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CHAPTER 14

Building Honors Community through Honors Housing

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A strong sense of honors community is a fundamentally important characteristic of a vibrant honors program or college. In fact, I am fond of saying that “community, community, community” are the three most important characteristics of a strong honors program. The idea of community does not appear, however, in the National Collegiate Honors Council’s “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors College” or the “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program.” Perhaps that absence is because this characteristic, regardless of how it is expressed, would be difficult to verify.

A strong sense of community among honors students enhances the honors academic experience, inside and outside of the classroom. In class, the camaraderie that is engendered by being part of the honors community fosters greater comfort, engagement, and respect, both among the students and between the students and the

instructor. Community facilitates student interaction outside of the classroom. Honors students frequently share common concerns and dreams about a variety of things—from grades, to course and major selections, to plans for life and career after college. Community among honors students provides an enhanced support system for students. And a strong honors community can help provide these students with a strong lifetime support network.

In a small honors program, a sense of honors community can develop through common experiences such as honors classes and social events, elements that routinely bring the entire group of honors students together (or at least those within the same cohort). In a large program, however, honors students will not routinely encounter each other over and over again in classes or in social settings. In fact, honors social events in large programs probably will not be successful if the only link honors students have to one another is through honors classes. While honors classroom experiences will likely lead to important and long-lasting friendships among small groups of honors students, they are not likely to lead to a strong sense of honors community within the program or college overall.

The honors program at James Madison University (JMU) is large. Its entering freshman class has over 200 students and the program's total enrollment is over 900, including students who enter the program sometime after the first semester of the freshman year. Total undergraduate enrollment at JMU is slightly over 18,000. These honors students typically take one honors class a semester until they begin the capstone project in the second semester of the junior year. With honors classes capped at 20 students and with the capstone project being largely independent work, the honors academic experience at JMU is not conducive to the development of a strong sense of honors community.

I arrived at James Madison University as Honors Program Director in the summer of 2007 to find a strong academic program but one without a strong sense of community. My priority in developing an honors community was to create an honors residential hall that would anchor that community. My vision was that

entering honors students would arrive on campus early for honors orientation activities. The camaraderie developed in these activities would be supported and cemented by a common living experience. These students would eat meals together, walk together to their honors classes, study together in the residence hall's study areas, plan common social activities, attend cultural activities together, and form their own intramural sports teams. The vision was not to isolate them from the rest of campus but rather to have honors provide one community among a number of communities with which these students could engage. It would, however, be their first community experience on campus.

For some number of years, the honors program had a learning community that housed about 20 entering freshmen. These students were distributed randomly throughout a residence hall that also housed several other non-honors learning communities. Roommate pairings deliberately mixed roommates from the various learning communities. Soon after I arrived, I met with the Vice President for Student Affairs and told him that instead of just an honors learning community, a dedicated honors residence hall was a key priority for me. His response: "We don't do themed housing at JMU. We do learning communities." Two years later, in the fall of 2009, the entering honors class occupied the new Honors Learning and Living Center, one of two wings in a brand new 400-bed residence hall, Shenandoah Hall.

How did this happen?

While the Vice President of Student Affairs vehemently opposed the notion of dedicated honors housing, the director of the Office of Residential Life bought into the vision advocated by the honors program. Honors housing played a critical role in that vision. As the Director of the Office of Residential Life explained to one of her associates on campus: "This train is leaving the station and we need to be on it!"

Enhancement of honors community among the students was perceived to be the main benefit to creating dedicated honors housing on campus, but honors housing for freshmen also was expected to serve as a valuable recruiting tool for the university overall. The

JMU Honors Program provides little scholarship support to its students. Honors housing does not substitute for the lack of scholarships, but for some number of students, it is an enticement to be in the program that is of low cost to the university. Honors-bound high school seniors often note that they want to be in the JMU Honors Program so they can live in Shenandoah. For some students, of course, being forced to live in a hall full of other honors students constitutes an equally good reason not to join the program. Honors housing is optional for entering freshmen partly for this reason and partly for more practical reasons that will be addressed below.

Although generally supportive of the concept of honors housing, the Director of the Office of Residential Life was concerned that making an exception for honors would open the door to requests from the Department of Music, the Department of Chemistry, and other units that might want their students housed together. The logic behind the argument that honors is substantially different from these other units was sufficient to prevent Residential Life from extending dedicated housing to other units. It did articulate a willingness, however, to consider making exceptions in the future if the experiment with honors was successful. In fact, based upon the success with honors housing, the Office of Residential Life enthusiastically opened another themed residence hall in 2011, this one dedicated to the creative arts.

Ideally, I would have liked to see the honors residence hall include honors students from each class so that upper-level students could mentor less experienced ones. With 400 beds in the residence hall, it seemed like the space should have been sufficient to accommodate this plan. But on-campus housing at JMU is so limited that, other than residence hall advisors, only first- and second-year students can live in the residence hall. Even though many second-year students prefer to live off campus, not every second-year student who wants to can live in a residence hall. Although space in the B wing of the residence hall could accommodate up to 200 second-year honors students, only about 100 second-year honors students made this choice. Many second-year honors students who move off campus continue to room with other honors students who lived

with them in the residence hall the preceding year. The honors program is exploring the possibility of working with private landlords to create off-campus private honors housing for upperclassmen.

