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CHAPTER 21

It Came with Everything: A Baby Grand Piano, Hardwood Floors, Regular Flooding, 200 Honors Students, and a Live-In Scholar

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When the University of North Texas (UNT) opened its new Honors Hall on a hot Sunday in late August 2007, it was a residence hall in which everyone took considerable pride. Students loved the many amenities that the building featured, and they took pride in being able to call Honors Hall home. From the perspective of the honors college, the most significant feature was an apartment in which a scholar would live—a scholar who would be involved in the life of the hall and would, therefore, be engaged with the students who lived there. At that time, no other residence hall on campus had a live-in scholar. Now, with seven years and five live-in scholars under its belt, the UNT Honors College is able to share what has been learned along the way.

Including the apartment for a live-in scholar reflected the commitment the administration of the university had to making Honors Hall a desirable place for students to live. The support was so strong for building an honors residence hall that UNT willingly put substantial extra funding into the hall for multiple study lounges on every floor; wall coverings throughout; chair rails along every hallway; a lobby with large, comfortable leather sofas; a kitchen that would please HGTV viewers with its stainless steel appliances; and a beautiful new baby grand piano in the lobby. The live-in scholar would be provided, at no cost, a professionally furnished and decorated two-bedroom apartment.

The goal for the apartment was that a scholar could arrive with a suitcase and a laptop and be able to live comfortably. The apartment is located on the first floor, at the end of a wing, with an inside and an outside entrance. It includes just over 1,200 square feet of space divided into a living area, kitchen, two bedrooms, a bath and a half, and a laundry room. Everything was provided, including pots and pans, dishes, and linens. To date, five different faculty members have occupied the apartment, serving as live-in scholars to the 200 honors students who call Honors Hall home. The disciplinary areas of these scholars have included operatic music, visual arts, behavior analysis, history, and studio art. Two were visiting professors at the university, one was a new faculty member, one was a tenure-track assistant professor, and another was a tenured professor holding an administrative position in his college—all talented and accomplished individuals.

Honors housing is just housing, of course, unless it can serve as an extension of the honors program and its mission. Carefully selected live-in scholars can enrich the entire undergraduate experience for students and bring substantial value to the university and honors experience. These individuals organize events, help staff members identify students who may need additional support, and bring in faculty members to assist with programming. As we all know, however, problems and issues will arise, even among the best organized, most skilled, and most cooperative individuals.

At the outset, some sorting out was necessary. For example, when candidates interviewed for the position, they asked questions about when they could move in, when they had to move out, where they got keys, who would fix the bathroom leak, and where they got their mail. Realizing that those issues would never be the purview of the honors staff was a relief. Housing officials provided a contract that spelled out every detail, including financial obligations, rules and regulations, dates for moving, use of one's personal furniture in the building, care of the apartment and furnishings, repairs, the term of service, and a host of other issues. In fact, the director of housing has been a partner in every aspect of this endeavor, making the whole experience easier for everyone. For example, one of the questions that arose early on was whether pets could live in the apartment. The director said yes, and that dimension has increased the perception of students that the apartment really is someone's home. This year, Hunter, a small mixed-breed dog blessed with a large personality, is calling Honors Hall home, and on move-in day, he kept a watchful eye on new residents, almost all of whom came over to greet him.

Rule Number One has to be that housing professionals should run all residence halls, including those that serve honors students and programs. To campus housing professionals, the honors residence hall is just like all the others, albeit a bit quieter. Because housing is complicated, having professionals with the skills, experience, and expertise to do it properly is essential. Unless honors college personnel have made a terrible mistake and agreed to manage their own residence hall, they should visit the hall as guests and for clearly stated purposes. The reality behind this recommendation should make all honors personnel realize that they need to establish a close working relationship with the housing office and agree to work cooperatively on matters pertaining to the hall. Although the honors program will not own or govern the building, it will be relieved of worries about maintenance, safety, behavior, and liability.

Although a partnership with the housing office means that honors staff will never be called to fix the microwave or a leaky faucet, the question may become whether honors staff have any privileges at all in the building. At UNT, honors staff members have sometimes felt that they are quite disconnected from Honors Hall. For example, the commons room is a great asset, but the terms under which the honors staff can use it and whether they have some sort of priority over other users are murky. Another issue is whether honors students who do not live in the hall can even attend programming arranged by the live-in scholar. How welcome these students feel when they find the building locked or have to buzz the front desk to be admitted is another complicating factor. Clearly, the influence the honors college enjoyed in the hall at the outset has diminished over time, and that diminution seems to be part of a natural process.

