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Using Students Mentors in an “Introduction to Honors” Course

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THE UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA-MISSOULA

ABSTRACT

The Davidson Honors College at the University of Montana requires “Introduction to Honors” of all matriculating students. The course is offered for one credit and is designed to develop a sense of organizational identification among the first-year students enrolled in each of the ten sections that we teach every fall semester. Specifically, the goals of the course for students are to a) develop community, b) learn the essentials of a liberal arts education, and c) participate in activities they might not typically experience (e.g., community service or cultural events). Faculty members teaching each section volunteer their time and are provided \$250 to spend with their class.

To facilitate our goal of developing community, each “Introduction to Honors” course is staffed with a student mentor. Honors students apply to be mentors, are selected by the Dean, and work closely with the course instructors to plan and implement the course. Student mentors also volunteer their time and energy to facilitating the course.

To provide readers with a more detailed idea of the course and the role of student mentors, we provide a history and overview of our “Introduction to Honors” course, discuss the recruitment and role of our student mentors, and offer comments from two student mentors about their experiences.

“INTRODUCTION TO HONORS”

COURSE HISTORY

Our one-credit “Introduction to Honors” course was first offered in the mid 1980’s under the rubric “Freshman Seminar” and was available only to Honors students selected for our top academic award—the Presidential Leadership Scholarship (PLS). The course, offered in the fall semester, was designed to build community among the fifteen PLS awardees and to ease the transition from high school to college. After several years in hiatus, the course (still called “Freshman Seminar”) was resurrected and made available to *all* new students matriculating in the Honors College. Because of the number of “Freshman Seminar” courses taught across campus, along with the one-credit Seminars offered as a required part of our campus learning communities (called

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Freshman Interest Groups, or FIGs), not all Honors students enrolled for the Honors Freshman Seminar because the common name, "FIG/Freshman Seminar" did not distinguish the different content offered in these courses.¹

To reduce confusion and ensure that all Honors students had a proper introduction to the Honors College, the Honors course was renamed "Introduction to Honors" in 2003 and *required* of all new Honors students. For the fall 2005 semester we have ten sections scheduled, with 20 students in each section. Honors students enrolling in FIG classes are required to take "Introduction to Honors," in addition to the discussion section offered as part of the FIG experience. Through collaboration with the FIG Director, the "FIG Seminar" has evolved as a discussion section with the goal of linking together the content provided in the FIG courses. A fall 2003 survey of students enrolled in both "Introduction to Honors" and a FIG Seminar revealed that students saw these two one-credit courses as substantially different. While Honors students may enroll in the 2-credit campus-wide Freshman Seminar, they are discouraged from doing so since the course goals overlap with those of "Introduction to Honors."

COURSE CONTENT AND STRUCTURE

With the three stated course goals in mind (i.e., to develop community, learn the essentials of a liberal arts education, and engage in a unique activity), instructors develop widely varied classes. All instructors spend time covering the book selected for the campus-wide first-year reading experience,² yet each course is designed around the instructor's area of expertise and interest. All instructors are strongly encouraged to offer readings representative of a liberal

¹ Our university offers four programs targeted to incoming freshmen, two of which are mentioned in this article. The largest program is comprised of our Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs), where a cohort of students registers for the same block of four or five courses. Approximately 25 FIGs are offered each fall semester, and each is arranged around a different theme and enrolls a maximum of 25 students. One of the courses in every FIG is a one-credit FIG Seminar led by a UM senior or professor. Our Freshman Seminars are two-credit interactive courses focused on a particular topic, with the goal of fostering bonds between students, helping them with the transition to university life, and developing critical thinking skills. The two programs not mentioned here include University Transition, a one-credit week-long course focused on research and writing, and Learning Strategies for Higher Education, offered as part of our TRIO programming.

² Since 1999, the Honors College has had a freshman reading experience, followed by a fall Honors convocation featuring the authors of the assigned reading. In the fall of 2004, UM-M adopted a campus-wide first-year reading experience, using Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. The 2005 all-campus book is Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. Beginning fall semester 2005 we will return to our Honors tradition. In addition to Alexie, Honors students have been assigned Debra Earling's *Perma Red*, with the author as our Honors convocation speaker.

arts education, and many choose opinion pieces, academic articles, and literary readings to supplement their courses. Instructors have chosen readings such as former Missoula mayor Dan Kemmis' book, *Community and the Politics of Place*, while others choose opinion pieces from magazines like *Harper's*, the *New Yorker*, or the *New Republic*. Still others choose readings from Wallace Stegner, various local or Western authors, and academic articles related to their training and expertise.³

With the common bonds of the required reading for first-year students, discussing the essentials of a liberal arts education, and building community, each course has a unique character. For example, a Health and Human Performance instructor socializes his students into the Honors program by having students read articles and discuss issues related to wellness, and he gets them out exercising weekly. His class used their \$250 to build resting benches along our river walk, a popular exercise trail. A Forensic Anthropology professor and chocolatier entitles his popular section "Death and Chocolate." He provides chocolates for each class, takes them to the county crime lab, and asks them to write their obituaries. They end their seminar with a dinner at a local sushi bar. A Philosophy professor uses films and discussions to create community among her first-year students, while an environmental rhetorician asks his students to read local articles on environmental conflicts and takes them to work in a local organic garden.

