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CHAPTER 12

Honors Students' Perceptions of the Value and Importance of Honors Housing

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In 2011, we participated in a panel presentation, entitled “Where Honors Lives,” about the new honors college complex then under construction at Appalachian State University (ASU). This complex was to consist of two new buildings: a ten-story residence hall for the honors college students and a three-story building with honors offices and classrooms on the top two floors. Unfortunately, between initial planning in the mid-2000s and building five years later, University Housing changed its mind and decided freshmen would not be allowed to live there because suite-style housing was deemed inappropriate for that population. Current honors students could live there, but it was unclear how many, and it appeared they were to be scattered throughout the building whose residents would primarily be non-honors students.

These decisions put the honors college in an awkward situation because current students had to be told that the honors residential option, which had been a long-standing benefit of being in honors, was no longer guaranteed for continuing students. This change also meant that the honors community, which had included all years living together for over three decades, would now be split, with the freshmen living in a third, traditional-style hall adjacent to the new tower. This plan precipitated an outcry from students and parents, and it put the honors college in the uncomfortable position of either not making the student constituency happy or generating the ire of University Housing by questioning this policy.

In order to evaluate how strongly the community felt about the proposed changes, the Appalachian State Honors College sent an open-ended email to all of the students, asking for their input. The 105 responses (13% of the total honors population, but ~37% of the number in honors housing), as well as a student petition, were delivered to those in charge of the decision. In the end, a compromise was achieved, splitting the honors students between the two buildings; honors students would live together on honors-only floors within the two halls: continuing students in the new hall and freshmen in the traditional, corridor-style hall.

The email was not sent with the intention of gathering material for an article, but the responses were compelling and provided insights into honors students' views that merited further study. The 105 qualitative responses revealed that honors students do, in fact, strongly value the honors-only housing option, primarily for the sense of community it provides, the academic benefits of being surrounded by other honors students of all years, and the physical environment and location of the honors residence hall. This article will present these findings and discuss the students' opinions in light of honors programming goals.

BACKGROUND

Participation in an honors program or college, according to Alexander W. Astin (1977), increases persistence in college and encourages post-baccalaureate school aspiration, but some specific

program elements also increase the likelihood that students will persist specifically within honors (p. 221). Many honors programs offer a residential community to allow honors students the opportunity to live with similar students, and K. Celeste Campbell and Dale R. Fuqua (2008) have found that students who live in honors housing are more likely to continue in honors than those who do not (p. 145). Their data probably underscore the NCHC emphasis on housing in the “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors College”: “Where the home university has a significant residential component, the honors college offers substantial honors residential opportunities” (2014, item 10).

Because students spend so much of their time where they live, the residence can have a profound impact on their academic performance. Research about honors living-learning communities is limited. Data suggest that honors housing provides specific benefits to honors students, with certain caveats. For example, Eric Daffron and Christopher Holland (2009) reported on their experience of instituting a new honors living-learning community, including their successes and challenges. Their students reported high levels of satisfaction with the physical environment of the residence hall, had a strong sense of community, and were engaged with honors programming. On the negative side, students complained that both living and taking multiple courses together meant they spent too much time with the same students; they also wanted a balance in the social and academic aspects of the living-learning community. But, for three of the four years of their experimental data, students involved in the honors living-learning community were more likely to remain at the institution than honors students who were not in the honors living-learning community and more likely to continue in the honors program (pp. 203–205).

One rationale behind honors residence halls is what Anne Rinn (2004) calls “environmental press,” where students tend to meet the achievement levels of the students around them (p. 71). So “if students with high achievement and high aspirations surround a gifted college student, the student is likely to raise his aspirations to meet those of students around him,” whereas those same gifted

students were found to be less satisfied living with non-honors students (Rinn, 2004, p. 71). Honors residence halls are important, according to Rinn, because of their academic orientation and because students who choose to live in the honors residence hall reinforce this academic orientation with each other. Also, since honors students are more likely to remain living on campus than non-honors students, they create a multi-year community (Rinn, 2004, pp. 71–72).

