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CHAPTER 4

The Genesis of Barrett, the Honors College at Arizona State University

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ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

The honors college at Arizona State University (ASU) had its roots in the distributed honors programs in departments and schools that began in 1958 as ASU became a university by a statewide popular vote. It started as an honors college when it was created in 1988 by order of the Arizona Board of Regents (ABOR), the only honors college in the state established in this way. The founding dean of what was at first called the ASU University Honors College was Ted Humphrey, who had earlier directed the university honors program. Professor Humphrey had very specific ideas about what the nature of honors education and honors living communities should be, and—along with the design of a yearlong, first-year course teaching critical thinking and writing called “The Human Event”—Humphrey negotiated a living space for about 170 honors students in a separate building near the center of the ASU Tempe campus called McClintock Hall. The first honors students

moved into their 80 rooms in McClintock in 1988 at the same time the honors college was formed, so it was a residential college from its inception. The students shared the 33,000 square feet with three classrooms and six offices for honors college staff.

As the ASU University Honors College grew, plans were made to move to an entire city block south of the McClintock Hall site, a block that contained seven buildings with about 420 beds. This move occurred in 1992. The buildings had previously been entirely residential halls, but one was converted into offices for the honors college staff and faculty as well as three classrooms; modifications were made to another building to create five other classrooms dedicated to honors classes. In 1994, two entirely new residential halls housing 400 more students were added to this so-called “Center Complex,” bringing the bed number to 820 and the square footage devoted to the ASU University Honors College to 197,000 square feet. When Craig and Barbara Barrett endowed the College with a \$10 million gift in 1999–2000, it became the “Craig and Barbara Barrett Honors College.” Barrett Honors College at this time comprised the city block of Center Complex, housed 820 honors students, and served them with 8 classrooms and offices for 8 dedicated honors faculty and 18 staff and administrators. The entire complex was arranged around a small courtyard with palm trees.

In 2003, I was hired as the new dean of Barrett Honors College. The search firm found me at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania where I had been for over two decades, serving as Professor and Chair of Biology and Associate Provost of the College. The then new President of ASU, Michael Crow, apparently instructed the search firm to look at administrators in such private liberal arts colleges as Swarthmore to see if there might be a person interested in coming to ASU and transforming the already well-developed honors college into something that had not existed before: an entity with the quality of a private residential college but interfacing seamlessly with the resources and excitement of one of the nation’s largest research universities. That prospect was attractive, and when I visited and found the honors students at Barrett easily as good as Swarthmore students, I was happy to take the job.

In one of my first conversations with President Crow before I even moved out to Arizona, we discussed the possibility of building a new honors campus. We actually pondered whether it would be a good idea to build it at a site separate from the Tempe ASU campus, in a way following the model of the University of Maryland system with St. Mary's College at a different location than the College Park main campus. We decided that since, next to a special residential community, the most powerful selling point to a prospective honors student would be the availability of the curricular and research resources of the main university, we should plan to build the new campus on the Tempe campus of ASU.

I spent my first several years at ASU and Barrett working with an absolutely wonderful and dedicated staff and faculty to change Barrett "from the inside out." We needed to require honors advising and make it much more thorough, greatly increase the number and quality of honors courses and contracts that were offered each semester throughout the Tempe ASU campus, and expand the honors college on the other three ASU campuses in the Phoenix Valley. Student programming needed to have a much greater presence to even begin to approach the quality of a private residential college, and the honors faculty needed to be expanded to incorporate more academic areas, which would diversify the approaches taken in teaching The Human Event classes. We also needed to file with the Arizona Board of Regents to have a special honors fee that would generate the income to expand programs in these exciting ways.

What these first years of work produced was, in fact, a high quality honors college that was beginning to have many of the characteristics of a top private residential college. Still, nothing had yet been done to address the residence part of that name. Luckily, and with the total and undying support of ASU's president, provost, and chief financial officer, the way was cleared by 2005 to start imagining the place and scope of a new honors campus on the Tempe campus. The infrastructure of Barrett had changed; now it was time to change the physical structure.

A site on the southeast corner of the Tempe campus was selected as a good one, meeting the tests of size (9 acres with the ability to support residence halls with approximately 1,700 beds); location (still within the main rectangle of the Tempe campus, a short walk or bike ride from any part of that campus); and availability for construction (mostly a parking lot, but with a small university visitor information building that could be moved also on the site). Two obstacles to construction did exist, however: the site housed the ASU Police Headquarters as well as a private tavern that had been a student watering hole for years. The ASU Police were, I think, delighted to move from their old “Quonset hut” building to an entirely new building, but extensive negotiations were necessary before the private owner of the tavern finally agreed to sell.

