvenient to the students as well.

YEARS 1–4: SHARING SPACE

The search for a more convenient space to locate the honors program began immediately after the change in leadership. Under-used space in the library had some distinct advantages for the students and the program. The space was on a major walkway and had a door that was accessible when the library was closed. It was close to both the office of the director and a coffee shop, but it had one minor disadvantage: the space would be shared with the new Center for Civic Engagement.

At first, the prospect of sharing the space seemed positive; after all, the Center would occupy the space during business hours, and the honors students would not need to use the space for studying until classes were over. Moreover, the students would become familiar with the new program and its opportunities to engage in civic and service projects, perhaps leading to jointly sponsored

programming. Unfortunately, possession during daylight hours is 9/10 of the law. Since no one at the Center saw the honors students using the space while they were working, they assumed the space was not needed and essentially took it over, reducing this beautiful honors space for students to three shelves in a bookcase. Unfortunately the students did not disclose that their space was slowly disappearing without their consent or that of the honors program.

On the other hand, the students were creating their own sense of community within their first-year class that extended far beyond the boundaries of any walls. They were forming their own study groups because they had strong connections and knew they could trust each other to do their share of the work. All first-year students live in just a few residence halls, but after that first year, students in the honors program were choosing to room together. They were even dating. In essence, the students were creating their own honors spaces. The lesson learned: When sharing space, the faculty and staff who work for and with the honors program should occupy and regularly use that space during the workday.

YEARS 5–8: THE BOONIES

Because Wartburg College was in a building phase during the early years of the honors program, space was tight. When the last building was finished and the coaches were moving into their new Wellness Center, I asked the administration for space for the honors program. They found two rooms in a house on the edge of campus. This allocation looked like a good solution to the space issue because, unlike in the library, the honors program would not share these rooms, and no one would notice whether students were around or not during the day. The residents of the house, the international student group, and a non-profit organization that was strongly affiliated with the college shared common space: a kitchen, dining room, and living room. About a year later, the gay-straight alliance group was also assigned a room in the house. The students loved having 24-hour access to the house and its kitchen, but they were pretty disappointed with the housekeeping skills of the other people using the space.

Even so, the most problematic issue with this space was its location. In the sixth year of existence, the program was modified to include a residential, living-learning community component for the first-year students. The consequence of that arrangement was that the honors space was now far from the office of the director as well as the freshman residence hall. For example, when the weather is bad, the house will not be the students' first choice of study and hangout space. The students have to remember one code to enter the house and a different code to access the study space. In a mistaken moment of collegiality, the honors program offered the study space to the non-profit organization during the summer when the students were gone. Now far too much energy is expended to evict them during the year since they see that area as an ideal overflow space that they do not have to pay for.

The last straw for the students happened this last academic year. A student with mental health issues could not remember the code to the house and was found on the porch by security, freezing in the cold. The administration asked that the honors program remove the 24-hour access, preferring that the students retrieve a key from the security office. Although this request was rational, it essentially ended student use of the space by students who fondly remember the previous system. Negotiations are still underway to find a compromise that will allow students to use the space, but that has proven to be challenging because security staff do not believe the students should have open and unsupervised access. Of course, students use the space when the honors program hosts events at the house, and some students do use the space late in the evening, but rain and snow and having to ask for a key often deter other students from using the space. The ultimate objection to this space: it is in the campus boonies.

The lesson learned: When seeking space, honors directors should remember the importance of having a central location. Currently, new students who did not experience unfettered access to the house are using it periodically. Some other students have discovered that the areas outside my office are excellent for gathering and studying, especially during the end of the term when space in

the library is at a premium. Fortunately, my colleagues in the vicinity are amused when the students tape blankets to the walls to create a study fort. Finally, that coffee shop near the first honors location always has honors students commanding at least one table.

The lesson learned: Battles for honors program space need to be waged carefully and only when the priorities are clear. A small honors program with a director and no staff or only a person or two might want to pursue space that will keep the personnel together in a central location and good signage so that people can find the director easily. In these circumstances, asking for storage space and perhaps a small area in the vicinity with couches for students and bookshelves may be sufficient. At the point in the honors program's development when a residential option becomes feasible, then the director may want to lobby for a dedicated lounge in the residence hall. Space for housing the honors program should always be the director's wish, but fighting for space is only wise if it will actually work for the honors program and the students it serves.

REFERENCE

National Collegiate Honors Council. (2014). Basic characteristics of a fully developed honors program. Retrieved from <<http://nchchonors.org/faculty-directors/basic-characteristics-of-a-fully-developed-honors-program>>