Martha L. A. Stassen (2003) compared retention rates of students in several different types of residential learning communities, including honors. This study of over 5,000 students found that participation in a learning community yielded increased retention (p. 584). Participation in an honors residential learning community had the highest retention among all groups, but Stassen speculated that this may be related to the characteristics of students in those programs because they are selective programs that typically attract and enroll well-prepared students (p. 595).

Karen K. Inkelas and Jennifer L. Weisman (2003) also compared outcomes of various types of living-learning program environments: transition programs, honors programs, and curriculum-based programs that concentrate on a specific major or research topic. The authors focused on the impact of the type of program on involvement and found that participants were generally more positively engaged than students not in a living-learning community and that the students in the honors programs reported higher levels of critical-thinking skills, social meetings with peers, and discussions outside of class. Although they were more likely to study individually than in groups, they also reported the highest level of social support coming from their residence hall environment and were the most likely to discuss academic issues with their peers (pp. 344–346).

Nancy L. Reichert (2007) conducted a survey of members of the National Collegiate Honors Council on the numbers and impact of honors programs that also offer an honors housing option. Of the 43 responses, 88% reported that they do offer some type of an honors housing option to their honors students. Sixty-six percent found

that honors housing was beneficial to recruitment, and 55% stated that honors housing was important to student success in college (p. 114). Some of the respondents reported an increased interest in honors after implementing an honors housing option and that standardized test scores improved rather dramatically afterwards. One respondent reported a significant difference in the GPAs of honors students who lived in the honors residence hall space versus honors students who chose to live in another type of housing (p. 117).

Campbell and Fuqua (2008) examined 16 variables to try to find a relationship between them and which students complete the honors program requirements and graduate with some type of honors award at a large Midwestern research university. While a number of demographic and academic elements did predict success and graduation from the honors program, the initial assignment to the honors residence hall was the third-highest predictor of completion of an honors curriculum. Fifty-eight percent of students who lived in the honors residence hall as first-semester freshmen graduated with honors, compared to 32% of freshmen who lived in a non-honors setting. Campbell and Fuqua concluded: "These results suggest that the social reinforcement within the honors residential setting is related to students' decisions to complete honors award requirements" (p. 145). Four major metrics predicted graduation with honors: first-semester GPA, high school grades and rank, first-semester housing (honors vs. non-honors), and gender. Of these variables, institutions only directly impact whether honors students are housed with other honors students or not, which "implies that honors housing facilities should be an honors program priority" (p. 150). Honors administrators may improve retention, persistence, and graduation rates by offering honors housing options to students, particularly in the first semester (pp. 149-150).

Overall, the literature shows that living-learning and residential learning communities typically have a strong, positive impact on student achievement and persistence, and an honors residential learning option in particular has a positive impact on honors student engagement, retention, and persistence to graduation with honors. While some of the articles cited here discuss possible challenges

to be considered, overall, most of the literature demonstrates that honors residential learning communities enhance recruitment to, engagement with, and graduation from an honors program.

METHODS

In fall 2011, the direction of honors housing at Appalachian State University for the future was under debate. An email request was sent to all active honors college students from first-semester students through graduating seniors, approximately 800 students, in October 2011, asking them for their input on the role of and importance of honors housing.

There were 105 responses to the open-ended prompt, which was approximately 13% of the honors college population, but closer to 37% of the total number of students then living in honors housing. Responses came in as individual emails, and four years were represented. Once the decision was made to analyze the results, all identifying data were removed so that identifying respondents by class standing was not possible.

The email prompt read as follows:

Dear Honors College Students,

As many of you know, Student Development has proposed to separate the Honors Residential Community next year. They propose to put the freshmen in Cone, mixed in with mostly non-honors freshmen, and the continuing students in the new residence hall (being built next to the future office/classroom building for Honors), also mixed in with a majority of non-honors students.

