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CHAPTER 16

It's All in the Family: The (Honors) Ties that Bind Us

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For many years, the Texas A&M Honors Program functioned in an extremely fluid manner. Students were deemed “honors eligible” according to their grade point average; if that average dropped below the set requirement, they became “honors ineligible.” If the GPA rose, they were eligible again. Under this policy, students continuously floated in and out of the honors community. The recent shift to an application-based process has created an official cohort of honors students as well as the challenge of building a community in a program that has had little sense of continuity.

At the same time, the residents of the Honors Housing Community (HHC) have long been known to be the most participatory members of the honors program. The program directors decided to build the rest of the community around this HHC, with its long-standing history of student involvement, in an attempt to foster an equivalent level of interest in the rest of the honors population. Since

the students who stayed in honors housing were more invested in the honors program than those who lived elsewhere, the first action in the restructuring of the program was requiring all incoming honors students to live in the honors residence halls. Although this requirement is only a few years old, anecdotal evidence suggests that students are responding as anticipated: their commitment to the program has increased. In addition, more students are applying for the Sophomore Advisor positions, perhaps because the connection between honors housing and the honors program is stronger.

The honors residence halls are home to a unique social structure created more than 20 years ago. The summer before they arrive on campus, first-year honors students receive a personal, handwritten letter from one of the Sophomore Advisors (SAs), affectionately nicknamed “parents,” welcoming them into the residence halls. These honors parents are SAs, student leaders living in the honors halls who have volunteered to help the students navigate their first year on campus. The SAs are honors students selected and trained during the spring semester of their first year to help the incoming class tackle difficult situations that may arise. As leaders and mentors in the HHC, they are also responsible for programming and community development in the halls. Each SA is assigned a group of incoming students—their “children”—for whom they are responsible. Each year three Junior Advisors (JAs) are selected from the current group of SAs to be in charge of the next generation of SAs. This program has a long and colorful history on campus. The advisors keep fairly in-depth records, and many “families” trace their lineage to the mid-1990s. (The first honors hall opened in 1989.) Along with the family trees are pass-downs, family heirlooms entrusted to those who have been selected to become SAs for the next class of students, as well as stories and pictures. Families treat the pass-downs as a serious and mysterious business; even the Honors Housing Coordinator, the staff member who maintains the strongest and most intimate relationship with the SAs, is unaware of exactly how many pass-downs exist or even which SAs are currently tasked with their safekeeping. One of the most colorful examples of a pass-down has been in circulation for almost 20

years. This item was stolen from a campus construction site in the 1990s and is purportedly hidden in the ceiling of one of the residence halls. Of course, all pass-downs are not this old. Periodically SAs may decide to create or designate a new item as a pass-down. Incoming SAs who are particularly well liked by the senior family members may find themselves the keeper of several new or newly historic pass-downs.

With guidance from the Honors Housing Coordinator, the SA team creates a steady stream of social, academic, and service events. Hallmarks of the program are Howdy Week, a weeklong orientation designed to introduce students to the campus and teach them about honors traditions, and Pizza and Profs, a program that brings professors into the residence halls for informal, intimate discussions. At first, the SAs are responsible for choosing professors they feel would be particularly interesting to the students. As the year progresses, however, and the first-year students learn more about their instructors, they organize their own Pizza and Profs discussions.

Even though the focus of the halls and the families is on the first-year students, the housing student leadership system and structure are as much for the SAs and JAs as they are for the first-year students. These leadership positions provide an opportunity for students to learn how to function in an organization and to take charge in the planning and executing of both small and large-scale events. They learn the value of working with others, time management, and conflict resolution, and they gain a greater understanding of the issues and obstacles faced in creating and maintaining a living-learning community for the students.

Over the years, the family structure has established continuity and a sense of belonging among the students, even after graduation. When the Texas A&M University Honors Program recently adjusted its curriculum by including a first-year seminar, the family structure in the residence halls became more important than ever. Now, families of freshmen are truly living and learning together; they meet weekly to discuss current topics, to share study habits, and to make homemade root beer floats. Outside of the weekly meetings, they have dances, talent shows, and movie marathons.

The success of the program lies in the building of community by emulating a support system inherently familiar to most students: family. It creates an organic transition into the collegiate environment that is not readily available on such a large campus. Students maintain their ties to their families and, by extension, to the honors program, continuing to attend programming events years after leaving the honors residence hall. Residents of the honors halls have even organized 10-year reunions and will return to campus to reconnect with their college friends and family members years after they have graduated.

In large universities like Texas A&M, programs and organizations compete constantly for student interest. In order to persuade students to commit to the academic challenges of the honors program, it has to offer something different: a support network established through the honors residence hall families. Ultimately this recognizable social structure helps students to see the program as more than an academic undertaking; it becomes an opportunity for personal and social development. First-year students are uprooted when they come to college, removed from their comfort zone, and forced to create a new life for themselves. The family system in the residence halls provides roots, that sense of belonging to a group that not only understands their challenges but cares about them on a fundamental level. They commit to the honors program by committing to each other. Because of this sense of family, they continue to stay involved even after leaving the residence hall, and they continue to support each other in their development and growth: just like a family should.