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CHAPTER 15

Lessons Learned from Nevada's Honors Residential Scholars Community

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For the past 30 years, intentionally structured living-learning communities (LLCs) have sprung up across residential college campuses in the United States. Recent research has suggested that LLC participation facilitates faculty and peer interaction (Blimling, 1993; Schoem, 2004), influences student learning and the development of critical-thinking skills (Terenzini, Springer, Pascarella, & Nora, 1995; Whitt, Edison, Pascarella, Nora, & Terenzini, 1999), improves retention (Campbell & Fuqua, 2008; Daffron & Holland, 2009), reflects a commitment to civic engagement, and promotes smooth academic and social transitions to college life (Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007; Stassen 2003). In fall 2005, in response to growing university enrollment and expressed student interest, Residential Life at the University of Nevada, Reno, expanded its campus housing options to include a living-learning program. To capitalize on the strong partnership with Residential

Life, the honors program offered its incoming class of honors students the opportunity for a living-learning experience. The goals of the Honors LLC were to build a community of like-minded scholars by providing meaningful learning, innovative teaching, and the shared goal of intellectual engagement in a residential educational setting. Residential Life managed the facilities, budget, and program operations; the honors program created the learning opportunities: honors courses, co-curricular programming, community engagement, and faculty-student interaction.

Now entering its tenth year, the Honors LLC, renamed the Honors Residential Scholars Community (HRSC), has progressed from a split traditional dorm-style model of 30 honors residents to the innovative pod-style living arrangement of over 60 residents in the new Nevada Living-Learning Community building. As its popularity, reputation, and success have grown and changes have been made to improve its existing curricular and extracurricular programs, the HRSC has generated a new way of thinking and become the model for other residential LLCs on campus. This chapter reviews the history of the HRSC at the University of Nevada, highlighting practices that were successful and offering suggestions for avoiding pitfalls. This discussion takes into account three stages of development: the first stage of establishment and growth begun in 2005, the second stage of continuance and flexibility over the following six years, and the third stage of stabilization and expansion at the present time.

STAGE ONE: FIRST STEPS

The Honors LLC was the first residential community on the University of Nevada campus. In fall 2005, 30 incoming honors students were recruited to live on the Honors LLC floor in one of the residence halls. Each honors resident submitted an application to the office of Residential Housing, requesting residence in the Honors LLC; students agreed to enroll in three common core honors courses in the fall and two common core honors courses the following spring, be actively involved in honors activities and Residential Life programming, and attend campus activities and events.

Faculty who taught the common core honors courses were invited to hold office hours in faculty office space on the honors floor and to participate in all Honors LLC programming. The Honors LLC was housed in a wing of a modern suite-style residence hall with the amenities of large double rooms; a bathroom/shower in each room; a laundry, television, and study room on each floor; and the dining facility conveniently located on the first floor. A student resident advisor was assigned to the Honors LLC.

Lesson 1: Allow Flexibility in Curricular Requirements

Foundational to the definition of a living-learning community is connecting students' residential experiences with their academic experiences. All Honors LLC students in the first-year cohort were required to co-enroll in three honors fall classes: honors English, the first-year Honors Seminar, and honors math. To accommodate the diverse curricular tracks of STEM, business, and non-STEM, non-business majors, as well as the differing interests of this student population, Honors LLC students were enrolled in either Calculus I or Pre-Calculus. Because honors students enter college with as many as 40 AP and IB credits, considerable college credits, and high ACT and SAT scores that satisfy the prerequisites of courses or place students in upper-level math and English classes, the honors residents did not fit neatly into a conventional first-year plan. Most of the incoming honors cohort elected to enroll in the calculus class over the pre-calculus, thus leaving the pre-calculus class with unfilled seats. Because the three-honors-classes policy was difficult to enforce, the number of required honors courses was reduced to two of the designated Honors LLC courses.

Lesson 2: Offer a Variety of Honors Curricular Choices

The honors program administration realized after the first semester that the 30 Honors LLC students required 30 different class schedules. Rather than enrolling in two designated honors classes, students could register for any of the honors offerings to fulfill the spring requirement of taking two honors classes for which they met

the prerequisites: offerings such as psychology, music, political science, economics, or core humanities.