I am writing now to ask for your opinion on this question in order to gain a better understanding of how the whole Honors College population views this matter.

So, whether you are currently in East or not, I would welcome a response from you indicating your views on this matter.

The authors obtained approval to analyze the data *a posteriori* under the Exempt category for “Collection or Study of Existing Data” from the ASU Institutional Review Board. Responses were coded for keywords and analyzed qualitatively. A word frequency chart was created to indicate how often specific words were used in the narrative responses. For the qualitative analysis, each response was read by two of the authors for accuracy. Twenty-one keywords and three main themes emerged from the data collected.

FINDINGS

When the 105 responses were analyzed using word frequency, a number of words or phrases were found to be shared across the respondents. The word frequency data appear in Table 1.

The word “community” was by far the most common word used to describe the role and effect of honors housing on the students who responded to the survey. Students often used the word “community” to describe a sense of belonging or a family-like feeling within the honors population, rather than simply referring to the residence hall that houses honors students. Nearly half of all respondents, 50 out of 105, included the word “community” in their response; 20 students mentioned it more than once. The words “unity” and “family,” frequently mentioned at 14 and 6 instances respectively, also referred to the same sense of belonging to a group. The keywords “community,” “unity,” and “family” were used 106 times in 105 responses, with most students using at least one of the three words.

“Support,” “encourage,” and “mentor” were used 51 times. These words typically described the phenomenon of having honors students from all four years available to provide encouragement, advice, and support. Students also frequently mentioned how important it was, especially for first-year students, to have access to upper-class students who had already made the transition to college successfully.

Honors housing also was important to success in college, with 18 students using the word “success.” Similar words were “respect,” “excellence,” “achievement,” “pride” “motivation,” and

TABLE 1: WORD FREQUENCY

Word	Count
Community	86
Support	33
Success	18
Unity	14
Encourage	11
Respect	11
Image	8
Perk	8
Mentor	7
Leadership	7
Family	6
Friendly	6
Friendship	4
Excellence	4
Recruitment	3
Resource	3
Challenge/Challenging	3
Achievement	2
Pride	2
Motivation	2
Determination	2

“determination.” Students reported that being with other highly motivated students was a major benefit to their academic success and achievement in college.

COMMUNITY

Once the 105 narrative responses were coded, they were reviewed by two of the three authors to ensure accuracy. From the responses, three main themes emerged, along with several additional subthemes. The first theme was about creating a sense of community and belonging. Respondents called it by several different names, including “community,” “friendship,” “family,” and “mentoring,” but the explanations referred to the same phenomenon: feeling a sense of connection with their peers. Many students referred to having a tightknit community because of their shared living space. One student explained, “Housing the students together enhances the community experience that is a big part of what the program offers.” Another student agreed, saying that honors housing “brings the honors community closer together, and my experience at ASU would not have been the same if I had been in just a regular dorm.”

This sense of community had several subthemes. One of the primary subthemes was that of making friends. Multiple students said that their friends were often other honors students who lived with them. One upper-class student wrote about her experiences: “I am still close friends with almost every single person from my hall freshman year. The community is very tightknit and helps to provide a support system for new students in particular.” This reflection was an oft-repeated theme, with first-year students explaining how their friends were usually their hallmates and upper-class students saying that they were still close friends with those whom they had met through honors housing.

Some students mentioned that their relationships went beyond mere friendship, and they developed a family within the honors housing community. Several other students claimed that living in honors housing had created a family atmosphere. “I have grown so close to all the honors students while living in [honors housing,] and I feel like they are my family,” said one student echoing a common sentiment.

Another benefit of honors housing was having mentors living in the same physical space. One student elaborated:

A part of what I loved so much about being a freshman in the honors program was being able to come home to peers that I considered mentors[,] . . . upperclassmen who could guide me and give me insight into life, stress, and succeeding at Appalachian.

