

The Spanish Colegios Mayores: The pedagogical value of a longstanding institution

Los Colegios Mayores: *el valor pedagógico de una institución centenaria*

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Abstract:

Every year, almost a third of Spanish university students move to another province to pursue higher education, and many housing options are available to them (halls of residence, shared apartments, student residences, etc.). From a pedagogical standpoint, the question of the formative potential of each of these spaces arises. Since their birth more than six centuries ago, *Colegios Mayores* (a special model of Spanish halls of residence) have contributed significantly to the development of Spanish higher education and to promoting culture. However, there has been little research into these educational institutions, meaning that their great cultural and pedagogical legacy is unknown. The aim of this study is to analyse the educational value of the Colegios Mayores as formative settings where the educational function of the university remains alive. With this purpose,

from a hermeneutic-interpretative approach, these centres are analysed from the perspective of both liberal and character education. This work concludes that Colegios Mayores are formative spaces at the forefront of education that offer their students a setting with a profound university experience, where the search for truth, the synthesis of knowledge, the encounter with tradition, and the formation of critical thinking are combined with opportunities for the cultivation of virtue, thus achieving an authentic comprehensive formation.

Keywords: Higher education, moral education, liberal education, hall of residence, humanities.

Resumen:

Cerca de un tercio del alumnado universitario español se traslada anualmente a otras

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provincias para cursar estudios superiores, siendo múltiples las opciones de alojamiento que se les plantean (Colegios Mayores, pisos compartidos, residencias universitarias...). Desde el punto de vista pedagógico cabe preguntarse cuál es el potencial formativo de cada uno de estos espacios. Los Colegios Mayores, desde su nacimiento hace más de seis siglos, han contribuido significativamente al desarrollo de la educación superior española y al impulso de la cultura. Sin embargo, la investigación sobre estas instituciones educativas es escasa, haciendo que se desconozca su gran legado cultural y actualidad pedagógica. El objetivo de este estudio es analizar la importancia de los Colegios Mayores como institución formativa donde permanece viva

la función educadora de la universidad. Con esta finalidad, desde un enfoque hermenéutico-interpretativo, se analizan estos centros desde el prisma de la educación liberal y de la educación del carácter. Se concluye que los Colegios Mayores son espacios formativos a la vanguardia educativa, que ofrecen a sus estudiantes un contexto profundamente universitario, en el que la búsqueda de la verdad, la síntesis de saberes, el encuentro con la tradición o la formación del pensamiento crítico se conjugan con numerosas oportunidades para el cultivo de la virtud, lográndose así una auténtica formación integral.

Descriptor: universidad, educación moral, cultura general, Colegio Mayor, humanidades.

1. Introduction

The historical development of universities in Spain cannot be understood without considering educational institutions that have a great cultural legacy and are currently of great pedagogical importance, but which, paradoxically, remain largely unknown: the *Colegios Mayores*. Deeply rooted in the tradition of Spain's universities, these institutions can be found in the genesis of such emblematic universities as Santiago de Compostela and Alcalá de Henares; they played a key role in the foundation of the first universities in Hispanic America, and throughout all of the modern age they have provided people to fill senior positions in Spanish and European society (Eguía, 1957; Lario, 2019). Nonetheless, the university reform undertaken by Charles III and, more specifically, by Pérez Bayer,

launched an epoch of decline for these centres, which gradually lost their splendour and importance before being reborn with strength in the 20th century.

Since 1922, Colegios Mayores have been present in educational legislation through provisions of various types, and the Organisation of Spanish Universities Law of 1943, the Organic Colegios Mayores Decree of 1956, the Protection of Colegios Mayores Law of 1959 and, in particular, Decree 2780/1973 regarding the regulation of Colegios Mayores deserve a special mention owing to the importance they place on this institution. This last decree recognised the important pedagogical work that is done in them and listed the nine principal aims of these institutions, all of which are linked to integral formation

(Pérez, 1973). Although Colegios Mayores were still considered in later legislation (Organic Laws 6/2001 and 4/2007), the explanation of their ends and recognition of their pedagogical value was much more limited than in the 1973 decree (Carabias, 2013).