Another professor uses qualitative methodology to emphasize "Missoula as Place" for her seminar, using the NCHC's City as Text© model as a guide. Students are required to act as participant observers on campus and around Missoula, submitting field notes about their observations. They work in teams and are required to spend at least two hours a week observing in their groups. They visit places such as the Farmers' Market, the monthly First Friday Artwalk, and the annual Hemp Festival to get a flavor of the Missoula community. The course is highlighted by visits from Missoula and western Montana luminaries—our former congressman, our mayor, and others—and field trips are taken to, for instance, the UM Carillon and the local carousel so that students get a sense of their new "place." Students are required to turn in a final paper in which they reflect on their field notes and discuss changes that have occurred in their personal, physical, and psychological "place" over their first semester.

STUDENT MENTORS

RECRUITMENT

Each spring, a call for student mentors solicits students for the upcoming fall semester. Honors students write a letter of application to the Dean in which they are asked to articulate their reasons for applying to be a mentor, identify

³ Sample syllabi and course readings can be obtained by contacting the first author at betsy.bach@umontana.edu.

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their particular qualifications for the task, discuss their leadership ability, and list names of two "Introduction to Honors" faculty members with whom they would like to work. They also must include a current résumé with their application. The Dean selects student mentors based on their application letter, GPA, leadership ability, and community service. As the mentor program grows in popularity, a selection committee comprised of faculty teaching "Introduction to Honors" will likely be appointed to assist with mentor selection. In 2003, the program's trial year, one mentor was recruited for 9 courses offered; in 2004, nine mentors were selected for 10 courses; in 2005, fourteen mentors applied for 10 sections.

Once selected, mentors attend a meeting with the course instructors and the Dean. The three course goals are discussed, the book for the first-year reading experience is distributed, and a general discussion about the course occurs. During this meeting the Dean circulates a draft list pairing student mentors with faculty members. Faculty members discuss their plans for the course, and then returning student mentors discuss the role and scope of their duties. Student/faculty pairings are then announced, and student mentors and faculty are given time to get acquainted and plan for the upcoming fall. To date, every student has been able to work with his/her first or second choice of faculty member.

ROLE OF MENTOR

The roles assumed by the student mentors are as varied as the instructors teaching the course. However, all mentors assist with leading discussions of course readings, help organize in- and out-of-class activities, and serve as guides to assist new students with their "sensemaking" of academic life in general and Honors education in particular.

By all accounts, faculty, student mentors, and students enrolled in the course benefit from the experience. Faculty members benefit because the student mentors know the campus culture and understand the difficulties inherent in the transition from high school to college. As the student mentors are easily accessible (both physically and psychologically) to students enrolled in the class, they are excellent socialization "agents" for first-year students. Faculty members are delighted to have student assistance in the course and often develop close relationships with their student mentors during the semester. Several faculty members have worked with their student mentors in subsequent "Introduction to Honors" courses while others have themselves become mentors to the students with whom they worked, serving as chairs of their Senior Honors Research Projects or advisors in undergraduate research activities.

The benefits both of being a student mentor and of having a student mentor are varied. The benefits of being a mentor are described by the second author of this article, a senior student majoring in forestry. During the fall of 2005 she will be serving in her third year as student mentor. Benefits to the

mentee are articulated by a junior majoring in economics, our third author. He is a mentee-turned-mentor.

BENEFITS OF BEING A MENTOR

Attending an honors college is a beneficial experience in many ways. One part of this rewarding experience is the new relationships that are constantly being formed, both among students and between students and faculty. The relationships that form between student mentors and the freshmen enrolled in the "Introduction to Honors" course go beyond those of a typical classroom experience because both leave the class at the end of the semester feeling that they have received something of value from each other.

"Introduction to Honors" is one of the first classes a new Davidson Honors College freshman attends at the University of Montana. As students in transition, freshmen are trying to find their niche, make friends, and simply survive. A small and intimate class like "Introduction to Honors" eases the transition as does the presence of a student mentor. Student mentors are valuable in that they have been through the transition themselves, are relatively comfortable with the college context, and can serve as a bridge between freshmen and professors.

While mentors are crucial in the atmosphere of that first classroom foray, their worth continues to grow throughout the semester. The second role that mentors play is as socializing agents between freshmen and the rest of campus. Having a mentor who 'knows the ropes' can be of significant value for several reasons: mentors have a practical grasp on general university information; they are usually familiar with opportunities for student involvement in campus activities; and they can act as advocates for campus organizations that are recruiting members, having socials, or doing service projects. Mentors, therefore, can encourage the freshmen to become involved, to take an active hand in getting to know their university. Student mentors can also organize their own social events such as hiking, picnics, or Frisbee, nice ways to strengthen ties within the classroom and to help students feel comfortable with their classmates.

