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INTRODUCTION

What We Talk About When We Talk About Housing Honors

Linda Frost
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Facilities can aspire to certain qualities as an expression of a civilization. Some of these qualities are readily apparent. Some are not.

—Max DePree

When I went to college in the early 1980s at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, I entered as a freshman in the honors program. I have very specific memories of those first classes I took as an honors student—a section of honors sociology in which I wrote a case study of my German immigrant grandfather; an honors seminar in 1930s *avant garde* theatre in which the students wrote and performed plays based on the dreams they recorded nightly in their dream journals; an honors marine biology lab that ended at the professor's house with a dinner where the group sampled the sea life the class had been studying; a section of honors composition taught by the legendary “Dr. Bob” Bashore, a former director of that program and the man most responsible for my eventual choice of nineteenth-century American literature as my academic specialty. Many of these classes took place in an open lounge area in the basement of some otherwise nondescript building, the name of which I can no longer recall. What I do remember is how different that setting was from the traditional layout of my other classes. Rather than occupying the rows of metal-footed tablet desks that populated my other university classrooms, the honors students usually sat on crescent-shaped couches or other furniture reminiscent of a 1970s-era church youth-group room.

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I have specific memories of the people I met through honors—Joelle and Dave and Brett and Cindy—many of whom were in classes with me but all of whom, more importantly, lived in the same “study dorm” I did. While not strictly an honors residence, Prout Hall was indeed reserved for a particular population of the campus, one that required some kind of academic pedigree or membership in an academically enhancing program for entrance. All the National Student Exchange Students, for instance, lived in Prout Hall, including a gang from Maine who fascinated us with their taste in sweaters and constant use of the word “wicked.” When I looked up Prout Hall on the BGSU website, I found out that I was actually part of the first living-learning community established on that campus in 1981. (Sadly for alumna me, the building was demolished two decades later to make room for a new student center.) Located in the very center of campus, Prout boasted what was reputedly then the best cafeteria on campus, as well as the first co-ed residential facility. The main lobby proudly displayed an outdated and much-abused portrait of Alice Prout herself, a BGSU First Lady from days of yore. When the residents threw *Love Boat* and Halloween parties in Prout, they always dressed Alice in construction paper costumes scandalously scotch-taped to her oil portrait.

In my memory, then, honors is something that has always been clearly housed. Whether it was in that strange, very un-classroom-like classroom where students sat on pillows on the floor and talked about the politics of immigration, or in the fireplace room and hallways of Prout where my friends and I talked about poetry and whether or not we should register for the draft, honors for me has always lived decidedly *somewhere*.

But what that “somewhere” means is a harder question to answer. It quickly emerged as a key question for me when I departed the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) to become an honors director myself in 2008 at Eastern Kentucky University (EKU). I left behind a tiny but sweet office in a renovated and historically significant church where I co-taught interdisciplinary courses about time and space in what had once been the sanctuary (see Rush-ton, p. 141). My office at EKU, though, was in the bottom corner

of an annex to a building that had once housed students; the whole space felt like an afterthought. Worst of all, the honors offices were tucked into a basement corner, far away from the rushing feet of passing honors students. Unlike the church offices in the middle of the constant foot traffic on the campus of UAB, the ECU honors offices were off the beaten path of the honors students as they trod between the honors residence hall and the rest of campus. The ECU honors students had to make a special effort and detour from their normal route to see me.

When conversations began regarding where honors might be better located on ECU's campus, I found myself at a bit of a loss. While I knew that the current facilities were not working, I could not instantly turn to other honors programs and colleges to determine the various options worth considering. I needed examples or references that covered a wide range of architectural territory. I had my prior institution, and I certainly attended every session I could at NCHC conferences about housing possibilities, but it seemed to me important to find a way to catalog the kinds of spaces honors occupies nationally and to bring that information to other frustrated honors directors, sitting in their dysfunctional campus spaces, wishing they had something exemplary to show their provosts and presidents—the “what else?” that could be their program's future home.

Honors administrators spend much of their time explaining and describing what honors is and does. When they talk about what honors looks like nationally, they should have answers to the following important questions: How pervasive is the model of separate honors facilities? How pervasive are the legendary closets that honors programs have so often mythically occupied? Where does honors really live?

Housing Honors attempts to answer those questions by showing the shapes honors takes in terms of the buildings and porches and study rooms and residential learning communities that contain and shelter it. It is also a book about how those spaces in turn shape the honors experience itself, whether it is the intimacy of a musty old living room or the grandeur of a LEED-certified, gray-water-

catching honors center. This volume offers four different ways of looking at housing honors. The first section, “Housing Honors Today,” offers a nationwide view of the current honors spatial situation via the results of a survey of over 400 institutions.

The second section, “Profiles of Spaces and Places in Honors,” includes individual essays that provide much greater detail regarding the acquisition, construction and/or renovation, development, and even loss of various honors abodes. Melissa Woglom and Meredith Lind explain how the University of Massachusetts Commonwealth Honors College Residential Community was initially conceptualized and then actualized. Larry Andrews makes the powerful case in his description of the evolution of the Kent State University Honors Complex that it requires careful coordination of the many offices with whom honors must work to make architectural magic happen. Mark Jacobs outlines the way in which the separate honors campus of Barrett, the Honors College at Arizona State University, came into being as a clear extension of that university’s mission. And Patricia MacCorquodale wraps up the conversation about new construction by detailing the philosophy behind the green creation of the University of Arizona’s *Árbol de la Vida*.