Housing is, of course, a student affairs issue while honors is an academic one. As such, the groups have had on occasion differing priorities and concerns that require negotiation. Even on the UNT campus where these two divisions are proud of their great working relationship, the honors college sees honors housing as an extension of the academic program, while student affairs personnel see honors housing as, well, housing. Because all of the personnel working in Honors Hall are employees of the housing division, not the honors college, honors staff members rely heavily on non-academic staff to help them achieve academic goals. Thus, maintaining a cooperative working relationship is important.

While the honors staff will happily leave many issues to the housing professionals, one that should not be left to them is selection of the live-in scholar. Several halls at UNT now have residential faculty, and a standard process for selecting faculty for each hall has been developed, but it was a housing process, not an academic one. It did not, therefore, provide for much input from the honors program or college staff. Early on, housing established a committee to set up a selection process for those live-in faculty members, and logically, but without the knowledge of the honors college staff, the Honors Hall position was thrown into the mix. The honors staff

learned eventually that someone had actually been selected for Honors Hall without any input from them. They were even more concerned when they learned that the committee's selection was not only a graduate student, but also one who would be teaching only graduate classes and who would have few opportunities to connect his interests with those of honors students. Fortunately, things were juggled about a bit to make other arrangements. Since then, the honors college has selected, with advice and support from housing, its own live-in scholar.

Selecting the scholar-in-residence is not an easy process or one to be taken lightly, and the level of interest at UNT is high when it comes to choosing a person to live in Honors Hall. The situation works best, of course, when the interests of the faculty member parallel those of the honors program and housing. Experience has taught the honors selection committee to determine how the interest level and goals of candidates intersect with those of honors so that the position is not taken lightly by its holder. Living in the honors apartment is free of any charges for rent or utilities. Cable television is provided at no charge, laundry facilities are available in the building, and getting a repair done is as easy as a call to the front desk. Additionally, the scholar receives a generous number of meal passes for campus dining halls so he or she can join the students who have a meal plan or bring along a fellow faculty member. The live-in scholar even parks free, thanks to the honors college paying for a nearby reserved space.

Although this arrangement offers significant inducements, many people find such an arrangement too confining or lacking in adequate freedom and privacy. Having a discussion with candidates about the realities of living in a residence hall is important because the position is not suited to everyone. Usually several good candidates emerge each year. Recommendations often come from deans and department chairs who are bringing in a visiting professor for a semester or two, or who have a new faculty member who is having trouble arranging housing.

Herein lies one of the potential pitfalls. The natural inclination to help one's colleagues and fellow faculty members simply must

not be allowed to override the obligation to consider the needs of students and the ability of the candidate to work well with residents of the hall. While some candidates may be excellent choices, the critical factors must be that they really are excited about working with students and that their motivation is not just having a place to live. Members of the honors college want intellectually talented and prepared people who easily and warmly engage college students in conversation, who model the life of an academic, who work cooperatively with hall staff, who willingly give of their time and energy mentoring and planning events for the hall's residents, and who spot the students who are having trouble making friends or console the student whose parent has just died. The live-in scholar must demonstrate a commitment to students that will make living in the residence hall a successful experience.

For those for whom the arrangement is just having a place to lay one's head, the result is likely to be that they spend their time away from the residence hall in the laboratory, the classroom, the music practice room, or other areas where students are less likely to interfere with one's regular life. Prospective live-in scholars must clearly understand the time, energy, and focus they will need to be successful in the position. After all, these are men and women who are carrying a full load as faculty members. In addition to preparing for and teaching two or more classes, they have research interests and responsibilities as well as service obligations to their department and the university. For most faculty members, that work adds up to far more than 40 hours a week, and if they are also a live-in scholar, their responsibilities will not end when they walk through the door of their home.

Based on past experience at UNT, the honors staff has concluded that two years is the ideal upper limit for faculty members to live in the residence hall because a longer period adversely affects their work in their college or department or disrupts their research agenda. Prospective live-in scholars should be well briefed on the expectations of the honors college as to their contributions. On this campus, the expectations are a minimum of 10 hours per month of interaction, which equals approximately three events. With

planning and implementation, the actual number of hours logged, however, is likely to be closer to 20 hours per month.

