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# Honors Space: What to Do When There Isn't Any

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CHAPTER 11

## Honors Space: What to Do When There Isn't Any

JOY OCHS

MOUNT MERCY UNIVERSITY

I direct a small honors program from my faculty office in the English Department at Mount Mercy University, which is an institution that is outgrowing its tiny campus. It is an exciting time, with new graduate programs and athletic facilities being added. But there is not enough space. At the end of May 2013, a memo from Academic Affairs made this request: “please contact your students to pack up any personal items they have left in the Honors Lounge, as we need to repurpose that room over the summer.” I have received a memo like this about every year or two since I began directing the program in 2005. The university values the honors program, but multiple constituencies are vying for the same limited and precious spaces even as strategic priorities keep shifting over the years.

Mount Mercy began offering honors courses in 1989, but these courses did not grow into a program with a director until 10 years

later. The first honors space, a student lounge dedicated in 2003, was a small cinderblock office that had become available when a staff position was eliminated. It was conveniently located in the same building as student housing, across the hall from the Academic Center for Excellence, and in a reasonably high-traffic-flow area. Unfortunately, it was so small that it could accommodate only one computer station, and no more than six people could congregate there at a time without inducing claustrophobia. The director at the time did the best he could to make this inaugural space homey by buying a small electric fireplace to occupy one corner. Small groups of students did hang out there, doing homework or socializing.

Then, in 2009 or so, plans were made to gut the building that housed the honors lounge and rebuild it into a new student center. The Academic Center was moved to temporary quarters, and the honors lounge was put in limbo until the construction could be completed. Two years and a new dean later, every room in the new building had been claimed by essential offices: Financial Aid, Health Services, Admissions, and Security. There was no room at the inn for honors.

Since that time honors students have lived, academically, as nomads. Like those self-sufficient peoples, these students have become adept at pulling up stakes and shifting locations every time the university landscape shifts. In spite of, or perhaps because of, the difficulty acquiring and maintaining a designated honors space, the honors program has optimized space when it fleetingly had it and had to develop non-geographical ways of building a sense of community for the students.

## **LOSING THE LOUNGE, BUT NOT THE CONNECTION**

Back in the days of the small cinderblock lounge, the Student Honors Association initiated a program called Fireside Chats. Once a month, the students would invite a faculty member to join them in the lounge for lunch and discussion. These informal meetings allowed students to learn about professors' interests beyond the classroom and for professors, most of whom taught outside the honors program, to learn about and connect with these bright and

engaged students. The original Fireside Chats were small and intimate and took place in front of an actual fireplace.

When the honors lounge was lost during the construction project, the students maintained their sense of community by continuing Fireside Chats, albeit without the fireplace. Working with Events Services to reserve an empty conference room added an extra step in preparing to host these lunches, but the upside was that more students could attend them than had been possible in the honors lounge. During the growth phase heralded by the new construction, several newly hired faculty members attended a Fireside Chat with honors students. These occasions were mutually beneficial because the students were exposed to new mentors and their research interests and the young faculty got a taste of working with honors students, leading some of them to commit to teaching in the program. Although the original Fireside Chats had been tied to a specific aspect of the old honors space, the students quickly learned that they did not need to be tied to that space and could still create a sense of community while floating.

## **WHAT'S AN HONORS SPACE GOT TO DO WITH IT?**

An unexpected set of events happened just prior to losing the honors lounge that allowed the honors cohort most affected by its loss to pull together more strongly than any previous group had done who had had uninterrupted access to the space. In retrospect, these events had a much larger impact on students' self-identification as honors students than mere access to a designated honors space had ever had.

In June 2008, while a colleague and I were preparing the fall semester course for that year's incoming honors freshmen, the Cedar River rose out of its banks and inundated 400 city blocks in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where Mount Mercy is located. Thus the incoming class of 2012, many of whom had themselves been affected by the flooding around the state that summer, arrived as newcomers to a community in crisis. The flood was a truly devastating event, and my colleague and I scrapped our course preparation and began designing a new course that would focus on the flood and its aftermath.

Because the problems from the flood were still occurring when school began in August of that year, the course adopted a two-pronged approach to studying it. We understood that new freshmen, already displaced from the familiarity of home, would have a hard time adjusting to a community whose essential services had been dislocated; the city hall, the public library, and the main fire station had all gone under water, not to mention a saddening number of restaurants, shops, and homes. The goal was to provide academic engagement with the science, politics, and sociology of the flood while also helping these new students integrate into their new community.

The first prong of the course centered on the study of river systems, a unit that culminated in an overnight field trip to the Mississippi River. The class visited Effigy Mounds National Monument, Lock and Dam No. 9, and the National River Museum. Beyond the academic content, this trip was important because these students began to think about themselves as a community inhabiting a space. The use of City-as-Text™ pedagogy informed their evolving understanding of community. Working in groups of three, students explored and asked questions about the river, its history, management, perils, and ecosystems. This pedagogy forced them to carefully observe their physical surroundings, make connections, share their discoveries with other groups, and reflect on their findings. With nature as the classroom, the vans became the social space where students relaxed and got to know each other during the drive between sites. Exploration teams and van groups were forced into further collaboration when they set up camp for the night and discovered that one of the borrowed tents was moldy; five students suddenly found themselves homeless on a night when it was sure to rain, and they were invited to squeeze into the other students' already-crammed tents. I am not suggesting that deliberately creating miserable situations to force honors students to work together is ethical, but there is nothing like shared misery to motivate students to problem-solve as a group.

