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Honors Courses: More Difficult or Different?

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At a well-attended "Developing in Honors" (DIH) session at the 2004 NCHC conference in New Orleans, the question of whether honors courses should be more difficult than or different from standard courses turned out to be unusually lively. The panelists insisted that honors courses should be different in a number of ways, all advocating smaller, interactive classes. My position went further in this direction, arguing that honors courses should replace General Education Requirements, courses often crowded with unwilling students, taught by instructors who would rather be doing something else, and dumbed down. Honors courses, I suggested, should *not* be specialized. When an Honors Council member at a college I visited insisted that all honors courses should require substantial research papers and demanding exams, I had to disagree. Although a substantial research paper, perhaps a two- or three-semester project, might be the ideal capstone experience in honors and a ticket to graduate school, the courses themselves, I believe, should be challenging, different, and fun for instructors and students alike. When possible, they should be team-taught and interdisciplinary; they should involve off-campus activities; and, instead of papers and exams, they should feature projects, preferably in teams. Clearly such courses require flexibility on the part of the administration and a spirit of adventure among faculty, who should be willing to work up a course, often to be given only once and perhaps far afield from their usual offerings.

Some examples of "different" honors courses offered at Eastern Connecticut State University are briefly described below. They were designed for sections of fifteen students, which could be stretched to twenty, when appropriate, with the instructor's approval.

SCIENCE VS. PSEUDOSCIENCE (ONE INSTRUCTOR, REGULAR CLASSROOM)

This course—offered by an outspoken skeptic, a chemistry professor who often challenges psychics or their ilk invited to make presentations on campus—proved to be so successful that it has been offered every three years. Topics include astrology, telepathy, ESP and other psychic phenomena, Tarot cards, palmistry and the like, ghosts, UFOs, abductions by aliens, and similar popular beliefs on the fringe. The course is mostly lecture and discussion, and

the major project is to prepare posters for public presentation at the end of the semester. Surveys given at the beginning and end of the course indicate, interestingly, that believers generally changed their minds about every phenomenon discussed except their belief in ghosts, which many maintained despite the evidence. Hobbyhorses can be turned into great honors courses!

MATHEMATICS AND SOCIETY (TEAM-TAUGHT, REGULAR CLASSROOM)

This course began with a dialogue between the instructors, an arch conservative political scientist and a very liberal mathematician, on Greek mathematics, society, and culture. Students were at first bewildered by the scope and method of the instructors, who were comfortable allowing the subject to advance spontaneously in unplanned directions, say, from the Greek method of calculating the area of a circle to Aristotle's justification of slavery to the idea of justice in the *Oresteia*. As the course moved through the Hellenistic age, the Medieval period, the Renaissance, and, ultimately, the Enlightenment, students increasingly participated in the discussion. When one instructor appeared in a flowery dress as Mother Nature, complaining that Kepler had revealed her long-kept secret about planetary motion, and the other instructor came as Giordano Bruno dressed as a wizard, the students loosened up. For their team projects, they did skits involving historical figures, interviews with Newton and Leibnitz, a debate between Samuel Johnson and Voltaire on religion, and the like. While enjoying themselves, the students did a lot of work and learned a good deal about the history of ideas.

SCIENCE FICTION AND THE STARS (TEAM-TAUGHT, SPECIAL FACILITY ON CAMPUS)

There were three instructors and three projects for students in this course. The English instructor, who had published some science fiction, put together a selection of classic stories portraying encounters with aliens and asked students in teams of three to come up with a variation on one of the stories, using the same or similar characters, write a script, and act it out. After discussing the characteristics of life forms and describing exotic fauna and flora that survive in extreme conditions on earth, the biologist asked teams to create a possible extra-terrestrial environment and life forms suitable to it. The astronomer taught the students how to use our planetarium's Zeiss star projector and asked the teams to create a plausible program with the machine and special effects. Most of the teams did much more work than was required, using the same setting for each of their projects and developing detailed, exotic worlds, making models of life forms, drawing landscapes, and creating images using computer programs. As a spin-off of this course, another biologist and astronomer offered a course on astrobiology the following year.

THE MUSEUM AND SOCIETY (TEAM-TAUGHT, MOSTLY OFF-CAMPUS)

An English professor got together with the curator of the university's art gallery to bring students to a dozen museums in the area. Introductory discussions spelled out what students were to look for at the various museums, including what the entrance vista, the arrangement of materials, and the tone of the labels suggested, what audience(s) the museum was addressed to, what programs it sponsored, and how it was funded. Beginning at our own gallery, the Textile Museum in town, and the Benton Art Museum and the Connecticut Natural History Museum at the University of Connecticut down the road, the class moved further afield to the Lyman Allen Museum in New London, the Wadsworth Atheneum and the Museum of Science in Hartford, Mystic Seaport, Sturbridge Village, and the Museum of British Art at Yale. The semester project required each student to visit a museum not covered in the course and to give a presentation including color slides or powerpoint on that museum.

