The influences of faculty-in-residence programs on the role of the professoriate: A case study

Rishi Sriram

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Case Study

The influences of faculty-in-residence programs on the role of the professoriate: A case study

Rishi Sriram*
Baylor University, Waco, TX, USA

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Abstract: In a time when faculty face criticism for possible disengagement from undergraduate student learning, faculty-in-residence programs bring students and faculty together in a living-learning community. The benefits of such student-faculty interaction are known, but lesser known is how to develop those interactions. This case study provides an account of how Baylor University – a private, research university in the Southwest – underwent a paradigm shift from a Sleep-and-Eat Model of residential education to a Learning Model. The change in culture not only benefited students, but also led to the reconceptualization of professorial work for faculty in higher education.

Keywords: Faculty-in-residence, living-learning programs, student-faculty interaction, residential colleges

1. Introduction

As the cost of college tuition continues to rise beyond what would be expected from inflation, higher education faces increased skepticism from the public, the government, and even scholars in the academy [6]. However, costs are not the only target of criticism. A primary and growing concern is the role of faculty on college campuses. The number of full-time academics continues to decline as colleges rely on adjunct faculty for teaching [15]. Yet critics argue that the remaining full-time academics care much more about research and publication than they do teaching and mentoring. The National Survey on Student Engagement is commonly used on campuses to measure effective educational practices. Findings from this survey indicate that student-faculty interaction occurs less frequently than all but one of its five benchmarks [4]. As Hacker and Dreifus admonish, “lost on the Professorial Campus is the primacy of students and, for reasons that sometimes seem mystifying, an appreciation of an activity as joyful and useful as teaching” [6, p. 15].

Campus leaders also face increased pressure to improve student success on their campuses, whether in terms of retention, engagement, achievement, or development. Rather than blame faculty for the problems preventing the attainment of student success, some campuses are turning to faculty for help with the solution. Rigorous studies demonstrate that increasing student-faculty interaction positively and meaningfully increases the effort students put forth in their education, effort expended on co-curricular involvement, satisfaction, engagement, and learning [8, 20]. Therefore, colleges now invest in high-impact educational practices that serve to bring students and faculty together in intentional ways [9]. One example of such intentionality is a growing movement to place faculty members and their families in student residential communities [3].
The purpose of this case study is to give account of one research university’s attempt to shift its culture through the development of a faculty-in-residence program. This program transformed the idea and meaning of work for those faculty members who participated by reconceptualizing education as a more holistic experience.

2. Case history

Baylor University is a private research university located in Waco, Texas. Founded in 1845, Baylor began as a liberal arts institution with the majority of students living on campus. However, from 1961 to 1995, enrollment at Baylor more than doubled, rising from 5,186 students to 12,202. The administration did not choose to add on-campus residential communities to accommodate the surge in enrollment. Instead, administrators relied on off-campus apartment construction to house students, resulting in a culture in which students lived on campus for only their first year before moving off campus [16].

Shushok, Scales, Striam, and Kidd [18] proposed three philosophies concerning residential experiences for college students: the Sleep-and-Eat Model, the Market Model, and the Learning Model. The Sleep-and-Eat Model focuses on the utilitarian demands of housing students, feeding them, and keeping them safe. The Market Model, on the other hand, seeks to attract students onto campus by competing with off-campus venues in terms of the quality of facilities and the entertainment opportunities. In contrast to these two, the Learning Model “defines itself first and foremost as a residential campus with a holistic educational philosophy that pervades the institution at all levels of administration” [p. 18].

In 2001, Baylor launched a 10-year strategic plan, and this vision called for increasing the number of students living on campus from 30 to 50 percent. But more than just the number of students living on campus, this vision represented a paradigmatic shift concerning the purpose of residential facilities. New residential communities sought to incorporate living-learning programs – communities that integrate the academic and social lives and activities of students. These initiatives also permeated into previously existing facilities when possible and appropriate. A major tenet of the philosophical shift at Baylor was going from a Sleep-and-Eat Model to a Learning Model, and this required unprecedented involvement from faculty in the out-of-class experiences of students.