Despite enjoying less legislative protection and popularity than in other times, Colegios Mayores continue to be a very important reality in the panorama of Spain's universities, as shown by the large number of Colegios Mayores in existence (134 in 24 cities); the large number of students that these institutions house each year (nearly 22,000); and the thirty-three universities that have at least one Colegio Mayor (DBK, 2022). In fact, in some universities, the Colegios Mayores are a very notable reality. For example, the Universidad Complutense de Madrid has more than thirty colleges, both integrated into the university and affiliated, and universities such as Navarra and Granada have more than ten. Furthermore, these colleges also have important collaboration networks at both regional and national and international levels for organising joint activities, interchanging good practices, and for institutional representation among which stand out the Asociación de Colegios Mayores de Madrid (Association of Colegios Mayores of Madrid, ACMM), the Consejo de Colegios Mayores Universitarios de España (Council of University Colegios Mayores of Spain, CCMUE), and at a European level, the European University College Association. Similarly, Colegios Mayores contribute actively to

invigorating university life, not just for their members, but also with talks, artistic events, and formative activities open to all students.

Although Spain's Colegios Mayores have distinctive traits, similar institutions can be found elsewhere in the European Higher Education Area. This is the case, for example, of some British collegiate halls of residence that still preserve the communal and interdisciplinary experience of the historic institutions of Oxford and Cambridge (Hegarty, 2012) or of certain residential models in Eastern Europe (Mazalu, 2012). The Italian *collegi di merito* deserve a special mention owing to their great similarity and shared history. These centres are very similar to Colegios Mayores in their educational project, but they have greater legislative support, as the Italian government classifies them as bodies that perform an important cultural promotion role. This means that the requirements for centres that aspire to this status and for students who want to obtain a place in these institutions are very demanding (Conferenza Collegi Universitari di Merito, n.d.).

1.1. An unnoticed institution

Although the information above endorses the important historical legacy of these centres and their relevance in the current educational panorama, research into the Colegios Mayores is limited, being principally limited to studying them from a historical perspective. Given the longevity of these institutions, there are so few works that the historian Lario (2019, p. 19) considers that there is a “fast of

vocations” in this line of historical research, a fact that is even more evident from the pedagogical approach to these institutions.

There was more analysis of the formative contribution of these centres in the second third of the 20th century, when many researchers underlined, in articles and books, the pedagogical importance of these institutions for the integral formation of students, establishing multiple parallels with the thought of notable philosophers such as Ortega or Newman, and even suggesting making it obligatory for all university students to reside in these institutions. These works also proposed character education as the aim of these centres, in which a great potential for contributing to the formation of virtuous citizens was apparent (de la Vega, 1948; Eguía, 1957; Egido, 1977; Lascaris, 1952; Lorenzo, 1958; Martín, 1977; Martínez, 1978; Nieto, 1952; Robles, 1946; Suárez, 1966). However, towards the end of the 20th century, interest in the educational work of these centres declined notably, with the only works we found being those by Ramos (1990), Díez del Río (2003), Pedrosa and Fernández (2007), Calvo (2010), and Cañamero and Domínguez (2014), as well as various publications by the CCMUE, most notably *Los Colegios Mayores en el Espacio Europeo de Educación Superior* (González & Calvo, 2007). Nonetheless, more recently, a number of voices seem again to take note of the pedagogical value of this institution as a space for integral formation (Martín & Jutard, 2019), as a privileged environment for the development of per-

sonal and professional competences (Renuncio & González, 2017; Villar, 2018), and especially as an excellent environment for character education and cultivating virtues (Torralba, 2022).

In 2022, this growing interest achieved a new momentum through three events of a university, political, and social nature that reflect recognition of the formative work of the Colegios Mayores from different sectors of society.

2. A renewed interest in Colegios Mayores

On 5 February 2022, the rectors of twenty-four Spanish universities signed the Declaración de Santiago sobre el valor de los Colegios Mayores en el s. XXI (Santiago Declaration on the Value of Colegios Mayores in the 21st Century), expressing their recognition for the intense formative work of the Colegios Mayores. The universities emphasised the importance of these centres as a space for integral formation and underlined the great contribution that Colegios Mayores make to fostering democracy and social justice, by promoting active citizenship in their students (Meneses, 2022).