NEW ENGLAND AND THE SEA (TEAM-TAUGHT, MOSTLY OFF CAMPUS)

Taught by a marine biologist and an English instructor, this was among the more elaborate honors colloquia offered at Eastern. It involved day trips to the Coast Guard Academy in New London, Mystic Seaport, including participation in the Yachting History Symposium, and the University of Rhode Island School of Oceanography, where graduate students made presentations on their research. It also featured a working session on the Thames River and Fishers Island Sound aboard Project Oceanology's research vessel, Envirolab II, a Saturday at the marine ecology station on Outer Island near Branford, CT, an afternoon sail in rough weather on a schooner, and a visit to a lobster cooperative. Student projects included descriptions of the domestic architecture of Noank, CT, building a sharpie at Mystic Seaport, projects at the Sound School in New Haven, the haunting of New London Ledge Light, and a shakedown cruise aboard the *Eagle*, the Coast Guard's tall ship.

OTHER COURSES

Here are brief descriptions of a few other "different" honors courses: *Ethnicity in Canada and the United States*, given by an anthropologist and an English instructor, featured a week at a youth hostel in a francophone district of Montreal; *Worship in Willimantic*, also given by the anthropologist and English instructor, included visits to about a dozen houses of worship and discussions with ministers, priests, and rabbis; *Rocks, Time, and Landscape* and *The Ecology of Local Ponds and Wetlands* each had weekly field trips, the first taught solo by a geologist, the second by a team of two biologists; *The Culture of the African Diaspora*, offered by English and Fine Arts faculty, included

dance, music, mask-making, and food preparation for a banquet; and *Modern American Troubadours*, presented by an English instructor who had written and recorded his own songs, featured performances, open to the entire campus, by half a dozen song writers. To be successful, however, an honors course need not be exotic or expensive. *Freud and His Critics* and *Sports and Society*, both offered solo, and team-taught *Crime Fiction/Crime Fact* and *Political Culture and Mass Media* were all well received.

At the DIH session and via email I was asked a number of nuts-and-bolts questions regarding this pedagogy. Of course, much depends on the number of students in the program, the culture of the campus, administrative flexibility, and resources. Eastern, with about 4500 students, has an honors program of about a hundred students, all of them on tuition scholarships, and a modest operating budget of about $4,500 a year. Some questions and their answers:

WHEN COURSES ARE TEAM-TAUGHT, HOW ARE FACULTY COMPENSATED?

In our halcyon days we had a dean who would schedule two courses under a different designation in the same room, thus awarding 3 Faculty Load Credits (FLC) to each instructor. When this dean moved on, it was agreed, after negotiation, that instructors in team-taught honors colloquia could share 4 FLC any way they chose, usually 2 and 2, but often 3 and 1. This works at Eastern because faculty accrue partial credit for internships and tutorials, and some departments offer 1-credit courses. All courses designated "Honors" now replace appropriate General Education Requirements

HOW ARE FACULTY RECRUITED?

I asked students to recommend lively and imaginative instructors and then waylaid them in their offices. From time to time, I sent an email to the entire faculty, spelling out what is involved and soliciting responses. Sometimes interested faculty came to me, and I also sought out recently hired faculty I had heard good things about. Frequently two instructors from different disciplines showed up with a proposal, and at times I would suggest and try to recruit a suitable partner if the proposer was willing to team-teach the course. It helps if the director is an old hand and knows everyone on the campus.

HOW ARE ARRANGEMENTS MADE FOR OFF-CAMPUS EXPERIENCES?

Usually arrangements have to be made a semester in advance to be sure a state van will be available. When students would ask if they could drive to a site in their own vehicles, I said no because there are problems with liability at public institutions in Connecticut during travel for academic purposes. I also pointed out that travel in the van was part of the course. After discussing

the latest scandal in the dorms, students often would talk about their courses, their interests, and even their projects. These trips contributed to socialization, friendships, and at least one marriage! Arrangements for tickets, entrance fees, reservations, special programs, and the like can, however, be complicated and time-consuming.

HOW ARE THESE COURSES EVALUATED?

At the conclusion of every colloquium, each student evaluates the experience, and the professors evaluate each student. Of course, when a colloquium has problems, students come to the director's office with their concerns. In most cases the problem can be remedied by reviewing the guidelines with the instructors. Four of every five courses get enthusiastic evaluations; one of every twenty has been considered a disaster. One disaster was a course on health care reform offered during the Clinton effort by an economist, an anthropologist, and a political scientist, two of them recipients of distinguished teaching awards. The problem was that the instructor in charge assigned separate sessions to each instructor and never made clear what was required, leaving the students and the other two instructors unsure about their responsibilities. Team-taught courses are best when each professor comes to every class.

WHY DIFFERENT IS BETTER THAN TOUGHER

When the daughter of a colleague of mine did well on a statewide secondary-school exam, she was singled out for "enhancement" in mathematics. Enhancement, it turned out, meant that, when everyone else was assigned five problems for homework, she was told to do ten. Only a masochist, I suspect, would welcome this sort of enhancement. Fortunately, the school was flexible, and she was able to take a calculus course the following term at Eastern. Similar negative experiences in high school, such as doing twice as much work for a lower grade in an honors section, may explain why some academically talented students choose not to apply to our honors programs. It might therefore be a good idea for honors programs committed to the idea of different rather than just tougher courses to make this clear on their web sites and in letters inviting prospective students to apply.

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