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CHAPTER 19

Living-Learning Communities: As Natural as Cats and Dogs Living Together

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Fully achieving all the potential benefits of a living-learning community requires effective collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs. Unfortunately, because of differences in organizational structures, priorities, cultural norms, and even the types of people drawn to work in academic affairs and student affairs, collaboration between faculty and staff is as unnatural as cats and dogs living together. Understanding these differences and recognizing the two subcultures that operate within most college housing departments can mitigate the challenges that honors faculty and staff can face when collaborating with staff in housing.

Elizabeth Blake (1979) has offered a number of still timely insights from the perspective of a faculty member as to why collaboration between faculty and staff is difficult. She characterizes student affairs staff as “manager types: entrepreneurial, gregarious, practical, ambitious, . . . [who have] bureaucratic expertise, and [a]

love of structure” (Blake, p. 284). In contrast, she describes faculty members as scholars who value “ideas and reflection . . . reason and proof, detached judgment, originality, [and freedom to engage in] the exciting pursuit of understanding” (Blake, p. 284). These differences lead to having very different views about the university itself. Whereas student affairs staff members tend to see institutional success as a function of effective management, faculty members recognize that independence, creativity, and academic freedom are critically important for the pursuit of learning (Blake, p. 285).

Blake’s (1979) generalizations of the differing priorities, values, and working styles of faculty and student affairs staff suggest a greater potential for misunderstanding and conflict than collaboration. Faculty members value autonomy and independent work, and hearing a faculty member wryly quip that an academic committee or department meeting can be like herding cats is fairly common. This sensibility is completely foreign in student affairs not only because so much of this work cannot be done independently, but also because it usually requires supervisory approval. “Always remember to consult with your supervisor” is a mantra at every level of student affairs. Even though the academic affairs structure might look like a pyramid (provost, deans, department chairs, and faculty members), student affairs is truly a rigid hierarchy. The titles say it all: while academic departments will often have a chair, student affairs departments have a director. Student affairs staff members operate more like dogs in a pack, with each staff member in a position of a clearly defined hierarchy. Thus, cats and dogs living together is an apt metaphor for faculty and staff collaborating on a living-learning community. Just as faculty members are attracted to the independent and egalitarian culture of the academy, student affairs staff members have chosen to work in a hierarchical, interdependent, and often frenetic work environment.

Faculty seeking to work with their campus housing department may find this situation further complicated by the fact that housing tends to be a department with two distinct personalities. At its core, campus housing is a self-funded auxiliary (i.e., an independent, not-for-profit business); it must generate enough income

from room rent to cover all of its operating expenses and, on most campuses, contribute funds to other campus departments and programs. Because empty beds do not generate revenue, every housing department has staff who operate primarily, if not exclusively, from a business perspective that emphasizes heads in beds. These staff members often have responsibility for setting room and board rates, budgeting, occupancy management, marketing, and maintenance of facilities and amenities. Consequently, these staff members focus on operational stability and efficiency, student and parent satisfaction, and, above all, ensuring expenses do not exceed income.

The other side of campus housing is often called residence life, residence education, or, simply, the hall staff. In contrast to the rest of the department, most hall directors and their supervisors perceive living on campus as an educational experience that makes a meaningful contribution to the educational mission of the university. These staff members see themselves as educators who are maximizing students' learning and success by focusing on community development and educational programming, engaging students in hall governance, and connecting students to campus resources. The dichotomy between the business and educational perspectives can be a source of conflict within the housing department and a confusing challenge for faculty seeking to collaborate.

The following scenarios are composites drawn from my own experience and provide examples of these two perspectives in action.

SCENARIO 1: EVERYTHING WAS GOING SO WELL. . . .