The rest of this section focuses on how the acquisition, nature, and loss of different kinds of honors spaces have affected honors populations at various institutions. Karen Lyons discusses the distinct advantages of including classrooms, as well as the office of the National Collegiate Honors Council, in an honors residence hall at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Robert Spurrier and Jessica Roark, Vicki Ohl, and Rusty Rushton offer rich descriptions of their historically significant and variously renovated honors houses and buildings. Spurrier has long urged honors administrators to always have a wish list on hand, and these authors have benefitted from being prepared. They aspired to have—and received—historically significant homes for their programs and colleges. Mariah Birgen and Joy Ochs conclude this section of the monograph with tales of woe, of losing honors spaces. Their stories are critical because they emphasize how the pursuit of space can and will transform students, regardless of what that pursuit yields.

The third section, “A Forum on Honors Housing,” follows the Forum tradition of the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* by presenting short pieces that offer a wide range of commentary about residential spaces for honors students. Essays in this section consider what is gained and what is lost when honors students are clustered in living-learning communities. Angela D. Mead, Samantha Rieger, and Leslie Sargent Jones share the results of a qualitative study they completed when surveying the honors students at Appalachian State University regarding changes to their honors residential situation. Richard Badenhausem challenges the assumption that honors students should live together in an honors community. Barry Falk; Tamara Valentine; Jamaica Afiya Pouncy; and Ashley Sweeney, Hannah Covington, and John Korstad delineate the various ways in which they have made and seen honors residential communities function well while Laura Feitzinger Brown echoes Badenhausem’s resistance to the honors living-learning model. John R. Purdie’s essay and that by Melissa L. Johnson, Elizabeth McNeill, Cory Lee, and Kathy Keeter consider the sometimes clashing cultures of honors and housing offices and the difficulties that such differences can spark. And wrapping up this section are three essays—by Gloria Cox, Keith and Christine Garbutt, and Paul Strom—about the challenges and benefits of faculty living in residence with honors students.

“The Future of Housing Honors,” the concluding section of this monograph, features the voices of students. The first essay in this section recounts a project undertaken by a group of architectural students at the Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences in which the students had just 24 hours to imagine the renovation of a downtown Rotterdam facility into a unique honors residence. After a frantic day of planning, drawing, building, and critiquing under the sustained guidance of architect Remko Remijnse, these students designed an urban honors residence hall. Images from those students’ final projects follow that piece.

The final essay in the collection was written by Tatiana Cody, an honors student and biology major at Eastern Kentucky University, and Rachael Poe, a Brock Scholar and English major at the

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Cody was the honors student worker when I was Director of the ECU Honors Program. She challenged me, as she was wont to do, regarding the issue of student perspective in the monograph: “Where is it in this book?” she asked me one day when we were discussing the project. Cody’s question led to a survey, which was distributed through NCHC’s national listserv to current honors students. Almost 300 students responded. This survey documents the predictions of current honors students regarding where honors will—and should—live in the future. Thanks to Cody, who prompted that conversation, and Poe, who gave it a final form in this article, the student view on the future of honors spaces concludes this volume. That is, I think, exactly as it should be.

Many people are to be thanked for their work on this monograph. All of the contributors were enormously patient and suffered the editors’ seemingly endless requests for more revision and more information with good humor and impressive kindness. My co-editor and writer, Lisa W. Kay, was my guide as we undertook our large survey and was crucial in developing our contribution to *Housing Honors*. She is also, to borrow those Maine students’ word, a wicked copy editor. Rachael Poe spent hours during her junior and senior years not only helping me acclimate to UTC culture and life, but also proofreading, offering suggestions, and corresponding with authors. Russell Helms generated probably a dozen different cover designs before this one was selected; he is always my go-to about looking good in print, and I am never not grateful to him. Mitch Pruitt and Cliff Jefferson of Wake Up Graphics are also dedicated to making NCHC’s publications look lovely, and their contributions are greatly appreciated. Reviewers of the first draft of this manuscript provided excellent advice, and all of the members of the NCHC Publications Board remained enthusiastic about the project despite how many times updates about the monograph appeared on their meeting agendas. Ada Long—*long may she edit*—came through, as she always does, with steady, loving, and editorially definitive support. And Jeff Portnoy works harder than just about anyone I know, spending hours and hours on all of these manuscripts published by

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NCHC. He is kind, smart, thorough, and deeply funny. Thank you, Jeff, for your relentless pen and your saving wit.

Where people live and work is never incidental to how they live and work; the two are always connected. What that means for educators and students working in honors is something this volume seeks to understand. While I hope this collection is as interesting as it is informative to its readers, I am most hopeful that it will be of practical use to those people seeking to improve, expand, or simply find a place for their honors programs and colleges to live.