Many others agreed; they cited the unofficial mentoring offered by sophomore, junior, or senior students living in the next room or down the hall as a major benefit, especially for first-year students. Another student explained how mentoring was a cycle for students living in honors housing: "I remember being a freshman and consulting older members of my hall for academic help, and I remember being a sophomore and having help requested of me." That this process emerges organically from the group and is not an imposed feature is important to note.

Several students mentioned being advised by older students in the community to pursue leadership roles on campus. They reported becoming residence assistants, club presidents, and members of journalism organizations as a direct result of their honors residential experience. Many students cited their peers and upper-class mentors as the ones who encouraged them to pursue these extracurricular activities and to become involved in the university outside of the classroom.

This theme of community focused on the shared experiences made possible by living together in honors housing. One student explained, "Our friendships have lasted in part because while we come from different backgrounds, we share academic values, and we probably would not have met had we not lived in the honors dorm." Many students reported that social situations were important, but having roommates, hallmates, and peers who also understood that academics were important was a key factor in their satisfaction at ASU.

ACADEMICS

A second major theme referred to the academic benefits of living in dedicated honors housing. One student reported that living

in honors housing “has made a significant impact on my success here at App and more specifically in the honors college. The opportunity to surround yourself with other strong students who share your priorities is an opportunity that all honors students should have.” Several students referred to the ease of forming study groups because of the proximity of classmates in honors housing. One student reported that “having all the honors students together in one place will give them a chance to build relationships and form study groups.” Another expressed that sentiment this way: “We studied together and understood how important our studies were.” Others emphasized the convenience of having classmates living in the same building when it came time to work on projects and study for exams. Some students mentioned that having their peers nearby encouraged them in general to work together on their academics. Several students referred to group projects in classes, and, that by living together, they were able to work on projects much more easily.

Students also reported that having upperclassmen in the same building was helpful. Having upper-class students allowed younger students access to tutors in specific subjects, as well as models and mentors for developing important study skills. One student reported, “I have been able to meet upperclassmen who know exactly what I am going through. They have already taken some of these classes and offer help and guidance.” Another student wrote that she had “developed some fantastic study skills” from being around other honors students, especially older students. While many of the comments focused on study groups, several students also mentioned that upperclassmen guided them in transitioning to college, adapting to higher expectations than in high school, and learning coping skills to balance academics and personal life.

Students appreciated being in an environment where success was celebrated and actively encouraged. Comments also highlighted how honors students encourage one another to succeed academically. One student observed, “It is wonderful to have other students with the same mindset of school. We encourage each other and keep one another focused.” Other students agreed, saying that sharing housing space with honors students encouraged planning for the

future. Encouragement was important in all aspects of academics, the students reported, but several students specifically pointed out how having other honors students in their residence hall was helpful in encouraging them to remain in the honors college despite the additional rigors associated with the honors curriculum. One student explained that, by living in honors housing, one was always around other students who understand what it is like to be in an honors program and would then provide encouragement to persevere and remain in the honors college. Moreover, being physically surrounded by intellectual peers with a similar drive to succeed proved to be motivating and encouraging to students, and they felt challenged by a healthy competition that pushed them to perform at the highest level and to achieve academic excellence.

Many students reported that living in honors housing actually assisted in their academic endeavors by providing an environment that was respectful, friendly, and quiet. One student valued the lack of noise and distraction in the building:

I felt accepted by my dorm-mates who valued academics and, consequently, understood the importance of living in an environment where you could study any time of the day. I think it was helpful to be surrounded by honors students of all grade levels who shared my passion for learning.

Students appreciated enforced quiet hours in the honors dorm, which allowed them to study, sleep, and relax in a relatively quiet and calm environment. One student explained, "My floor was respectful of quiet hours and studying because we shared the honors experience." Students also mentioned that they felt that living in honors housing was conducive to studying because of the quietness, the respect other students had for academics, and the common expectation to focus on academics. One student reported being told horror stories about loud and disruptive neighbors, all-night parties, and the inability to sleep in dorms before she came to college, but she was relieved to find that "living in the honors dorm was almost the opposite experience" for her.