From 2001 to 2004, administrators at Baylor initiated several programs to better connect students with faculty. For instance, student resident assistants selected “faculty partners” who committed to building relationships with students on a particular floor. Living-learning programs also developed, bringing together students of similar academic interests into a residential community and giving a related academic department partial ownership of that community alongside the division of student affairs. This represented quite a change from a culture in which “faculty rarely darkened the doorstep of a residence hall” [16, p. 240]. These students not only benefited from these programs, but faculty also began to realize the educational potential of residential environments. Therefore, when Baylor planned to open its first new residential community in 40 years, a distinguished professor of engineering offered to live there with his wife. Thus, the faculty-in-residence program was born. Upon hearing of this initiative, a faculty member in the Honors College immediately requested a similar opportunity in the honors living-learning program [16].

These initial faculty-in-residence were important for several reasons. First, the desire to live and serve in residence was advocated for first by the faculty themselves, then by student affairs administrators. Although student affairs professionals initially created the opportunities for faculty to become involved, faculty soon took ownership of the Learning Model and in some ways became stronger advocates themselves. Second, the faculty lived in vastly different physical facilities – one was a brand new residential community and the other was an apartment retrofitted into a more traditional facility. This demonstrated that even though there are financial resources that administrators must invest to accommodate faculty living on campus, new facilities are not required. Third, the momentum gained from these first two faculty, and the positive experience reported both by them and their students, quickly shifted the process from an out-of-the-box idea to an official faculty-in-residence program.

Soon thereafter, the president of the institution referred to the faculty-in-residence program as a way Baylor was encouraging student-faculty interaction beyond typical colleges. The senior student affairs officer called for the eventual implementation of a faculty-in-residence in every residential community. Instead of asking, “why do we have a faculty member living with us?” students began to ask, “why don’t
we get a faculty-in-residence when other communities do? A more formal process for selecting faculty-in-residence began to take shape, and senior administrators created a new position in student affairs for the express purpose of providing leadership and guidance to living-learning programs and faculty-in-residence. When administrators send a call for applications for a new faculty-in-residence position, typically anywhere from 6 to 8 faculty members apply. What was once an unknown opportunity quickly became a competitive process.

A senior student affairs administrator seeking to capitalize on this momentum decided to take a different approach with Baylor’s next new residential community: the residential college model. Residential colleges were first founded in Oxford and Cambridge in the 13th century and were established in American higher education in 1933 at Harvard [13]. As Jessup-Anger describes, a residential college “consists of a clearly defined mission promoting students’ intellectual development and values congruent with that mission, including a commitment to holistic student development, to democratic ideals, and to the creation of lifelong learners” [7, p. 432]. Whereas student affairs professionals typically lead living-learning programs in partnership with faculty, the faculty serve as the symbolic and formal leaders of residential colleges, with student affairs professionals serving as the partner.

In 2007, Baylor opened Brooks Residential College, named after a former president of the university. The college expresses a commitment to student academic integration through facilities such as a library, faculty offices, and seminar and study rooms. Facilities such as a large dining hall, central quadrangle, and student lounge support social integration. The senior student affairs officer and the senior academic officer of the university jointly appoint the residential college’s leader, a faculty-in-residence. The responsibilities for this faculty member include sustaining a sense of community that fosters academic excellence, intensive student-faculty interaction, and a tradition-rich student experience [17]. The faculty-in-residence also serves as a bridge between the students in the residential college and faculty across campus, with programs such as informal coffees, formal dinners, and guest lectures connecting the two groups.

Baylor University currently has three residential colleges, eight other living-learning programs, and twelve faculty-in-residence. Of course, faculty interactions with students still vary in quality and quantity, but a paradigm shift occurred that makes learning a priority outside of the classroom in addition to inside it.

The students were not the only beneficiaries of this type of a program. Placing faculty in residential communities can transform their conceptualization of work in the professoriate. One study examined the impact that participating in the faculty-in-residence program at Baylor has on the faculty themselves—their pedagogy, their philosophy of education, and their lives in general [19]. Six faculty-in-residence representing six different academic disciplines participated in the study, leading to the creation of the Faculty-in-Residence Development Model. This model describes important ways that the idea and meaning of work changed for faculty after living in community with students. The five themes of the model are: Opportunities, Means, Roles, Benefits, and Outcomes.