While a perfect model for a live-in scholar probably does not exist, some factors are important to consider. Avoiding the candidate with an extensive travel schedule is prudent. Being on the road reduces the time available to make connections, plan activities, and be part of the honors community. If other commitments require the applicant to spend 12 hours a day in the studio, rehearsal hall, or lab, that individual is unlikely to bring much energy to activities with honors undergraduates. If the candidate is a graduate student struggling to finish a dissertation or a fifth-year assistant professor worrying about tenure, a better selection would be from among the candidates who are at the point in their career at which they have the time and energy to devote to students rather than personal goals. The personal circumstances of the candidates may be an impediment as well. Candidates looking for opportunities to entertain their own friends rather than relate to undergraduates are not a good fit, and neither are candidates whose primary goal is saving money for the down payment on a house.

Spelling out expectations about programming, including how many activities are required, how they will be paid for, and who should be invited, is critical. If honors housing is designed to be an extension of the honors program or college, then programming, while varied, should rest on a foundation of enriching the undergraduate experience. The activities can vary; a concert or bowling alley can provide that benefit if building community is an important goal. Most activities, from popcorn and football to Diwali and Eid dinners, are successful if they feature accomplished and learned individuals and opportunities for enrichment. Because having a live-in scholar should support the goals of the honors college, the live-in scholar must agree in advance to the following conditions: 1) coordinate events with the events director of the honors college, so that activities do not unduly compete; 2) invite members of the honors staff to major events that include guests such as faculty members or community leaders; 3) extend an invitation to all honors college members for some events during the semester;

and 4) submit reports about attendance and expenditures for all events paid for by the honors college from the allocation made by the honors college to the live-in scholar each year.

The current live-in scholar lives in the hall with his wife, two children, and a dog, and his performance has made him a model for other live-in scholars. He relates well to students and seems to know exactly what will appeal to them. For the spring 2014 semester, he put together a Thursday night movie series that features older movies (pre-1995!) selected by faculty members who teach in honors. The faculty member who chose the movie attends the screening and talks a little about the film. Among the movies included were *Name of the Rose*, *Oliver*, and *Hunt for Red October*. This kind of programming achieves the enrichment the honors college seeks to provide students, in that they see a film, having been provided some information about what makes it interesting and appealing, and view it with their fellow students and current faculty members teaching in the program. Students are easily inspired by the faculty members they meet and by the scholar's ability to relate to them as talented young people. When one live-in scholar taught knitting, students embraced the idea wholeheartedly, and some gave it a try. When another hosted dinners marking important cultural events around the world—Diwali, for instance—students again responded with enthusiasm. Honors students are open to a great variety of learning opportunities, and accomplished scholars are able to put their own brand on whatever is planned. The bottom line is that presenting such opportunities to students enriches their undergraduate experience and adds to their intellectual growth.

The honors college makes a substantial investment in these scholars because they play a role in the retention of students and in the image that students and others, including parents, have of the honors college. It is in the best interest of honors to find a great candidate for the position and then provide strong support to that individual: a budget and freedom to plan. At this time, the honors college does not have a formal assessment process. The honors evaluation is informal with input from the scholar and students. Because honors staff are invited to events from time to time, they

have opportunities to talk with students on an informal level about the Honors Hall programming and their interactions with the live-in scholar. Of course, attending events at the residence hall also ensures that the connection between the honors college and the honors residence hall remains solid. The formal evaluation process resides with the housing professionals at UNT. The housing division monitors and evaluates all campus live-in scholars, and housing professionals work with them throughout the academic year to increase performance in areas that may not be going well rather than evaluating them at the end when the time is gone and no improvement is possible. This arrangement underscores the notion that having an honors residence hall with a live-in scholar is a real partnership with the division of housing. The hall staff, including professional staff and student employees, are partners in the effort to provide the best possible undergraduate experience for students in the honors college. On a practical note, because the housing staff members are present on a daily basis, they are often the first to recognize the waning interest and diminished involvement of a live-in scholar or other problems in the hall and to communicate that information to the honors staff. Working together allows the two groups to take a collective approach to problems and to share in accomplishments, too.

The live-in scholar position started with Honors Hall and contributed to its success over the last seven years to the extent that it is now an accepted position at the University of North Texas. In fact, several other residence halls have live-in scholars. That a second honors residence hall, which opened in August 2015, features an apartment for a live-in scholar underscores the value of the concept at UNT and the contributions of these scholars to the honors program.

