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CHAPTER 18

One Size Does Not Fit All: When Honors Housing May Not Work

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The gracious donor, the dean, and the other honors program director and I walk down the corridor of an old campus building needing repair but possessing a great deal of charm. While a science classroom building is being renovated, this hall houses temporary offices for displaced faculty. We look at the high ceilings in a room now used as a faculty break room and admire the way the morning sunlight plays on the walls. This room would make an amazing honors student lounge. Renovating the entire building would create a terrific honors dorm that could attract talented prospective students and encourage current honors students to remain at the college.

Within a few weeks, my co-director and I face one unexpected but significant obstacle to creating an honors dorm: the honors students oppose the idea. Although the student body is generally happy to have newer, better residential housing, the Honors

Program Student Board firmly rejected the concept of separate honors housing when these conversations took place in October 2008. Of course, student perceptions have their limits, and student desires and needs may change. Years later, however, their attitude that honors housing may not be the best use of funds for the Nisbet Honors Program at Converse College, a small college for women in South Carolina, remains largely unchanged. At Converse, honors students often find in their honors coursework and in research with faculty the kind of honors community they want.

Admittedly, in some ways, the choice not to build honors housing may put Converse at an initial disadvantage when recruiting in the state since honors students at larger state institutions definitely have the option of honors housing, often in attractive, well-appointed spaces. Shannon Earl, the mother of two students at the University of South Carolina's Honors College, reports that the new honors dorm there is "ecologically green and high-tech" and impressive to outsiders (personal communication, October 16, 2012). She notes that the honors dorm at USC has features such as "its own cafeteria" and special study areas that look appealing to visitors (personal communication, October 16, 2012).

The much more intimate scale of Converse and of its honors program, however, means that an idea like honors housing that works well in honors colleges at large state universities does not necessarily work as well here. Converse, although categorized as a master's university because of several large graduate programs, is physically a small residential undergraduate college. The honors program's size reflects the college's size. The college has approximately 700 undergraduates and roughly 400 graduate students. The honors program averages 110 on the rolls, with 60 to 70 members taking honors courses during each long term. About 20 seniors graduate as Nisbet Honors Scholars each May. The honors program currently has a student advisory board; extracurricular activities; an alumnae newsletter; funding for undergraduate research; and several options and financial support for study-travel, including the option to study at the University of Glasgow through the Principia Consortium. The main focus, however, remains on the challenging

discussion and lively intellectual interchange that students seek in an honors class.

I had thought students would want an honors dorm to build that intellectual community; however, to my surprise, students and alumnae have different understandings of how community works here. Nicole Dumouchel Watford, who graduated in 2010 and recently completed her MEd in gifted education, recalls the debate in 2008. While at Converse she sat on the Honors Program Student Board. She recalls the student board's firm opposition to an honors dorm. They were responding, she observes, to the already existing "small, close-knit community":

We felt that choosing to group ourselves in housing with other honors students could potentially hinder our development of community with other Converse students. Basically, we did not feel that we were a 'lost' group at Converse (such as at a larger university) where we were struggling to make peer connections with similar students. (personal communication, November 8, 2012)

Instead, honors coursework and opportunities to do undergraduate research already created meaningful connections with similar students and with faculty. An honors dorm, to students like Watford, felt unnecessary.

An honors alumnae survey conducted in March 2012 confirmed how intellectual community grows at Converse: in the classroom and in research with faculty. Of the 162 surveys sent to alumnae, 45 people responded. The community and challenge created by honors coursework and research seemed central to their generally positive views of the program. Particular courses and instructors figure prominently in open-ended responses to the question about their most influential experience as a Nisbet Honors Program student. Twenty-four respondents (53%) answered that question by referring in some way to honors coursework, and 10 respondents (22%) referred to the honors thesis or other research experience in the program. Several alumnae identified honors class discussions and chances to interact with other honors students in honors classes as

the most influential experiences in the program. Discussions with faculty and students in honors courses seem already to build the kind of community our students seek.

An alumna who graduated before the program began provides another insight into the strong opposition to honors housing that the students voiced: an honors dorm might be perceived as a threat to the close-knit campus community. Emily Harbin graduated *summa cum laude* from Converse in 1999 and later completed a PhD in English at Vanderbilt University. She is clearly the kind of student who would have been invited into the program had she entered after it began in 2001. When asked her view about how an honors dorm might work here, she, too, expressed strong reservations, partially based on her experience as an intellectual woman from the South. An honors dorm, she feared, might be perceived as perpetuating the isolation from peers that many academically gifted students who come to Converse have already unhappily experienced: “Intellectually gifted students here in the South are often set apart from other students in isolating or stigmatizing ways. What those students may be looking for is a way to finally ‘fit in’ socially while still enjoying rigorous academic classes” (personal communication, November 2, 2012). Her voice echoes Watford’s comment that honors students feared that an honors dorm might harm the “development of community” with non-honors peers.

In addition, the college’s size and housing policies encourage each student living on campus to live among students with varying interests and strengths. All traditional-age undergraduates must live on campus unless they live with their families and commute. Converse also has no sororities and no themed housing such as a hall for the debate team. Instead, the college offers many opportunities for student involvement and leadership development and allows students to try on new identities. “One of the strengths of Converse,” Harbin remarks, “is that it allows a student to be more than one thing. You don’t have to pigeonhole yourself” (personal communication, November 2, 2012). You can be in the honors program, on the varsity soccer team, and in student government. An honors dorm might make being equally involved in all three difficult.

For smaller institutions, honors housing may not appeal to students. Although one might argue that student perception is not everything, at a small tuition-driven institution, student perception looms larger than it may at a large state institution. When faced with the choice of student misgivings about spending money to create honors housing, the honors program at Converse made the better decision to spend its resources elsewhere. In this instance, the generous donor instead funded study-travel scholarships for honors students and honors academic programming. Clearly, the honors students value the community created by their honors classes and research more than the promise of community created by physical living space. When it comes to honors housing, one size does not fit all. In fact, for small honors programs, honors housing may not fit at all.

