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Karen Lyons

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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CHAPTER 6

Living to Learn, Learning for Life: Housing Honors Classrooms and Offices in an Honors Residence Hall

KAREN LYONS

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN

I left the interview with high-hopes: being Assistant Director of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Honors Program sounded like an excellent fit for me. A full-time job, a real income, and no longer having to depend on year-to-year contracts as an adjunct were appealing. The opportunity to teach tied into my strengths, and since I had taught UNL honors classes previously, I knew the high quality of the students. I also knew the director and was excited about the prospect of working with him. As I wended my way, in heels and suit, through the extensive construction going on in the renovation of the honors offices, I had only two reservations: my office would be in the Neihardt Residence Center, and Neihardt had no classrooms, so I would have to walk across campus to teach. I mulled over those points with skepticism. Did I really want to

spend most of my days in a residence hall when I had been out of college for nearly 30 years? How uncomfortable would that location be after being in my own little office tucked away from the noise and commotion of the students changing classes? Would I feel terribly out of place among people less than half my age? What would be the students' expectations of me? Would I turn into a surrogate mom or, more likely, grandma? And would I like having to walk across campus to my classrooms when I was accustomed simply to going downstairs in the building, especially in January in the minus-twenty degree wind chills or the heat and humidity for which the Midwest is famous? What would I do if I forgot something or misjudged traffic and was late? When the offer came, however, I accepted it immediately despite those reservations; after all, I was clearly aware that no absolutely perfect job exists. The result: I have never regretted taking the position and my fears were in vain.

I quickly learned my first concern was completely unfounded: I was very happy with the location of my office, and after over 15 years as Assistant Director and then Associate Director of the UNL Honors Program, I cannot imagine ever wanting to retreat to an office tucked away in a corner, away from the hustle and bustle of students. Initially, however, I did have to walk across campus to teach, so I did my best to be stoic about it. Several years later, Neihardt was renovated again, this time to remodel several rooms into classrooms and study rooms. I now could teach in Neihardt and enjoy the comfort of having my office in close proximity to my classrooms and heading to my classes without dealing with the Nebraska heat or the Midwest winter weather. But I was to learn this situation held far more advantages than merely being out of the sometimes unpleasant climate. A living and learning environment, the presence of classrooms and offices in the residence facility, and the integration of faculty and students outside the classroom as well as in epitomize the college experience for faculty and administrators as well as for students.

NEIHARDT RESIDENCE CENTER

Neihardt is unique on the UNL campus in many ways. The first residence hall built on the campus, it opened in 1932 for women only although it has long since been co-ed by floors. It boasts the only Georgian architecture among the UNL residence halls, with elegant chandeliers in the room that was the original dining hall but now serves as a large gathering place for students; a circular staircase; and a temperamental elevator made by the Otis Elevator Company, which was the first elevator company in the United States. The elevator features classic Bogart-style accordion doors and is, of course, named Otis. Since opening, Neihardt has undergone several metamorphoses: during World War II, it served a stint as an influenza hospital. It has since been the home of international students and the residence for Centennial College, a precursor to both the honors program and UNL's current learning communities. In the early 90s, just a few years after the inception of the UNL Honors Program in 1986, one floor of one of the four wings became optional honors housing, although the honors program administrative offices remained in the student union. From there, it was only a matter of time until the honors program, including the administrative offices, infiltrated the rest of the residential complex. Today Neihardt houses just under a quarter of the 2,000-plus honors program students, along with several classrooms, study rooms, the administrative and advising offices, the Director of Fellowship Advising, a computer lab, the honors thesis library, lovely spaces for students to gather, and the executive offices of the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC).