Back on campus, the class also used City-as-Text pedagogies to explore the impacts of the flood on the Cedar Rapids community.

The students took exploratory walkabouts in some of the most ravaged neighborhoods to experience what was happening in these areas. The class also collaborated with the Kohler History Center for a service project that involved collecting oral histories to document the experiences of those affected by the flood. Students went out in pairs with a video camera and a notepad to interview flood survivors and write up their stories. Students also teamed up online with students from Macauley Honors College of the City University of New York, who do an annual photo documentation of New York City post 9/11. At the end of the course, two honors students flew to New York to help curate a photo exhibition of these two cities in recovery.

I mention these details because the sense of community that the students in this course constructed—in the class, in the city, and nationally—was key in holding this cohort together over the long term once the honors program lost its space on campus. This group of freshmen had to overcome a number of challenges that other incoming classes had not: the physical disaster, the miserable camping trip, their hesitance about talking to strangers. For them, the demolition of the honors space did not matter so much during their sophomore year: they were not shy about asking faculty to Fireside Chats in strange locations or inviting their honors director to club meetings in their dorm rooms. They had formed acquaintances during the course that did not require additional hanging out time in any honors lounge to cement into friendships. By the beginning of their senior year, still loungeless, this group had made the whole campus their space; they were student ambassadors, undergraduate research assistants, newspaper editors, and double majors at a higher rate than any class before or after them.

With limited space for honors on campus, the first line of community building has taken the form of meaningful, challenging classroom experiences that propel students out of their chairs and promote working together. Although no event has been as conducive to City-as-Text pedagogy as the flood (thank goodness!), building excursions, community outreach, and hands-on problem-solving into freshman honors courses has been fairly easy. While

this pedagogy does not replace having an honors space, it does go a long way toward encouraging honors students to get to know each other and intermingle in a way similar to what they might have experienced in the lounge.

## **HOW TO MAKE THE BEST OF A BAD SPACE**

Still, honors space is important. After the river trip students clearly understood that the honors lounge was not coming back; they worked with me to pressure the administration into providing a new one for their senior year. In addition to wanting to enjoy the lounge for themselves, they also realized that their unique community would be disbanded when they graduated, and they wanted a space where they could socialize with the honors students in the classes below them and help them carry on the work and the legacy of the Student Honors Association.

Obtaining a new honors space when it has been factored out of the equation is easier said than done. The provost agreed that the honors program needed one. The chair of the Space Utilization Committee concurred, as did the Facilities Department. The problem was that the potential spaces available were not suitable: a windowless room in the basement of the library, which students would have to vacate at midnight (defeating the purpose of an honors lounge—the ability to provide students a quiet space to work when they finally open their homework at 2:00 a.m.); a walk-through area connecting the residence hall to the student commons, with more traffic than Grand Central Station; an empty faculty office in the attic of Warde Hall (same midnight problem with the added ick factor of being surrounded by faculty).

Once those spaces were rejected, the only plausibly available room that would make sense as a student space was located in the old commons; it had formerly housed the mailroom and was now being used as a storage closet by the Copy Center. In other words, the honors program and its students were begging to be allowed to move into a closet. After months of negotiations about where all that paper was going to be stored, the room was handed over to the honors program in November of 2011. The nomadic students were

too relieved to complain about the space, which was nearly as small as the old cinder-block lounge, was located in a deserted area, and had an awkward sliding customer-service window that opened into the hallway.

These resourceful students did everything they could to turn this dubious space into an honors home. With no budget and only their charm, they talked Facilities into letting them pick their own color and paint the room themselves. The painting party involved students from three different cohorts and marked their first social event before the lounge was even officially open. Following the same color scheme as the paint, one student made curtains to obscure the window while another donated a “comfy couch” she found on Craig’s List. On the last day of class that semester, the honors program ordered in food and had a Grand Opening, ceremonially presenting each of that year’s new cohort members with a key to their lounge.

While I still walk past the lounge and cringe a bit that my students had to be content with this less-than-ideal space, the students were happy there. A second couch joined the first, and throw pillows sprouted in the corners. The lack of a budget to buy the institutional furniture that otherwise would have occupied that room turned out to be a boon because this iteration of the lounge was completely personalized with accoutrements belonging to the students.

## **BACK TO SQUARE ONE**

When the notice came again this spring that the honors program was being evicted, it was harder to take than the first eviction or even the years without a space at all. The mailroom, it seems, wanted its old space back for easier access to the loading dock. This does make sense. But the new mailroom, which I assumed would be designated for honors in this transaction, has already been claimed by Security, which needs a more visible presence in the new student center. The new provost feels badly about this situation and is trying to find a permanent space “from which,” she promises, “you will never have to move again.”



As of this writing, the honors program is technically homeless although the students have compiled testimonials about why an honors lounge is important to them and have presented them to the dean. Facilities workers, who have grown sympathetic to the students' plight, have put their furniture into storage until a new place is assigned. Despite the geographical uncertainty, students will continue to form communities in their honors courses and will continue to take pride in being in honors, regardless of whether they have a designated honors space or not. And when they do finally get their own room once again, they will break out the paint cans!