The A wing in Shenandoah Hall accommodates up to 200 students, almost entirely in double rooms. Honors freshmen are given priority for these rooms. Most of the resident hall advisors in this wing are honors students, and the honors program works with the Office of Residential Life in their selection; a faculty-in-residence is housed there as well. Although requiring entering honors students to live in Shenandoah Hall would have been consistent with the desire to have the residence hall enhance the honors community, allowing entering students to opt out of honors housing avoided the problem of not being able to accommodate all of the entering students' housing preferences, especially since the target freshman class size is also about 200. This flexibility also provides an option to those students who are attracted to other aspects of the program but who prefer to live somewhere other than the honors residence hall.

Generally 170 entering students choose the honors housing option each year, and usually 10 of these entering honors students who prefer specific non-honors roommates are accommodated on a space-available basis. The university's housing office allocates the remaining 20 spots to other freshmen. First-year students covet Shenandoah Hall for its amenities (central air conditioning, for example, and its proximity to the university's newest and best dining hall); for providing academic high achievers the opportunity to live in a community with like-minded students; and because it offers a ready-made community for entering students. Parents of prospective students find it reassuring that their children will live in a community of honors students rather than a random collection of freshmen. Honors housing has become an important recruiting tool for the honors program.

The Office of Residential Life has been extremely pleased at how this experiment has worked. The dorm is vibrant and relatively trouble free (even so, the Director of Residential Life will occasionally remind me that "not all honors students are angels!"). The study

areas in Shenandoah are used more heavily than those anywhere else on campus, and the retention rate for the residence hall is relatively high by JMU standards. Faculty members who teach honors classes have noticed and commented on the benefits of having honors students living and studying together. Group work and learning occur more easily and naturally. Students come to class more prepared and will often respond to an instructor's question or comment with the reply that they were "just talking about that in Shenandoah last night."

The residence hall has contributed to the sense of honors community at JMU in other ways besides academic achievement. The day after freshmen arrive, the honors program hosts a series of morning orientation activities including icebreaking and team-building activities, all followed by lunch. Rather than dispersing in many directions after eating, thereby diluting the community-building effects of the morning activities, students now return en masse to Shenandoah for the afternoon, reinforcing these effects. Social events planned by Shenandoah's students for the group are not simply residence hall events but are, by the nature of Shenandoah, honors events, too. Honors information and group advising sessions are routinely offered in the residence hall because of its convenience for so many of the students in the honors program. Both the honors program director and the program's academic advisor spend time each week in a small office in Shenandoah.

Had circumstances been different, my preference would have been to house the honors administrative offices in the residence hall because Hillcrest House, the honors administrative building that was once the President's home, is located on the other side of campus. Hillcrest House is a wonderful, spacious, and elegant facility, one that includes several student lounge and work areas, conference rooms, and a computer lab, in addition to the staff offices. Even though I would have left that facility had space and planning allowed the honors offices to be moved to the residence hall, Hillcrest students are now using Hillcrest much more than they did before the honors wings in Shenandoah were established. Students who live in Shenandoah use Hillcrest as their base for

work or sleep when they are on the other side of campus. Other students just like to hang out at Hillcrest, even venturing over from the residence halls in groups.

Maintaining an honors residence has created two new challenges. The first is relatively minor. Honors administrators and staff have to work with the Office of Residence Life to keep track of those entering honors students who do not want to live in Shenandoah Hall as well as the non-honors roommate preferences among those who do. Further, the honors program must ensure that freshmen understand the process they must follow to reserve their spot in the hall for their sophomore year; occasionally the honors staff must deal with the student or parent who is unhappy about the outcome of this process. The larger challenge is accounting for the fact that while 250–300 honors students are living in Shenandoah at any one time, another 600–700 students are not. Many of these honors students will have never lived in honors housing. Maintaining and developing a sense of community among students who are no longer living in, or who have never lived in, Shenandoah remains difficult. For example, the tendency to hold many informational events in Shenandoah sometimes has the unintended consequence of isolating non-residents or privileging the residents.

Despite these challenges and the various operational limitations, the JMU Honors Program has clearly benefitted from the addition of an honors residence hall. The honors residence hall has fostered honors community, helped recruitment efforts, strengthened the relationship with Student Affairs, enhanced both the students' and faculty's academic experiences, and made contacting and advising students more efficient. Exit interviews and surveys now indicate that living in the honors residence hall is one of the most rewarding elements of the JMU honors experience.

After their first or second year in Shenandoah, JMU honors students, like other upperclassmen at JMU, must move off campus into private apartments or houses. This obligation continues the practice that developed at JMU when, during rapid enrollment growth, on-campus housing was not an option for third- and fourth-year students. While these honors students often move into off-campus

housing with other honors students, they are dispersed widely across the many off-campus housing options that are available to them. One consequence of this situation is that third- and fourth-year honors students become more isolated from one another as they pursue their majors and their capstone projects. Although the strong sense of honors community that developed during the first two years weakens considerably for this group as a result, new initiatives on campus may improve this situation.

The university is now building its first apartment-style housing, exclusively for upperclassmen, on the perimeter of campus. The honors program has been offered the first shot at these units. It is also working with the university on a plan in which the university would lease and manage a private apartment building to provide off-campus rental units to a community of honors students. These steps will help the honors program maintain the strong, vibrant community created by honors housing through all four years of the honors experience at JMU.