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CHAPTER 20

The Colliding Cultures of Honors and Housing

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The University of Florida's honors residential college was completed in 2002. It remains the newest and most expensive residence hall on campus to this day, housing more than 600 honors students, a faculty-in-residence, a classroom, and a multi-room study lounge. On paper, the residential college is a beautiful partnership between Florida's University Honors Program and the Department of Housing and Residential Education. In practice, however, two distinct cultures have emerged between the two offices.

From having the locks changed on shared learning spaces to not having a voice in the selection of housing staff, the honors program involvement with honors residence life has been tenuous at times. Even a decade after the building's dedication, more than half of the student resident assistants are not honors students, a figure

that has remained constant over the past few years. When honors students questioned the director of housing several years ago in an open forum about this underrepresentation of honors students in these positions, they were told that honors students simply had not applied for the position. The students quickly pointed out the plethora of resident assistant positions filled by honors students in other housing facilities on campus.

It is perhaps through the Student Honors Organization (SHO), however, that the colliding cultures have become most apparent. SHO serves as one of three honors-sponsored student organizations, filling the role of an honors student council that serves the entire honors student population, a group that exceeds 3,000 people. SHO also serves as the governing body of the area government for the honors residence hall, specifically representing the hall's 600+ residents to the Inter-Residence Hall Association (IRHA). SHO has a faculty advisor through the honors program, as well as a graduate student advisor through the residence hall.

SHO is led by six officers, typically sophomores who served on a SHO committee as freshmen and then were elected by the honors student body. These officers oversee four committees that plan monthly events around the following themes: academic, social, residential, and community service/campus outreach. Primarily freshmen apply and interview for positions on the committees, with six or seven students serving on each committee. Because honors students perceive a position with SHO as one of the first opportunities to become involved with the program, they demonstrate a high level of interest in the application process.

Unlike other area governments in the Inter-Residence Hall Association, SHO does not receive any funding from IRHA. In fact, in one of the first IRHA meetings each year, the SHO treasurer formally renounces funding. The honors program completely funds SHO with the understanding that the group represents all honors students. Aside from keeping an eye on the budget and ensuring that the executive board publicizes their events to all honors students, the honors program places few limits on SHO. The philosophy is that student leaders need the freedom to be creative

with their program development, the confidence to make decisions on their own, and the ability to execute events with minimal supervision.

Even as it maintains this level of autonomy, SHO is responsible for following the same IRHA guidelines and regulations as other area governments that receive funding from IRHA. In addition to the weekly IRHA meetings for the general body that last multiple hours, each officer is responsible for attending weekly meetings with corresponding officers in other area government groups. Even the treasurer must attend a weekly meeting despite the fact that SHO does not receive any funding from the organization. Officers report that they are constantly told discussion points do not apply to them in their various meetings; nevertheless, they are still required to attend.

Aside from the governance meetings, other requirements and expectations include attendance at monthly IRHA socials and a highly decorated office door. The SHO officers must complete extensive paperwork before and after each of their events. During certain times of the year, SHO is not allowed to schedule programs because of their required participation in IRHA-sponsored events, events that honors students are often less interested in attending than events organized by SHO. And because of housing regulations, honors students who serve as resident assistants are not allowed to hold office in SHO.

Because of the high expectations that SHO members set for themselves, typical for honors students, their level of programming is of exceptionally high quantity and quality. Obviously, SHO members are excited to plan events for their fellow honors students and work hard to enhance an honors community that will last beyond a year in a residence hall. In the past several years, SHO has been recognized as the area government of the year as well as the student organization of the year for the entire university. Unfortunately, the increasing obligations and demands for time outside of programming for honors students have started to wear on the SHO officers in particular.

In 2010, the SHO officers at the time began to question their purpose as officers and that of the organization as a whole. They wondered why IRHA regulations restricted their programming in and for the residence hall since they were funded by the honors program. They felt as though they were no longer serving all honors students, which was the overarching purpose and function of their organization. And most importantly, they were exhausted. Pulled in multiple directions and feeling responsible to multiple parties, the officers faced a serious dilemma of how to move forward.

When new officers were elected in 2011, the 2010 officers continued the discussions about the future of SHO. They created an ad hoc committee that included representatives from the other two honors student organizations and current SHO officers. Representatives from Housing were invited to participate in many of these conversations, but they chose not to do so. The ad hoc committee reviewed the purpose of SHO and discussed the potential ramifications of changing the structure of the organization. At one point they seriously considered separating SHO from the area government in order to more fully represent all honors students, rather than just those living in the residence hall. After much discussion, the group ultimately decided to maintain the structure of SHO, but to continue adding new opportunities for honors students to get involved with the program through other outlets. The members feared that programming space within the residence hall would not be available to SHO if it no longer served as the area government. Despite increasing limitations on SHO, the group perceived a need for involvement in areas falling more in line with the philosophy of the honors program. Those opportunities have included establishing a retreat for first-year honors students, which allows them to get to know each other prior to the start of their first semester; appointing junior and senior event-planning interns who coordinate large-scale events for the program; and creating fundraising teams for various campus philanthropy events such as Dance Marathon and Relay for Life.

Interestingly, conversations about the purpose of SHO have reemerged with the latest group of SHO officers. As the students

find themselves busier and busier with academics and social obligations, they are more concerned about how they spend their time. When they realized that their meeting obligations for IRHA were impeding their ability to program events for honors students, they approached the honors program with their concerns. On top of these obligations, officers often were faced with snide comments about being “special” during these meetings.

This time, the housing staff has been more responsive to the concerns related to SHO. At least from the administrative levels, the two groups are working towards creating a common understanding about the larger purpose of the organization, but the negotiations are difficult. From a broader level, the cultures of honors and housing, despite sharing an interest in facilitating the academic success of college students, approach their roles with students in different ways. Honors at Florida has long been about celebrating the uniqueness of high-achieving students, encouraging independent thought, and supporting innovative activities. In fact, students know that they can approach the honors administrators with any new idea for the program; often, these plans will find support.

Housing, on the other hand, is driven by facilities and operations. With almost 10,000 on-campus residents to manage, this enterprise is a full-service business with policies and procedures necessary to keep afloat; the operation supports too many students and facilities to allow for deviations from the established norms and regulations.

Not surprisingly, student leaders mirror the cultural divide. Members of SHO favor the independence they have to develop programming for honors students; honors advisors encourage them to be flexible and creative in their work. They are also genuinely passionate about serving the honors program through this organization. Student leaders in IRHA prefer rules and procedures applicable to everyone, as expected in a business or regulatory agency. This organization also sees itself as the governing body over smaller organizations that serve at its pleasure. The focus on service inward versus service outward, as with SHO, accounts for the major collision between these two organizations.

Housing has been listening to concerns about the two organizations, and the matter has been a topic of conversation at several staff meetings. These sessions have provided a mutual understanding of the needs of honors student leaders; however, the collision continues between the two student organizations because the macro-level accommodations have not readily filtered down to the students. The challenge of bridging the competing obligations and responsibilities of two different worlds remains a difficult work in progress.