Soon after moving to a new university to accept a leadership position within the residence education unit of campus housing, I met with the head of the honors program. She revealed that she was disappointed with some changes made to a relatively new honors living-learning community. She said the first two years of the program were great; the honors students in the community really got to know each other and often moved off campus and continued living together. She was concerned that this pattern was not happening as much anymore. I then met with the hall coordinator. He told

me the honors students had all lived on one co-ed floor those first few years, but they only took up about half of the floor. The honors students bonded with each other, but they had not connected with the non-honors students who also lived on their floor. Each year the Resident Assistant, who was not an honors student, complained that being an RA on the honors floor was more difficult because their floor operated like two separate communities. The hall coordinator brought this problem to his supervisor, and they discussed it with the assistant director responsible for occupancy management. After reviewing the occupancy data trends, these three determined there would not be enough honors students to fill the floor in the coming year, so they fixed the problem by distributing the rooms for honors students among many floors within the building.

In the above scenario, the business perspective dominated the educational perspective. Although the solution addressed the priority of the hall staff to build strong floor communities, it almost completely negated the intent of the honors living-learning community. In the same way pulling apart a camp fire and spreading out the coals almost stops the fire from burning, putting a few pairs of honors students on every floor in the hall inhibits those students forming a sense of community with the other honors students in the building. Other solutions were possible, such as leaving rooms empty rather than putting non-honors students on that floor, or moving the honors community to another location better matched to the size of the program. Leaving beds empty, however, results in reduced revenue, and moving a community requires considerable work: determining where it will go, updating marketing materials, re-programming the software that assigns students into each bed, and facing the complaints of students being told they cannot live in their same room next year because it is being given to another living-learning program.

That the housing staff did not discuss this issue with the honors program indicates that the housing staff did not see the development and care of the honors community as a collaborative venture. If the housing staff had seen this enterprise as something jointly created and co-owned with the honors program, they would not

have made a fundamental change to the program without consulting the honors program. The honors program seemed to have had a similar perspective, for the director of the honors program was so disconnected from the hall staff she did not even know they thought a problem existed.

SCENARIO 2: DESIRING EDEN

An example from my current campus further illustrates these conflicting perspectives within housing. The honors program director asked if the honors community could be moved to the most aesthetically pleasing residence hall on campus, which happens to be named Edens Hall. He noted that prospective honors students and their parents grew excited on their campus tour as they neared Edens and then were disappointed when they realized the honors community was in another nearby building.

His request made sense because the university wanted to attract more high-ability and out-of-state students. Such students typically have a variety of institutional options, and many of those campuses have honors programs with attractive residence halls. The director understood that this request might not be approved since other high-profile academic programs on campus might be asking for the same thing. He was surprised, however, to hear why his request was not granted. Staff operating from the business perspective had offered two arguments. First, the fact that current residents now choose their own rooms for the following year made it seem unfair to them if the most popular residence hall on campus was restricted to honors students. Second, and perhaps more compelling, was the concern that fewer current students might choose to live on campus another year if they were not able to live in this popular building, which would result in empty beds and less revenue. After extensive conversations within the housing department, the honors community was moved to Edens Hall, but only on a pilot basis with clearly defined and measurable outcomes. Assessment done the following year revealed the number of returning and incoming students in the honors community dramatically increased, the honors program

achieved a small increase in admissions, and moving the community did not result in more empty beds in the housing system.

In this scenario the residence education perspective was prioritized, but to do so required framing the solution as a pilot project that would be assessed and reconsidered if it resulted in financial costs that outweighed the educational benefits.

IMPROVING COLLABORATION

My experience has been that many faculty and staff members have inaccurate perceptions of each other's roles, responsibilities, and priorities. Peter Magolda (2005) has observed that faculty members and student affairs staff also struggle to collaborate effectively because they do not have sufficient awareness of their own subcultures.* By learning more about each other, they can minimize false assumptions, miscommunications, and mistrust. Of course, reading about similarities and differences is a useful starting point, but the groups must also engage with each other in person if they are to move beyond generalized stereotypes to context-specific, in-depth understanding of each other. Interaction and engagement will improve their ability to collaborate. Fortunately, both faculty members and student affairs staff enjoy learning. Taking advantage of that shared trait by continuing to learn how to work together more effectively will make their jobs more enjoyable and will definitely benefit students. And thus, cats and dogs can learn to live together, without warfare if not entirely in harmony.

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*Greg Blimling (2001) provides an insightful description of the four primary subcultures within student affairs.

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