Secondly, and also in 2022, this support for the figure of the Colegio Mayor can also be seen in the political sphere, in particular in the parliamentary discussion document proposed by the socialist group in the Spanish parliament, in the framework of the University System Organisation Act (Ley de Ordenación del Sistema Universitario [LOSU]), which enjoyed the support of parliamentary groups with very different

political orientations (the Partido Popular on the right and Podemos on the left). All of them, despite their significant ideological differences, agree that Colegios Mayores provide much more than just accommodation, and that, compared with other residential options with exclusively commercial interests, they offer students an authentically university experience, which should be protected by legislation. As the deputy Renau Martínez said:

A Colegio Mayor is much more than somewhere students live [...]. It is a place where one can live and breathe the university; it is a place for intersection, for the intersection of art, debate, science, participation, values and democracy [...]. Despite all of the changes that this institution has experienced over the years, over the centuries, there is still an essential element that gives it — and so it should be recognised — a special character. They are part of the university and so should be regulated from this perspective, recognising the fundamental role they play in the formation of thousands of students and the fact that they offer these students additional growth at a personal level through the social and cultural experience that living in them provides. (General Courts, 2022, p. 8)

Finally, in 2022, the prestigious consultancy Deloitte, after analysing more than a hundred Colegios Mayores, published a report that reflected both the distinctive experience that living in these centres provides for students and the extra value that these institutions contribute to society. The use of numerous pieces of quantitative and qualitative data, through which the international and interdisciplinary wealth of the collegiate community was

analysed — the broad social, cultural, and sporting offer of these institutions or the generous economic support that they allocate to their students — illustrated the wealth of the formation of the Colegios Mayores (Linares & Muñoz, 2022).

Furthermore, it is no wonder, as we will see, that this defence and recognition of the value of Colegios Mayores also coincides with a renewed interest in liberal education (Hitz, 2020; Torralba, 2022) and character education (Brant et al., 2022; Lamb et al., 2022) in the face of contemporary educational challenges, as these pedagogical approaches achieve their best practical possibilities in places where virtuous ways of living can be promoted.

The aim of this research is to explore the pedagogical value of the Colegios Mayores as spaces where the educational role of the university remains alive. To do so, it considers, through a hermeneutic-interpretative focus, how these institutions generate educational practices typical of liberal education and character education from neo-Aristotelian focuses (Fuentes & Sánchez, 2020) displaying the timeliness and pertinence of these centres in the current educational panorama.

3. Colegios Mayores: a transformative university experience

Rubio (2017) notes that since its birth in the Middle Ages, the university has gradually been transformed in line with changes that have affected the anthropological model. For this reason, at a moment in history like the present one, where the productive

capacity of the person prevails (Han, 2017) and technical skill is deified, it seems logical that there is a strong emphasis on the professionalising aspect of the university. It is no surprise then that universities often invoke concepts such as employability, transfer, internationalisation, agreements with companies, or international rankings to assert their efficacy as symbols of their good work. Nonetheless, the university, as an educational institution should not be concerned so much with efficacy as with fruitfulness. A fruitfulness that is intimately related to the students' capacity for personal transformation (Llano, 2009); it is, precisely, this fruitfulness, this educating mission of higher education in line with the Humboldtian tradition, that many miss when speaking of the university today (Barrio, 2022; Esteban, 2022).

There is no question of the importance of students acquiring in-depth technical knowledge that enables them to practise their future profession, but limiting the experience of university to this goal involves forgetting that the university is tasked with a much higher mission, the task "of 'enlightening' man, of teaching him the full culture of the time, of revealing to him clearly and precisely the gigantic present world, into which his life must fit to be authentic" (Ortega y Gasset, 2007, p. 131). For this reason, it makes sense to say that the greatest legacy that the university offers students, far from being employment opportunities, is time: time to dedicate oneself to the higher aspects of the person, namely self-cultivation through reading, through encountering beauty, considering great questions, or dialogue with others (Esteban

& Fuentes, 2020). Ultimately, time not just to ask what a good life is and how to achieve it, but also time to shape a personality that is capable of giving an embodied answer to these questions (Deresiewicz, 2019).