Lesson 3: Recruit Faculty Who Are Willing to Be Involved in the Academic and Social Experiences of Students

In the hopes of fostering student-teacher relationships, developing problem-solving challenges, and enhancing advanced and accelerated instruction, the honors program and Residential Life extended support and opportunities to LLC instructors. LLC faculty were offered office space, provided 20 meals per semester at the dining hall, and given tickets to cultural events; yet, the gratuities were not appealing enough to recruit full-time tenure-track or permanent faculty to teach the honors math and honors English LLC courses. The common assumption held among honors programs is that regularly appointed faculty members have a record of teaching and scholarship, a commitment to the university, and high standards for students. Students and parents believe that a tenured professor is more knowledgeable; the title “Doctor” carries greater prestige; and the position of non-tenured instructor or lecturer falls short on status. In point of fact, the teaching of honors math and honors English fell to non-tenure-track faculty, part-time instructors, and lecturers interested in teaching small classes to high-achieving students. Unfortunately, these instructors were disinclined to stimulate the team spirit and group engagement necessary for building community. Only one HRSC instructor held office hours in the LLC honors office, and only the honors program staff participated in the meal plan at the dining hall and attended the cultural events. The year-end student evaluations indicated, nonetheless, that the students appreciated the “extraordinary access” to their LLC instructors. Unfortunately, the direct faculty involvement and increased interaction between students and faculty did not occur as hoped. In hindsight, the instructors should have been consulted early in the planning process on what interactive activities were feasible and could be implemented throughout the semester.

Lesson 4: Consider Residential Life as an Ally

Residence halls now see themselves as providers of learning opportunities: students who live on campus have higher GPAs than students living off campus, retention and graduation rates are higher for those who live on campus, and students are more engaged in campus life and community service than their off-campus counterparts—all traits of the serious honors student (Thompson, Samiratedu & Rafter, 1993; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). A cooperative and collaborative partnership between the honors program and Residential Life was critical to the success of the Honors LLC. Residential Life provided staff, resources, financial backing, physical space, marketing, and funding for campus programming and cultural events. Residential Life advertised, recruited, and assigned students to the HRSC. In return, the scholars in the honors residential community raised the GPAs, improved retention rates, increased involvement in campus and residential life activities, and brought prestige to on-campus living. Building a strong, solid foundation and maintaining frequent communication with Residential Life and Student Services were essential for the successful launch and future growth of the HRSC.

Lesson 5: Assess and Look to the Future

Despite all the challenges in the first year of the Honors LLC, the students and faculty evaluated the experience as a positive one. Ninety-three percent of the honors residents evaluated the living-learning experience as meaningful: students cited the living-learning experience as one that developed a sense of common group identity, an academic safety net, intellectual exchanges, and life-long friendships and social partners. In fact, a few of the first-year honors scholars banded together to form an LLC in the sophomore residence hall for the following year. Eighty percent of this first-year cohort eventually completed the requirements of the honors program; 100% graduated from the university. Moreover, the LLC won over the parents of these students. Parental enthusiasm led to many years of goodwill and a legacy of future honors applicants.

STAGE TWO: FROM 2006 TO 2012

Recognizing the need to better integrate the academic and social experiences and remove the existing curricular barriers, the honors program evoked its primary purpose in establishing the residential learning environment: the promise of a scholarly community. Returning to its roots, in fall 2006, the Honors LLC was elevated in name and status to the Honors Residential Scholars Community (HRSC). Entering honors students were assigned to one of two honors floors in two different residential halls: one hall with the modern suite-like arrangement and private baths and the other, a less expensive option, with the traditional 2–3 person-bed layout and a communal bath. Both halls featured a central lounge and study area. Each floor had an upper-class honors advisor in residence.

All Honors Residential Scholars signed an agreement to enroll in a minimum of nine honors credits the first semester (the Honors Seminar and two additional honors classes of the student's choice) and two honors classes in the subsequent semester. In addition, the honors program and Residential Life required the residents to participate in a certain number of outside activities. Through the years, to make up for the declining number of required hall activities, the honors program offered the scholars more opportunities to participate in events related to research, career development, service learning, and international study. Although the honors program recruited faculty instructors to teach honors classes, the instructors were not obligated to participate in outside events or activities.