An RFP was issued by ASU, and, in that wonderful pre-recession era of 2005–2006, 12 groups bid on the chance to construct the new Barrett Honors College and a set of apartments across the avenue that could also be revenue-producing. When I expressed surprise to the business manager of one of the bidding groups that so many bids had come in, he told me that Tempe was “the largest student housing market in the nation” at that time and thus an attractive place to build housing and be assured of high occupancy.

When a group was selected—one put together by American Campus Communities (ACC) from Austin, Texas—the real work began. A “Barrett Users Group,” or BUG, was formed with the folks from ACC, ASU Facilities, ASU Residential Life, ASU’s University Architect and Planning Office, and ASU’s Finance Office. The ACC people on the BUG included their finance specialists, their engineers, their residential life experts, and the architectural team that they selected with major input from ASU. The Barrett representatives on the committee consisted of several honors students, the Assistant Dean for Student Services, Barrett Honors faculty members, Barrett’s Business Manager, the Vice Dean, and me. This core Users Group—an amalgamation of people who grew extremely close over the next four years and ended up thoroughly enjoying each other and their joint mission—was the group that envisioned, planned, and built the new Barrett Honors campus at Tempe. The

committee planned and discussed for two years, roughly 2005 to 2007, before breaking ground at the site in the fall of 2007. It then took two more years to build the entire 9-acre campus, which opened in the fall of 2009.

The BUG members have already spoken about this collaboration at several national meetings, not only of the National Collegiate Honors Council, but also separate organizations to which the architects, the builders, and the residential life specialists respectively belonged. The purpose of these presentations was to communicate how wonderfully and cooperatively this whole process occurred. ACC was incredibly generous all along with their architects: a firm from Princeton, New Jersey, and a firm from Phoenix, Arizona, were paid by ACC and worked together on the project, but they also worked seamlessly, on a daily basis, with the ASU and Barrett members of BUG. This willingness to share, so to speak, meant that the Barrett staff had a chance to work with national-class architects to design and build the college campus of their dreams. I believe that as ACC got to know the people from ASU and Barrett better and better, they began to trust our judgment in a way that let us keep generating ideas that the architects and ACC willingly incorporated into the plans. The result: the privilege of building a \$140 million, just-for-honors campus without having to raise a dollar. The financial arrangement is this: the land is leased to ACC, they pay to build the college, and they collect and keep the rent for a set number of years. Functionally, it meant that a person like me was able to design and build a whole college in a way that I had thought about and dreamed of for years, but without having to do the 10 years of development work that would ordinarily be required to even have a chance of raising that kind of money. Of course, none of this would have happened had President Michael Crow not been willing to make such a financial deal in order to obtain an amazing new honors college campus.

In talking with the architects at the earliest stages, I had several strong beliefs and aims that arose from my own experience in higher education. When I was growing up, I spent time on Princeton University's campus. I saw the benefit of suite arrangements for

a group of students, particularly when they had a shared living area: it seemed to be an important factor in keeping older students happy and on campus at a time when the siren call to move to off-campus apartments was so powerful in part because the only on-campus option was a single-room space, shared with a roommate or not. Therefore I wanted from the start to offer four choices of rooms, with one of the choices being a four-person suite that included a living area and kitchenette along with a bathroom. Suites like this can woo the juniors and seniors—whose presence is so important to a four-year residential college—to remain on campus. Furthermore, I wanted to have no bathrooms down the hall as so many dorms in my era had, especially since that complicates mixed-gender hallways. Thus every room or suite at the new Barrett campus comes with a bathroom for its denizens.