Some time ago, the philosopher Alejandro Llano asked whether it was still possible to live this profound experience of the university in institutions that are drowning in bureaucracy and are focussed on the job market, and he observed that this university experience could still be found in one place: the Colegios Mayores. So, in a lecture with the title "Los Colegios Mayores: universidad vivida" (Colegios Mayores: lived university), he noted that:

A Colegio Mayor today can offer the students who live in it — or who frequent it — the uncommon possibility to discover that the university is much more than a machine for delivering classes, grading exams, issuing certificates, and launching onto the job market ambitious professionals who lack a sense of solidarity, or simply future unemployed people. The university is a spiritual adventure, a forge for free personalities, a discoverer of the new, a haven for cultured coexistence. (Llano, 2004, p. 3)

For this reason, in the midst of this panorama of higher education losing its way (Esteban, 2022), Colegios Mayores provide a unique setting for a transformative university experience for students.

3.1. A spiritual adventure

Colegios Mayores offer a space for a liberal education where the original essence of the university institution can be found.

Aspects such as the search for the truth, the synthesis of knowledge, or the university community comprise the distinctive ethos of life in a Colegio Mayor, which can be summarised in four main categories: 1) searching for the truth from an open reason; 2) cultured coexistence; 3) encountering tradition and beauty; 4) fostering a critical spirit and active citizenship.

Faced with the fragmentation of knowledge and hyper-specialisation that typify current higher education, Colegios Mayores are a space for the university activity par excellence: the search for the truth. This search is promoted through experiences with the capacity to open students to the big questions. From seminars on love, suffering, friendship, transcendence, or meaning to volunteering that opens students to the encounter with the mystery of vulnerability and suffering. Colegios Mayores not only raise these existential questions but also encourage students to answer them from a reason that transcends scientism, since

a wisdom that tries to build itself using only empirical reason cannot give a sufficient response to the big existential questions. If we want to study them, it is necessary to turn to that flow of ethical experiences that configures a historical wisdom that critically and at the same time gently embraces a varied set of contributions people have made through all the sources of knowledge that we possess. (Ibáñez-Martín, 2021, p. 40)

This historical wisdom that Ibáñez-Martín refers to can be found, for example, in the important role of the humanities in

college activities and which is reflected in the many philosophers, writers, historians, and artists who are invited every year to participate in different talks and symposia in Colegios Mayores. College seminars also stand out, where students can learn about topics as varied as astrophysics, human rights, sustainability, entrepreneurship, and economics, thus opening themselves up to new perspectives from which to consider reality. Similarly, this search for the truth is enriched by the interdisciplinary community in which students are immersed, since, as Llano notes, “Colegios Mayores offer a setting for cultured conversation, which leaves an indelible imprint in the intellect of young scholars” (2004, p. 8).

This cultured coexistence has three essential traits: the importance given to study, the wealth of the university community, and the role of dialogue. Colegios Mayores foster a profound commitment by students to their time at university, as they are often required to achieve a minimum number of credits to be able to stay in the college in successive years. Likewise, these institutions offer a range of seminars and courses to help students confront the challenges of university life, such as time-management workshops or seminars on study techniques or academic writing. Similarly, the wealth of the difference present in the college community plays a fundamental role in this cultured coexistence, both at the level of academic disciplines and at the level of age, geographic origin, or socioeconomic status, thanks to the scholarships that many Colegios Mayores offer. This diversity enriches students by opening up

new perspectives, sciences, cultures, and outlooks on them, generating numerous dialogues and conversations between the students, which, as Newman observed, are of incalculable formative value (Newman, 2014).

Thirdly, Esteban (2022), speaking about the misdirections of university education, identifies a depressing fact: people now can leave university without feeling like they are heirs to anything. Faced with the loss of cultural transmission as the axis of educational activity (Bellamy, 2018), Colegios Mayores remain loyal to their educational mission of fostering the students' encounter with tradition. One of the most notable ways in which this happens is through university ceremonies, which are of great importance in the life of Colegios Mayores. So, while many university students only attend this type of academic activity on the day they graduate, Colegios Mayores place great importance on solemn ceremonies to mark the start and end of the academic year. These acts, which are presided over by academic authorities and where the *Gaudeamus Igitur* is sung, are a profound encounter with university tradition, allowing students to understand that the university is about more than just obtaining a professional qualification, as they join a tradition dating back centuries. Furthermore, in a context that advocates a horizontal educational relationship, these ceremonies make it possible to discover the meaning and dignity of the professor and of academia. In these ceremonies, students also hear lectures with a marked humanistic content. One example is the lecture delivered in the 21-22 end of course at the