Opportunities refers to the ways that living in residence provides faculty an outlet for their intrinsic motivations to educate students. Means describes how faculty-in-residence can implement their philosophies of teaching, namely through the students desiring to learn from faculty in new ways, an environment conducive to weakening the divide between academic and social interaction, and the increase of time that allows for constant, informal conversation. These opportunities and means led to new roles for the faculty-in-residence, both in relation to their colleagues and their students. They found themselves advocating for the importance of their discipline and its contribution to society to students who did not have majors in that discipline. To colleagues, these faculty found themselves as advocates of a more holistic view of education. The benefits theme revealed how faculty-in-residence progress in personal and professional ways from the experience. Faculty adamantly presented themselves as beneficiaries from the experience alongside students. These benefits led to the following outcomes: their own development as educators, further understanding of teaching and learning, and a deeper commitment to connecting classroom experiences to life outside the classroom [19].

3. Discussion

In his classic, Scholarship Reconsidered, Boyer [2] argues for a reconceptualization of the faculty role. Without downplaying the importance of research and discovery, he advocates for other forms of scholarship,
such as teaching, integration, and application, to play a greater role in the professoriate. He writes, “there is growing evidence that professors want, and need, better ways for the full range of their aspirations and commitments to be acknowledged” [p. 75]. Acknowledging the mosaic of talent in faculty allows for them to contribute in ways that align with their individual strengths. Although not all faculty are suited for a faculty-in-residence role, every campus has faculty who possess the passion, purpose, and personality to engage students in community. Palmer believes that all good teaching revolves around such community, defining teaching as creating a “space in which the community of truth is practiced” [11, p. 90]. Faculty-in-residence programs simply take this idea of learning in community quite literally.

Although limited in quantity, previous scholarship on faculty involvement in residential communities is not limited in quality. Rhoads [12] provided a personal narrative of his nine-year experience as a faculty-in-residence. He reflects, “I came to understand and appreciate the contributions that faculty can make to residential education. I also came to more fully appreciate, albeit from a different vantage point, both the work of residential education staff and the value of residential education in general” [p. 18]. He found it to be a rewarding experience that reconfigured his concepts of student learning and development. Others examined faculty involvement in residential learning communities on a more empirical basis, finding that faculty appreciated the opportunity to know students better, the opportunity to more fully enact their beliefs about education, and a shared commitment to the purpose of learning [5]. Moreover, faculty-in-residence develop deeper relationships with the professional and student staff they work with, and these relationships lead to more interactions with the student population in general [10].

Cox and Orehovec [4] created a typology of student-faculty interaction based on their qualitative examination of faculty-in-residence. The typology has five types of student-faculty interaction, listed from least impactful: disengagement, incidental student-faculty interaction, listed from least impactful to most impactful: disengagement, incidental student-faculty interaction, faculty-in-residence. The typology has five types of interaction based on their qualitative examination of student-faculty interaction outside the classroom: A typology from a residential college. Rev High Educ 2007;30(4):343-62.

Baylor did not begin with a top-down effort launching innovative programs that demanded drastic, immediate change. Rather, it succeeded through implementing a series of small wins [21] – tangible, achievable, and nonlinear tasks that comprise segments of a larger goal. Student affairs administrators invited faculty to participate in residential education, a few faculty became champions of this new paradigm, and these faculty then took the lead in the next steps of the change. The artifacts and espoused values of the culture toward residential education at Baylor changed because administrators first gave careful attention to changing the basic underlying assumptions and philosophies of what learning can look like on a college campus. In other words, they invited faculty to rethink what it means to be faculty.

4. Summary

In a time when faculty face criticism for possible disengagement from undergraduate student learning, faculty-in-residence programs bring students and faculty together in a learning community. The benefits of such student-faculty interaction are known, but lesser known is how to develop those interactions. This case study provided an account of one research university’s journey toward creating a paradigm shift from a Sleep-and-Eat Model of residential education to a Learning Model [18]. The change in culture not only benefited students, but also led to the reconceptualization of what the role of the professoriate can mean for faculty in higher education.

References