Lesson 1: Frontload the Honors Curriculum

The honors program structured the Honors LLC on the curricular model of shared honors courses and shared learning experiences. If honors students elected to live in the Honors LLC, they were required to enroll in a minimum of 15 honors credits their first year. By frontloading the honors curriculum, honors students not only connected early to faculty, the curriculum, and honors expectations, they also made a substantial commitment to honors education and the university overall.

Lesson 2: Require a First-Year Seminar

Sharing the intellectual experience is integral to building a strong sense of community. To meet that expectation, since its inception, all Honors Residential Scholars have been required to enroll in the first-year Honors Seminar. The goal of this skills-based course is to enhance the quality of the undergraduate experience by emphasizing research-based education, optimal communication skills, civic engagement, responsible self-learning, and internationalization that form the core of the honors program's curricular objectives. Students deeply bond with each other and with faculty around academic themes and relationships. Although students earn three honors credits and the course extends beyond the boundaries of the classroom, the first LLC cohorts commented that enrolling in the Honors Seminar was an unfair additional load placed on Honors Residential Scholars. They questioned why only the participants in the LLC were required to enroll in a set number of classes, and why honors students who did not live in the HRSC were not bound to the same constraints. Their disgruntlement, however, was short-lived; when the Honors Residential Scholars reached their junior or senior year, they were the primary promoters of the Honors Seminar and the HRSC experience. For example, those students who were successful in winning nationally competitive awards or in conducting research alongside faculty credited the Honors Seminar as being key to meeting professors, learning about national fellowship opportunities, seeking international study opportunities, and building a record of community service. The Honors Ambassadors, a distinguished group of current honors students who serve as liaisons between the honors program and prospective honors students and their families, championed the benefits of the honors residential program: connection to a diverse group of students with similar academic aspirations; access to study buddies, support groups, and an intellectually challenging environment; and membership in a dynamic social and intellectual community. And, of course, living in the HRSC created memories and friends to last a lifetime.

Lesson 3: Maximize Scheduling Flexibility for Students

Students want good schedules; they want the opportunity to interact with good faculty; and they want to be members of a campus community. In scheduling honors classes each semester, the honors program learned to account for the special needs of the entering HRSC by offering multiple sections of the Honors Seminar and honors English, class times ranging from 8:00 a.m. to early evening, and the traditional 50-minute MWF honors English class as well as the three-hour art class. Scheduling complications and class conflicts underscored the necessity for priority registration and early advisement.

Lesson 4: Encourage the Opportunity for Instructors to Build a Teaching Community

To achieve the goal of integrating educational learning and community living, the honors program's administrators soon realized the value of bringing the honors faculty into the LLC discussion. The honors program held joint meetings with the faculty teaching honors courses in English and physics and the Honors Seminar, as well as with the library specialists to discuss common themes and shared assignments. This approach created opportunities for interdisciplinary teaching and deep learning. For example, the five honors English classes invited the upper-level honors physics class to participate in a multi-media presentation as a final project; library services offered its expertise on professional posters, PowerPoint slide shows, YouTube videography, and research skills to all honors classes. The Libraries Teaching and Learning Technologies office remained the resource for the instructional design of the semester-long electronic portfolio project. The instructional design team provided training workshops on the electronic learning software, assisted in the final evaluations of the project, and recognized winning portfolios at an awards ceremony the following semester.

Lesson 5: Include Community-Based Learning

Beginning in 2010, Honors Residential Scholars in their first semester of college were introduced to community-based service activities. Committed to offering an engaging and meaningful participatory educational experience, the honors program identified local non-profit partners dedicated to the areas of health and human services, education, and the environment to engage students in 15 hours of community service as part of the Honors Seminar experience. This arrangement proved to be successful in building a close and well-connected community among the honors students, goodwill with the neighborhood, and a sense of civic duty early in the students' academic careers. Each year, the first-year students log over 2,000 hours of service with non-profits in a single semester.

STAGE THREE: 2012 AND BEYOND

In fall 2012, the total number of LLCs on campus increased to nine when the university opened the five-story 320-bed Nevada Living-Learning Community residence hall—a space that includes faculty offices and instructional classrooms. The building features a pod-like structure for its living areas. These pods accommodate living group sizes ranging from 18 to 64 students, and each floor of the building houses up to four living groups. The first floor features dedicated state-of-the-art classrooms and faculty offices. To increase interaction outside the classroom and to enhance the honors presence, the honors program was given office space for honors staff and honors faculty to hold office hours, be available to students, and socialize in a student setting. One wing of the building was assigned to the HRSC.