Colegio Mayor Alcalá, entitled "Cultivar el asombro por la vía de la Belleza" (Cultivating wonder through Beauty) (Bocos, 2022). College scholarships are also very important, and, being awarded in a solemn ceremony, they give a new identity to the people who receive them, conferring greater maturity and wisdom on them, as well as a greater responsibility towards their surroundings. As Sánchez (2019, p. 263) observes, the college scholarship is character building:

From this assembly room, doctors, jurists, teachers, researchers, and artists will emerge, but above all, people with a different vision of the world around us; with a more daring and more mature way of confronting life's challenges. You will be capable [...] of guiding yourselves in your decisions always by the values you have learned and built here: justice, solidarity, perseverance, and, above all, I insist, the search for freedom and truth will become your best letter of presentation.

Similarly, the colleges are a centre of cultural blossoming. Poetry recitals, literary contests, art exhibitions, and courses on great works of literature are activities frequently held in Colegios Mayores and they allow an encounter with cultural tradition. Theatre is especially important. During the 21-22 academic year, the Certamen de Teatro Universitario (University Theatre Contest) organised by the ACMM featured fourteen works, bring students into contact with works by dramatists from different eras such as William Shakespeare, Federico García Lorca, and Enrique Jardiel Poncela (ACMM, 2022). Music, painting, and sculpture also have

an important place in these centres. Many colleges have spaces dedicated to art exhibitions and they promote numerous cultural activities such as visits to museums, exhibitions, and notable places, with many of these activities being accompanied by university professors who teach the students to consider and comprehend the grandeur of what they see. Moreover, Colegios Mayores have encouraged the creation of numerous cultural initiatives within the university setting, among which stands out JOECOM (Young Orchestra of Students and Colegios Mayores). This orchestra, which mainly comprises college members, but also other university students, not only fosters the students' encounter with music, but also enables them to put their talent at the service of others. For example, in February 2022, they put on a benefit concert in Madrid's Auditorio Nacional that raised more than 17,000 euros for the charity Caritas Diocesana (Serrano, 2022).

Finally, the Colegios contribute to the formation of a critical spirit that is the foundation of active citizenship. As well as holding frequent discussions about topical issues and inviting politicians with different positions to participate year after year in symposia, the Colegios Mayores have an area of special importance that shapes the critical spirit of their students: debate.

We learn to think seriously by participating in serious and truly meaningful discussions, and seeking arguments to defend what we think in contrast with other positions, which might be at odds with ours, but which are supported by

well-structured and thoroughly thought-out arguments, which make us rethink ours, polish them, sharpen them, both dialectically and rhetorically. (Barrio, 2022, p. 77)

This activity enables students to question their own beliefs, it obliges them to approach controversial subjects from different perspectives, it fosters their capacity for analysis and argumentation, and it improves their communication skills. Colegios Mayores foster debate at a university level with tournaments open to all students, promoting the profound questioning of very topical subjects every year; for example, the Torneo Nacional de Debate Adolfo Suarez (Adolfo Suarez National Debating Tournament), which in its fifth edition encouraged reflection on the climate emergency with the following question: "Agenda 2030: ¿debe España impulsar más la lucha contra el cambio climático?" (Agenda 2030: should Spain do more to drive the fight against climate change?) (Ecoaula, 2021). Finally, it is important to note that the commitment of Colegios Mayores to fostering active citizenship is intimately linked to the very essence of the university institution and to its mission to contribute to the common good. As well as actively promoting university volunteering through participation in local projects and work camps at the national and international level, social entrepreneurship is becoming increasingly important in these institutions, with frequent seminars being held with notable social entrepreneurs, who through their testimony share the value of committing to social transformation and justice from their professional environment.

3.2. Education for plenitude

Colegios Mayores are true spaces where liberal education and character education are combined (Beltramo, 2020; Kristjánsson, 2015), because the search for truth is joined by the formation of a fundamental element for human plenitude: commitment. “The human being is not born to plenitude, but advances towards it thanks to its capacity to commit to what it finds to be true” (Ibáñez-Martín, 2015, p. 40). Mounier identifies this capacity to commit oneself as the fifth originating act on which the person is founded: “being faithful” (Mounier, 2002, p. 701). The formation of this creative fidelity requires four actions: decentralisation, personal knowledge, self-command, and giving, all of which can be experienced in the day-to-day life of the Colegio Mayor.