While the student mentor is a role model to new freshman, the value of the program is not limited to freshmen. Mentors themselves come away from the experience feeling that they have gained several benefits, the first being simple acquaintance with new students. Whatever an individual's status in college, it is always nice to meet new people and get to know them and their backgrounds. Student mentors already have strong connections to their honors college, and they appreciate seeing a future generation of students who are getting the chance to participate in their education. Similarly, the student mentors enjoy keeping their contact with the honors college setting. Many students complete their required honors courses within their freshman and sophomore years and then disappear into their respective departments. The student mentor program contributes to the unity of the honors college.

Another major benefit to student mentors is the opportunity to express and practice their leadership skills. They can give back to the honors college by

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contributing what they have learned since their arrival at the university. Whether this knowledge is practical—such as where a particular department is housed on campus—or something more personal, the bottom line is that student mentors enjoy the chance to help these new students because they were also freshmen at one point. Sometimes it only takes one role model's attitude or actions to make a difference, and, with a little more work, this program has the potential to leave lasting impressions on the future classes of honors college freshman.

BENEFITS TO THE MENTEE

Upon entering the University of Montana as a freshman in the fall of 2003, I enrolled in "Introduction to Honors." In our section of the class, we were to concentrate on both the physical and intangible aspects of our immediate surroundings, including the Montana environment, UM campus, and the overall Missoula community. While initially reluctant to attend this class—the concept of place was somewhat interesting, albeit seemingly abstract to me—I eventually began to view it as beneficial to my overall education and to my life.

The classroom discussions, the weekly jaunts into the community to do something uniquely "Missoula," and the readings ranging from participant observation to literary work written by the myriad of talented writers who habituate Missoula—all provided a formal setting in which students experienced and analyzed the transition from high school to college. The class was both a way to meet peers—socialization—but also an informal way to assess what was happening in our lives. Its structure achieved two important, albeit paradoxical goals: interaction and introspection. "Introduction to Honors" provided the opportunity to form new relationships with people and the community and, at the same time, encouraged an examination of these new changes. It allowed everyone to engage in a genuine examination of place, and it also eased the transition process. The student mentor in the group provided support yet at the same time allowed enough space for the introspection process. She also served a fundamental purpose by acting as an intermediary between the students and the professor, and in this way she was able to offer both friendship and help with the transition.

The role of student mentor is beneficial for not only the students but also the mentor. When I assumed the role of student mentor in my second year, I desired to serve both as a friend and advisor to the students in the class. I offered to go mountain biking and hiking with the students, and I actively sought to maintain an informal attitude in order to establish friendship and encourage interaction. For the most part, I was able to ease the transition to college for the students—to relay information back and forth between the professor and the students; to provide my experience on a subject; and to acquaint students with the processes by which the University of Montana operates. For me, the second year was especially beneficial because it continued the introspection process but also allowed a forum for increased personal, communal,

and intellectual discovery. Quite simply, the student mentor position provided me with perspective. Being a mentor functioned as a way to better understand myself: what I valued in the environment around me, in my friends, and in life. Mentors are able to use the analytical and social skills they developed in their first year of study and apply them more thoroughly in their second.

I now better understand my community, and I have found my niche at Missoula—these are lessons I learned from both my roles in the student mentor program. And while not every student may have the opportunity to experience the surroundings in a forum such as this one, the basic idea is beneficial and necessary. It encourages community interaction, and it fosters pride in the campus and the environment as a whole. Quite simply, it leads to a friendlier, more inviting place.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Although this program is only in its third year, we have two recommendations for change. First, we believe that the mentor selection process could be more formalized. As noted earlier, a committee of faculty teaching “Introduction to Honors” courses could select and interview the student mentor applicants. This would both allow for discussion among the faculty about the necessary qualifications and responsibilities of student mentors and help faculty articulate and clarify what they perceive to be the role of the mentor. Similarly, interview questions could push potential student mentors to offer their vision of the mentor role, examine their qualifications for the position, and think about their potential contributions prior to class.

Second, more training could be provided to mentor/faculty teams. While some brief discussion is offered during the spring meeting of faculty and mentors, one or two additional meetings in the fall could be added. In these meetings, mentors and faculty could brainstorm ideas for the student mentor’s role and how the mentors might be drawn more fully into the teaching of “Introduction to Honors.” Former student mentors could attend to share their ideas and suggestions.

Student mentors serve a valuable role in the assimilation and socialization of new Honors students. Their assistance as guides and mentors allows them to assist first-year students in learning the ropes of an Honors education. They provide much needed informal communication on how new students learn their place as contributing citizens of our Honors program. If allowed to play an active role in the teaching of “Introduction to Honors”, student mentors have both the ability and capacity to provide valuable insight to new students and to serve as model socializing agents.

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