Lesson 1: Maintain an Honors Presence in the LLC Building

To promote an honors presence in the building and goodwill among the other LLCs, the honors program took full advantage of the new high-tech digital facility. The honors program scheduled

nine honors classes and the honors orientations in the classrooms; held regular office hours including advising sessions in the honors office; offered student-led programming on the HRSC floor; scheduled the final multi-media English project in the classrooms and open areas; arranged the honors faculty lecture series and other activities in the multi-purpose room; used the bulletin boards to publicize events, market the honors program, and post honors information; and offered pre-professional programming for all LLC students, not only the scholars in the honors residential community. By increasing the honors presence in the building, the honors program not only increased contact with the Honors Residential Scholars but also raised honors visibility among the other LLCs. By opening its activities to all students participating in the LLCs, honors students made friends outside their community; as a result, the honors program gained a number of high-quality applicants from other LLCs. Capitalizing on the community environment, the honors program created opportunities for learning wherever and whenever possible. Honors faculty and staff took on new roles, engaging students as instructors, mentors, advisors, and programming directors. To smooth the transition to college living, honors faculty and staff became familiar faces willing to help students adjust to their new social and academic life.

Lesson 2: Work Closely with Past HRSC Students

Many satisfied Honors Residential Scholars continue their relationship with Residential Life as resident advisors and directors. The current HRSC is overseen not only by an Honors Resident Advisor but also by an Honors Academic Director. The LLC honors staff coordinates with the honors program and Honors Ambassadors to plan, publicize, and offer programs and other activities to the HRSC and to help with the recruitment and retention of good students.

Lesson 3: Maximize the Honors Experience

Being a member of the honors program is a mark of distinction. Being a part of the HRSC is a bonus. By being flexible in curricular

scheduling and in faculty recruitment and identifying teaching faculty early in the process and involving them in the programming and social events, the honors program connected the Honors Residential Scholars to honors classes, honors faculty, and honors activities in the first semester. Intentionally including the non-honors LLCs from across campus units enhanced the academic and residential experience for all of the participants.

To ensure that Honors Residential Scholars enroll in the necessary courses, the honors program designates a number of slots for them in the most popular honors classes. First-year students who commit to the honors program early benefit from priority registration, which gives these entering students a fair shot at high-demand course offerings. HRSC offers special programming for the scholars and gives them the opportunity to design their own academic programs and social activities. For example, the honors program offers Honors Residential Scholars the option of completing 40 hours of community service to fulfill one of their spring honors requirements.

The HRSC complements the mission of the university in its efforts to recruit high-achieving students and promote intellectual engagement. By offering entering honors students the opportunity to live, work, study, and socialize together, an instant community of scholars is formed. In fact, year after year, the incoming Honors Residential Scholars have reconstituted their own living-learning communities in the upper-class residential hall. And retention and persistence rates show that not only do students in the HRSC complete the honors program requirements, but also 80% of them graduate from the university within four years. The success of the HRSC has been the result of a shared partnership and vision with the students, faculty, residential housing, and the honors program. To assist residential housing in achieving its mission to provide educational and social opportunities to students who live on campus, the honors program developed a set of student learning outcomes with the goals of developing students' responsibility outside the classroom and engaging them in leadership development. The goals for the HRSC, established by residential housing, are listed in the

Appendix. The implementation of an Honors LLC has produced an active and supportive learning environment. Unifying all of the honors students on one floor of the new Nevada LLC building has enhanced the sense of community by integrating the academic experience with a campus experience. The Honors Residential Scholars living-learning community has transformed the students' learning experience and the institution. From the time that these students attend the annual incoming honors retreat to the time they cross the stage at the honors program convocation, the Honors Residential Scholars have grown into a distinguished community of scholars, leaders, international travelers, and engaged citizens.

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APPENDIX

Goals

Goals: By the end of the academic year, students in the Honors Residential Scholars living-learning community will

- practice sustained engagement with the university honors community through involvement in organized honors activities and events outside of required coursework,
- organize study groups and peer academic support for honors courses and other courses with the active involvement of their resident assistant and designated academic mentor, and
- demonstrate community engagement in addition to mandatory first-year seminar requirements, and reflect on experiences with their service learning assignment.