Firstly, Colegios Mayores offer a unique space to experience the relational character of the person: we exist with others. This discovery occurs thanks to the fact that, unlike in other types of university accommodation, Colegios Mayores place great importance on communal life. For this reason, they implement many initiatives to strengthen it, from ordinary activities such as eating together, or forming part of a sports team, to other more unusual ones like integration workshops, trips, or excursions, that promote the encounter between the different students. It is this encounter that enables knowledge of oneself, as well as great human experiences that can only be undergone with others, such as welcoming, dedication, forgiveness, love, and gratuity. Similarly, Colegios Mayores offer a unique space to

encounter one of the greatest treasures a human being can find: friendship. At the present time, social networks have changed how people relate to each other, creating more numerous but also much more superficial links, and so from the educational sphere it has become necessary to help young people create profound relationships (Sánchez-Rojo & Ahedo, 2020). To do so, not only must places for meeting be created, but also as friendship is a process of allowing the other to inhabit one’s own intimacy it is necessary to help students cultivate their interiority. On these lines, many Colegios Mayores have accompaniment programmes or programmes to develop personal competences that offer students these spaces where they can stop, reflect, get to know themselves, and, ultimately, cultivate an inner space.

In this growth through friendship, self-command is equally important, since, as Ahedo and Domingo (2022) note, self-possession is necessary in order to be able to give oneself and, in this regard, Colegios Mayores also offer a space for growth. The strength of arguments is limited when motivating a person to action, and so it is necessary to promote training that also involves the will and affectivity from an integrating perspective, and so it is highly edifying to promote the cultivation of the virtues. Colegios Mayores “offer the ideal setting for a type of community to emerge where virtues are learned and exercised” (Torralba, 2022, p. 116), for example the virtue of temperance. Compared with the family home, where control by parents usually moderates aspects such as

food, schedules, or use of technological devices, students in the college must learn to take responsibility for these aspects themselves, deferring immediate gratification in favour of higher value goals. Both peer mentoring by students from higher years for newly enrolled students as well as the college rules, which, freely assumed, help students manage their newly acquired independence, thus also discovering the role of the limits of freedom, are of great help in doing this (Reyero & Gil Cantero, 2019). Similarly, perseverance, responsibility, and sacrifice are also areas of growth that easily emerge in Colegios Mayores owing to the many opportunities they offer students for teamwork, through sporting or intellectual activities, which often require self-surrender and commitment to others.

In parallel, these institutions also boost the discovery of the donal being of humans, given the important role that service plays in the college community. From the start of their university journey, students are encouraged to assume responsibilities in the life of the Colegio Mayor gradually. So, little by little, the students start to participate in committees that invigorate the life of the Colegio, organising activities for their companions, or leading college activities (clubs, programmes of discussions, integration workshops, etc.), thus discovering in everyday life the joy of giving. Student deans deserve special mention. These are figures that have been present since the very origins of these institutions (Eguía, 1957). The deans are final-year students who take on responsibility for overseeing the life of the Colegio and representing

their institution in different university settings, providing a model for their companions and giving their time in a disinterested way so that others can enjoy the college experience that has been bequeathed to them; thus, generating a testament of dedication, which has a deep importance among their fellow students.

This dedication, so common in the day-to-day life of the Colegio Mayor, is of great pedagogical value, because it makes it possible to experience a fundamental aspect for the education of liberty: renunciation. In an era when technology extols freedom of choice as the principal attribute of human freedom, Colegios Mayores make it possible to experience freedom as self-determination and so understand that “the essence of commitment is not the limitation of freedom, but rather vital positioning: it closes off some paths but opens others” (Burgos, 2010, p. 40).

4. Colegios Mayores as an exception

Marín claimed that “the university is a state of exception where normal laws do not apply” (2012, p. 27). So, the people who pay are not in charge; the people who know the most are most aware of their own ignorance; and unlike material goods, which are lost when given away, the most perfect way to possess knowledge comes from sharing it through its communication. Similarly, Colegios Mayores can also be said to be a state of exception.