Students readily acknowledged that honors housing is a strong recruiting tool. One student claimed that students needed some benefits, such as honors housing, for being in the honors college. Another student explained how honors housing provided “incoming honors students something to look forward to as well as an immediate feeling of belonging as soon as they arrive.” If students know they will be housed with other honors students, they look forward to having students with similar priorities nearby, thus helping to recruit future honors students, according to the respondents. Several students reported that they had to decide between multiple institutions for their college careers and that knowing that they would be living in honors housing was part of what swayed them toward ASU. One student said that if he were a high school senior trying to make the decision of where to attend college, he would only attend a university where honors housing was an option.

PHYSICAL LOCATION

Students reported satisfaction with the physical environment of honors housing as well as the location of the honors residence hall. The then-honors residence, East Hall, was located centrally on campus, close to the library, student union, and main dining facilities. Despite being an older building, it featured some of the largest rooms on campus and the convenience of having a sink in each room. This finding came up less in the written comments, probably because the proposed new residence hall was only a few hundred feet away, but in conversations with students at other times, many students said that the physical location on campus was appealing, especially to first-year students who would have otherwise been assigned to housing on the other side of campus and away from most academic classroom buildings, support facilities, and student development offices. Both the old hall and proposed new honors residence hall were also connected to the honors college offices and classrooms, and a few students wrote that they liked the convenience of having some classes and their advisors in the same building.

DISCUSSION

Many of these themes are difficult to tease apart because they are so interconnected. For example, students reported that having upper-class students in the same building was important because it provided instant mentoring, encouragement to succeed, and a strong sense of community across the academic years. So a single comment like this was factored into the count total of multiple themes and subthemes. Honors housing is inextricably linked with both academic and personal success in college, according to the data, because it provides so many tangible and intangible benefits. Although students reported that living in the honors dorm had a certain cachet and commanded respect, the data confirmed the importance of the intangible benefits of community, friendship, mentoring, and encouragement. Students did indeed like the physical surroundings of the honors residence hall, but even when describing the physicality of the building, they still focused more on quiet hours and a sense of respect for academics rather than the location on campus, the size of the rooms, or the convenience of having sinks in each room. While several students reported those features as nice perquisites, many more students wrote about being able to study without distractions, making friends with similar values and priorities, and receiving help from upperclassmen on how to transition smoothly to college life.

Creating a sense of community across all years was clearly a major goal of housing honors students together. The word “community” was the most frequently used keyword, being used almost three times as often as the next most popular keyword. This repetition may be due to the initial email prompt containing the word “community.” Nevertheless, the sense of community established within honors housing was clearly the primary theme that emerged from the data. This finding corresponds with previous research that suggests the sense of community within honors housing is important to the overall academic and sociocultural success of honors students (Daffron & Holland, 2009; Rinn, 2004).

Since students are in honors programs because of their academic ability and dedication, being around other honors students

reinforces academic goals and behaviors (Rinn, 2004, p. 71). The data also supported this perception: the honors students stated repeatedly that living with other honors students increased their academic achievements and made it easier for them to focus on academics. Because of the reinforcing effect of the environment on academic achievement, Rinn argues, high-achieving students living together are already inclined to succeed academically (pp. 70–71). Many students reported that having friendly competition with classmates and being encouraged to do their best greatly contributed, as predicted by Rinn, to their academic success.

While research from Inkelas and Weisman (2003) found that honors students in a residential learning community were less likely to study together, the ASU findings were the opposite. Many students mentioned working on school assignments together and forming study groups. Study groups were one of the major ways in which the respondents reported that honors housing benefitted them academically. Perhaps this difference is due to institutional factors and the culture at Appalachian State University.

Daffron and Holland (2009) set up their initial honors housing experiment with two upper-class students serving as mentors (pp. 199–200). They had mixed success with this model, as did the Appalachian State Honors College in the past when it attempted to have formal peer mentors for honors students; however, the students definitely expressed in their written responses that having the upper-class students living with them provided them with built-in mentoring.