THE NATIONAL COLLEGIATE HONORS COUNCIL

The NCHC offices are located on the first floor of one wing, next to the computer lab and across from a classroom and a meeting room with a small kitchenette. The working relationship between the UNL Honors Program and NCHC is invaluable to both operations. The university provides the space, which includes the large, multi-room main office with its own exit, three other offices, phone

service, mail delivery, and access to the UNL Digital Commons. In addition, the UNL Honors Program supplies the use of the meeting room and as much moral support as possible, particularly during the month leading up to the national conference. Honors students sometimes have the opportunity to work for NCHC, and they often take shortcuts through the office to their classes. The two enterprises cooperate in many ways, and NCHC staff members typically attend the lectures, events, and celebrations hosted by the honors program.

ACADEMICS

While the residential component is extremely important, as is the presence of the advising and administrative offices and the NCHC offices, the academic component is the critical piece. The UNL Honors Program controls three classrooms; two are smart classrooms, and one has a dedicated smart cart. Two other seminar rooms are available for honors classes although the housing office oversees them. The two smart classrooms seat a maximum of 25 students; the smaller classroom can hold a maximum of 15 students and is available for group study sessions in the evenings. The other seminar classrooms seat 12 comfortably, but they can accommodate two or three more students when necessary. Of course, the study rooms are also available to all honors students, not just those who live in Neihardt, and students use them constantly although they are busiest during dead and finals weeks.

That students live and take classes in the same building is advantageous in a variety of ways. For starters, students in 8:30 a.m. classes are known to set their alarms for 8:25, slide into clothes and a pair of slippers, grab their texts and notebooks, and run downstairs to class. That behavior contributes to the casual atmosphere this arrangement promotes.

Of course, those faculty members who prefer a more formal atmosphere can teach in other facilities, usually in classrooms housed in their home departments, but most value it. The faculty who teach in Neihardt essentially come into the students' home, their space, instead of the students going across campus to the

faculty members' or departments' spaces. This shift in the paradigm means the faculty, not the students, are guests in the classroom, a situation that makes the students more responsible for their performance and thus means the classes are decidedly student-centered. Here, the barrier between the students and the faculty breaks down rapidly, and the students interact with one another in important and valuable ways earlier in the semester than they do in more formal settings.

Even in this relaxed setting, for the first few class meetings, the first-year students are stiff, tentative in responding to questions, and uncertain about what faculty will expect of them. Because many students have already met classmates in the building, they overcome that anxiety quickly in a Neihardt classroom and rapidly become productive, usually by the end of the third week, rather than the fifth or sixth week of their first semester in college. The comfortable setting enhances both the quantity and quality of what the students can absorb and the level to which they can perform.

The upper-division students, many of whom already know each other, are relaxed and open even as they look for challenges and academic excitement. Some of these students have lived in Neihardt previously and are excited to return to its casual environment even though they are quite happy in upper-division housing or apartments. When they arrive, they are enthusiastic and primed to work. With classes limited to 12 to 15 students and an atmosphere that obviously promotes intimacy, students typically feel free to share ideas sooner in the semester and in more depth than might otherwise occur.

Another advantage of having the classrooms in the building is the proximity of the computer lab: when assignments are due, students can print their work immediately prior to class. The disadvantage to that opportunity, however, is that it encourages procrastination, something that is an inevitable facet of being a student (or a faculty member).

Finally, and less tangible though no less important, the presence of the classrooms creates an academic aura: most residents and all students who use the computer lab, study rooms, or other

gathering spaces cannot walk through the building without passing at least one classroom. That constant reminder of the importance of academics within the living space sends a subtle, nuanced message that academics are central to this stage of their lives.

FACULTY OFFICES, ADVISING OFFICES, AND THESIS LIBRARY

For faculty whose offices are in the building, the academic presence and convenience are invaluable. Coffee comes with the territory, fresh-brewed and not in a paper cup for \$3.75. If faculty forget to bring something to class, the item can easily be retrieved. The most valuable aspect of having both faculty offices and study spaces in the building, however, is the constant contact with the students. Students can come by the honors offices before or after class if they have a quick question, during office hours, or whenever the office doors are open. If residents are working on the assignment for the next class and have a concern, they can easily wander by the faculty member's office. In other words, students rely less on technology and more on personal contact. This atmosphere lends itself to constant learning opportunities, not just structured ones in the classrooms, but flexible, spontaneous opportunities to discuss material one on one with students. The faculty member can share the joy of pursuing complex intellectual questions and demonstrate the habit of exercising lifelong learning skills.