Firstly, compared with other living arrangements where the student is a client, the student’s position in a Colegio

Mayor is, above all, that of a scholar. As happens in the university, the college member does not pay for a series of comforts but rather discomforts, as the Colegio Mayor is a demanding and challenging experience that takes students outside their comfort zones, opening them up to new disciplines, interests, and people. Secondly, the Colegio Mayor is not merely a functional space that fulfils the single task of providing accommodation; instead, it is a true home, providing a framework from which to make reality more comprehensible, a “here around which there are drawn” (Bellamy, 2020, p. 142). Just like how the family home provides roots from which to build an identity, the Colegio Mayor, through the formative proposition described above, also provides these roots, as it helps the students to discover tradition, themselves, and others. Thirdly, this exceptional nature comes from the fact that as the Colegio Mayor is an experience of a relational character, it requires the cultivation of interiority for its fruitfulness, since “greeting and sending off are only possible in the threshold where the inside becomes accessible for shelter and offering” (Marín, 2021, p. 28). Similarly, in the midst of a culture that exalts the material, Colegios Mayores are not so much concerned with what one has as with self-consideration; thus, fostering an education that transcends mere freedom of choice to lead to the discovery of freedom as self-determination.

Ever since Gil de Albornoz founded the first Colegio Mayor in 1364, the history of the university in Spain has been intimate-

ly linked to these institutions. Thanks to them, major universities were founded in Spain and the Americas; they have been the cradle of some great thinkers, scientists, leaders, and artists through the ages such as Eduardo Chillida, Josep Borrell, Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos, Francisco Giner de los Ríos, and Federico García Lorca; and today more than six centuries later, with Spanish universities suffering from an excessive emphasis on the role of turning out professionals, the Colegios Mayores offer resistance to this phenomenon, preserving within them the essence of the university experience. Today, the Colegios continue to incarnate this first aim of higher education, “where the institution takes responsibility for the individual and accompanies it in a process of self-discovery and human realisation [...] thus favouring their integral development at an individual and social level” (Colomo & Esteban, 2020, p. 58).

Sadly, despite the pedagogical importance of these centres, their formative value is often obscured by stories relating to practices such as hazing (Mérida, 2021), images of which go viral on social media with the result that they seem like frequent practices in the collective imaginary when in reality cases are ever more isolated (Fernández, 2022). These vile acts are not just forbidden in these centres, but for years regional and national associations of Colegios Mayores have worked hard along with universities to eradicate them completely through awareness raising campaigns such as one called “Contra las novatadas y en pro de la integración” (Against hazing and for integration) (Díaz,

2022) led by the Universidad Complutense de Madrid and the Colegios Mayores of the capital. This situation makes it all the more necessary to assert the pedagogical value of the Colegios Mayores to generate greater awareness at a social and academic level of the intense educational work done in these centres, which is often hidden by the increase of stories in the media such as those described above.

5. Conclusion

Every year, around 30% of Spain's university students move away from their home province to pursue higher education (Ministerio de Universidades, 2022), adding another difficult decision to the choice of course: where to live. Given the relational character of human beings, where students choose to live will have a strong influence on their personal growth and maturation.

In recent years, many investment funds have found that university accommodation is a sector with very high financial returns, driving the creation of different types of accommodation such as halls of residence and shared housing (de la Cruz, 2022). Today there is a risk that the commercialisation of higher-education institutions may also affect university accommodation, and so there is a need for greater research into the formative possibilities of Colegios Mayores to make it possible to defend and distinguish these educational institutions from other residential options with less of a pedagogical scope.

This study has shown the pedagogical value of the Colegios Mayores, demonstrat-

ing the continued relevance of this centuries-old institution. It has also shown that these institutions are privileged spaces for a wide variety of educational practices relating to liberal education and character education. Life in a Colegio Mayor offers a space for liberal education in which efforts are made to accentuate the search for truth through open reason, cultured coexistence, the encounter with tradition and beauty, and ultimately fostering a critical spirit and an active citizenship. We have also found that Colegios Mayores can offer authentic spaces where liberal education truly achieves character education by fostering commitment in students through experiences that promote decentering, personal knowledge, self-command and giving.

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