The data was also congruent with that of Campbell and Fuqua (2008): the students reported that being surrounded by other honors students made them more likely to remain in the honors college (p. 145). This result is partially due to the proximity to the honors college offices and classrooms, which makes it easier logistically to get to class or ask questions, but also because the students looked to the upperclassmen in the residence hall as leaders and mentors. Honors housing traditionally has students from all four years living together, which means that a number of upper-class students are available to answer questions and provide guidance.

Ultimately, the students who responded to the email survey overwhelmingly valued the option of honors housing. They were enthusiastic about the sociocultural benefits conveyed in being with a like-minded community of scholars. Many students reported making deep friendships with other students in honors housing, and older students reported that these relationships often lasted well beyond their years in the hall. Students also stressed the academic benefits of having built-in study group access, tutors, and the quiet and mostly distraction-free environment.

This study sought to find out why honors housing has an impact on student retention within honors. While students appreciated some of the advantages, like bigger rooms, they spoke far more often about the academically supportive environment, mentoring, and quiet environment, intangible benefits that make honors housing both appealing to students and an effective means to improve retention and graduation rates. Based on these findings and previous research, honors housing provides both academic and sociocultural benefits for students, which lead to increased retention and graduation rates.

All of the respondents were in favor of keeping honors-only housing as an option, and only four supported the proposed freshmen-upperclassmen split, since one of the major benefits of honors housing was access to more experienced, upper-class students in an environment that allowed organic mentoring to develop.

CONCLUSION

Many administrators in honors programs and colleges have an intuitive sense that honors housing is desirable, and the literature and this study largely support that feeling. What has been challenging is communicating to those who manage housing that the research on housing options is almost all on non-honors populations, and a great many of the reported findings do not generalize well to this specific population. While many freshmen students may want residence life that is centered on activities, such as outdoor life or athletics, most honors students want a community that supports their academic ambitions. The housing specifics, whether

the rooms are in suites or not, for example, are not as important to honors students as the opportunity to be together. In fact, the very point that housing experts warn against for freshmen—putting them into private rooms or suites because it will interfere with joining and creating a new community—is actually valuable for students focused on their studies. The evidence to the contrary is not drawn from honors students, and, of more concern nowadays, many studies on the impact of residence room styles were done at a time when students were coming from larger families. Students used to have more siblings, but now the average number of children per family is decreasing (Bachu and O'Connell, 2001, p. 1). Students now come from homes where they had their own rooms, and the adjustment to college-life with a roommate is, in fact, challenging (Moore, 2010, p. ED20).

ASU students reported that honors housing was a major benefit for them, and, for many, housing played a key factor in determining where they would go to college. Students in this study overwhelmingly reported that honors housing had a positive impact not only on recruiting them to the program, but on their social and academic lives once they came to live on campus.

Ultimately, the decision was made that honors students would be split between the two proposed buildings, with first-year students in a traditional floor-style residence hall and upper-class students in a suite-style arrangement. Contrary to the plan to intermix honors and non-honors students, the compromise was that all honors students would be grouped together on honors-specific floors within the two buildings. While this arrangement was contrary to the original aims of the honors-housing proposal, the administration opted to pursue this compromise.

Three years later, we can report that this option seems to have worked well and certainly better than we had expected. While the upper-class and first-year students are physically separated, the buildings are adjacent to one another as well as the honors office and classroom facility. The honors college has also implemented a freshman retreat, which includes a dozen or more upper-class honors students as well as honors residence assistants, which allows

first-year students the opportunity to meet possible mentors. We have not yet replicated this survey to see if responses are the same or differ, but continue to monitor students' grades and reports during academic advising. An interesting feature that has emerged as a consequence of this model of an honors-only, freshmen-only community is that the within-class bonding and community is, according to student anecdotal reports, very high. It will be interesting to run a survey again to determine if the trade-off for losing some of the upper-class mentoring was increasing the connection among incoming classmates.

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