That the thesis library is housed beside the Associate Director's office provides another advantage. That location means students who are preparing to write the thesis often touch base with the Associate Director for thesis advice as they are perusing a few of the over 2,000 theses shelved there. In this case, students have immediate access to an advisor who can discuss the thesis process as well as possible thesis topics. Again, this situation usually means the student receives immediate assistance, often without the necessity of making an appointment. That the honors program has resisted digitizing theses means not only that the operation is maintaining the spirit of the over-80-year-old building, but that the students

interact with a person who can respond to them in important and valuable ways, rather than with a laptop, as they investigate thesis possibilities. Although the thesis library, at some point, will certainly move to a digital format, the honors program will also retain hard copies of theses precisely because of the importance of this interaction.

In addition, because the Academic Advisor is housed in the residence center, she can be in constant touch with other honors administrators and faculty as well as with the students. Students have easy and spontaneous access to that office, and they can drop by after class or, on some days, in the evenings when student peer advisors staff the office. Centralizing all honors administrative and academic functions means any questions of policy that arise can be solved quickly and easily, and everyone on campus concerned with honors, whether they are upper administrators, students, or faculty, knows exactly where to go for honors information and questions.

STUDENT AND FACULTY CONNECTIONS

Often, as I walk back to my office after a class, I will find students reading or studying, which often leads to exploring potential topics for upcoming papers or determining what classes the students should consider taking in the following semester. These interchanges are always valuable. Students who no longer live in Neihardt often study in the parlors or study rooms. Reconnecting with them often means discussing graduate and professional school options, thesis issues, or questions about personal statements, all of which become important points of conversation. Often first-year students who have chosen to live in other residence halls study in Neihardt, in which case the regular interactions with them means they remain in closer contact with the honors program than they would if they simply came by the offices when they needed forms or advice.

The students who live off campus also find Neihardt a comfortable home when they are on campus. The commuter student lounge has lockers so they can leave some texts there while they carry others to class. The lounge is particularly attractive to commuting

first-year students who are acclimating themselves to campus life without being wholly a part of it. Alternatively, some students frequent the other parlors, which are also more open and closer to the ebb and flow of student life. But in the commuter student lounge, lunchtime can be quite busy on certain days, with six or eight students gathering with sandwiches and fruit to visit about classes or social events.

CONCLUSION

The inclusion of faculty, advising, and administrative offices and, more important, classrooms in the residence hall promotes the idea of learning as a partnership in which faculty not only mentor and guide students through the material but demonstrate a love of and dedication to lifelong learning. Other classroom situations, as well as the student/thesis mentor relationship, can foster these ideas, but in the academic setting of Neihardt, this relationship develops with first-year students, not just with upper-division students, and that difference is often critical to a student's survival at a large research institution and in the honors program itself. Because the opportunity exists in Neihardt to routinely encounter faculty face-to-face and not just at planned times, students can enjoy the spontaneity of a quick conversation or a more prolonged one, rather than having to make an appointment or ask questions and receive answers via email at odd hours of the day and night. This casual atmosphere lets the students know that the honors faculty and staff are anxious to stay in touch and to help them.

Housing honors at UNL means not only providing the opportunity for students, faculty, and administrators to establish a strong honors living-learning community, but the opportunity to blend these benefits with the advantage of honors advising, classes, and learning. The discussions then spill over from the classrooms into the hallways, parlors, rooms, and offices in the building, and this atmosphere teaches students to embrace learning as a way of life and enables faculty to engage in and demonstrate the same. Thus Neihardt establishes an atmosphere that defies the view that the college experience is simply a stage through which students must

pass before entering graduate or professional schools or the workforce. Rather, housing honors at UNL means students live to learn and will do so for life.