Both as an undergraduate participating in the House system at Harvard and on sabbatical in Cambridge, UK, at Clare Hall, I witnessed firsthand the amazing power that a central dining hall can have to bring people together. At both places, at least three years of undergraduates and staff and faculty would dine together in unassigned seating at each meal to encourage random encounters with different interesting people. That Harvard and Yale with their houses and colleges adopted the college system from Oxford and Cambridge is not surprising. Because I wanted that dynamic interaction at Barrett, the campus featured a central dining complex with smaller rooms (like the small dining rooms at Harvard's houses) that could handle 12 to 25 people in an enclosed and quieter space for students to use when they wished to entertain someone for dinner such as a speaker who had just held forth in the late afternoon. Another desirable space was for a Refectory, a room seating 125–150 in which a meal could be served to a group that was assembled to hear a special dinner speaker. This Refectory was modeled directly on the dining hall of New College Oxford, which was built in the 1300s; I actually brought a picture of New College's Refectory back with me from a trip to England to show the architects for Barrett. To encourage the students to use the dining complex, no rooms at Barrett included full kitchens, and all of the

students were required to buy a meal plan at the dining center. I will point out that Harvard Houses and Cambridge Colleges each have in the range of 300 to 500 students, while Barrett at Tempe has 1,700 students in residence, and many more who are members of the honors college in Tempe but who live off campus. I would have been worried about whether a single dining complex could serve that much larger a group, but my experience at Swarthmore College—a college of around 1,400 students with only one dining hall complex—reassured me that it would work. The architect from Princeton even drove to Philadelphia to look at the dining hall at Swarthmore and agreed.

Another important design component was having the grassy courtyards and quiet, contemplative spaces that I had so loved as an undergraduate and that I had experienced also as a faculty member on sabbatical. Even though they had to place most of the 1,700 beds and bedrooms along the edges of the campus to accommodate so large a number of students on only 9 acres, the architects did their best to include as many courtyards of differing sizes and atmospheres as possible. They succeeded: the Barrett campus includes five courtyards, and the largest one matches the dimensions of the main quads at a Harvard House or a Cambridge College.

Having a sustainable living community was important to the honors students. To support that wish, the honors college took out a loan of \$1.25 million from ASU, which is being paid back over time, to add to the funds ACC was using to build the campus. With this loan two of the eight residential hall buildings on the new campus were equipped to recycle greywater, to monitor individual room and hall energy, and to support a green roof complete with organic garden and meeting spaces for the community. Called “SHAB” or Sustainability House at Barrett, this facility is the only undergraduate sustainable living community at the moment on any ASU campus.

The campus was designed so that whenever students exited the honors complex to venture forth onto the “Big ASU” campus, the Barrett students would walk directly past both the honors faculty offices and the advising and deans offices should they need the

services of any of those people. I had always found that the remote nature of both faculty offices and student services offices in the institutions I had attended discouraged undergraduates from contacting those people to seek their advice or assistance.

Other details reflected the preferences I developed throughout my academic journey: I had always loved the warm, sandstone-colored arched columns at Stanford where I did my PhD, so we asked the architects to incorporate columns around a courtyard at Barrett, christened the Academic Court, with bougainvillea vines planted alongside each one to grow up and over the bypassing students in arches. I always hated having to go down into dank basements of dorms in college to do my laundry: thus the laundry rooms are located on the top floors of the seven-story buildings, next to big lounges with great views of the Phoenix Valley. Students have a pleasant place to read and wait for laundry. ACC felt that having a fitness center in any building they were constructing was necessary in order to attract students; thus Barrett got one. ACC even included an art budget of \$50,000 to provide wall art in public spaces and student residential hall lounges. ACC agreed to the request to use that budget line to induce ASU and Barrett Fine Arts majors to provide art for all of those spaces. The result is that all of the art on the walls at the Barrett campus—photography, painting, and textiles—comes from the ASU student art community; each work is framed and labeled with a plaque stating the name of the artist. Finally, the food service provider for all of ASU is Aramark, and they were asked as a part of their bid to receive the contract for the whole university to serve the Barrett campus in a special way. As a result, the meal plan cost is slightly higher for Barrett students, but the dining hall offers fresh produce from within a 125-mile radius whenever possible, sushi, and lobster nights. Students have nine stations to choose from, including one with a pizza oven. In fact, the dining facilities just won the *Phoenix Times*' award for "Best Educational Food" in the Valley.

The final result is a 544,000 square-foot campus for honors students, with 26 faculty offices and a whole suite of offices for advisors, deans, student services, business, admissions, recruiting and

national scholarship advising, events, website design, data analysis, and IT. After 10 years of development and the realization of a vision, I feel that Barrett has produced what I hope will be a new way of doing college at large public universities in this country, a way that emulates the high quality of any private college or university, but that can also give bright students a best-of-both-worlds educational experience: the community and support of a top private residential college coupled with the vast resources of a major public university.

