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JAMES SWAFFORD

Jump-Starting Honors Community with Introductory Biographies

JAMES SWAFFORD

ITHACA COLLEGE

Last June, as they descended from the peak experience of high school graduation, the forty newly selected members of the Humanities and Sciences (H&S) Honors Program at Ithaca College received a summer-reading book from me, the Honors Director, with a request for information in exchange: enclosed in the packet was a brief questionnaire about their experiences, their likes and dislikes, their hopes for the future. The questionnaires took only a few minutes to complete, but once the replies were translated into a set of introductory biographical sketches and sent back to the students in August, the information provided a great boost, even before the new students arrived on campus for the fall term, to the effort to foster a sense of honors-program community both in and out of the classroom.

Most of the questions had been devised by the Student Advisory Board members as they considered what students typically want to know about each other upon early acquaintance:

What do you consider your “home town”? Have you lived in any other exciting places?

Have you done much traveling? What is one of the most memorable places you have ever visited?

What is your all-time favorite film? Favorite book or writer?

What kind(s) of music do you like?

What academic subjects (such as biology, art, history) do you find especially interesting?

What was the best part of high school?

Do you hope to play any varsity sports at Ithaca? Any intramural sports?

At Ithaca College, in what extra-curricular activities do you think you'll get involved?

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Do you hope to study abroad during your undergraduate years? Where?

Below, write a few sentences to tell your colleagues in the honors program something about yourself not covered by the previous questions. What makes you unique?

I also sent an e-version of the questionnaire, and most students did answer by e-mail, some with very brief comments, some with novellas. Though a few were slow to reply, the threat of publishing highly fictionalized and embarrassing biographies of the slackers eventually shook information loose from everyone.

Each student's information ended up in a paragraph-long sketch, which, in all cases but one, for consistency in style and not altogether serious tone, I wrote myself. Here is a typical entry:

Because **John H**— (Environmental Studies major) can't remember his earliest years in Philadelphia, he calls Doylestown, Pennsylvania, his home town. One place that Jack does remember, with awe, is Big Sur in California. His favorite film is *The Royal Tenenbaums*, his favorite book is Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, and his favorite music tends to fall into the categories of folk and soul. He is fascinated by history as an academic area, Africa as a geographical one. In the next few years, he would like to join with others in the college community in some activist causes. Fellow honors students should be aware that Jack is subject to one strange compulsion: when he sees what he deems a "good tree," he must climb it, whatever the circumstances, whatever the location.

Often I quoted a phrase or two directly from the student's submission, but when I encountered Toni's truly eccentric voice—"Rebel grrl. Messiah girl. Riot grrrl. A weapon of mass distraction."—I retired into a brief, bracketed introduction and let Toni have the biographical sketch to herself, figuring that the other first-years should have fair warning of some of the challenges to come.

Last year was the first run of this experiment with what have come to be known as the "bio-blurbs." Without exception, the students enjoyed them; having been introduced on paper during the summer, students were eager to meet the persons behind the sketches. After all, if Kelly, the English education major from Wisconsin, collects pencils and owns a tarantula, she must be worth knowing. How exciting that fellow students will be coming from such exotic places as Turkey, Albania, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, and Indiana! Well before the late-August barbecue that was the first official honors event of the academic year, the new honors community had begun to form. Katrina was already famous as our token Nebraskan, Sara-Maria as the former model for Abercrombie & Fitch, Max as the composer of experimental music. Within the first month of the fall term, the several young women whose blurbs had revealed them as *aficionadas* of badminton were investigating the possibility of organizing a college club devoted to the sport.

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Besides serving as introductions and indicators of affinities (or extreme differences) of taste and experience, the biographical sketches have some side benefits. Without being blatant about it, they encourage new students to ponder study-abroad options and to consider a wider range of extra-curricular activities. It had not occurred to me that many of the parents would read the blurbs too, until several told me at the college's fall open house that they were delighted to have a glimpse of the community into which their sons and daughters were moving; as the introductions made the new arrivals feel more at home at college, they also—even Toni's—seemed to reassure the family whom the students had left behind.

One does pay a price for such benefits. Writing forty bio-blurbs certainly required an investment of my summer time although, once I found an overall tone that seemed right, the composition generally went smoothly. The information in my sketches could usually follow the order of the questions, which provided a logical “arc” to the presentation, and the students themselves almost always gave me a surprising piece of information or a pithy comment that could serve as a climax to the entry. Directors of larger honors programs, however, interested in experimenting with a project like this, might well be daunted at the prospect of writing hundreds of such paragraphs, even though the blurbs are probably even more useful in programs where sheer numbers can make it difficult for a student to find a kindred or a fascinatingly different spirit. Of course, a director could save a great deal of time and effort by providing a model paragraph, posing the crucial questions, and asking the students to write blurbs—with a strict word limit—about themselves, the director reserving the right to edit all submissions. The individual styles of the student-authored paragraphs would do much to introduce the uniqueness of each student. Another time-saving approach might be to leave the information in a sort of question-and-answer format like this:

Suzanne M— (Math Teaching major)

Home: Damariscotta, ME

Travel: camping in Norway; one year as an *au pair* in Germany

Favorite academic subjects: math and English

Favorite writers: Isabel Allende, Peter Shaffer

Favorite film: *Monsters Inc.*

Music: plays the flute

College plans: joining the crew team

This approach, at least as I have used it here, falls sadly short on charm, but it does provide some interesting details and is much better than nothing.

As noted earlier, I sent hard copies of the bio-blurbs to the students' homes during the summer; because I assumed that most of these paper documents

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would be lost in the relocation, I also e-mailed copies to the new honors students once they arrived on campus for the fall term. Especially after discovering that parents enjoyed reading the introductions, I intend to rely on the postal service again for year two. The published blurbs, in fact, are the last in a series of summer mailings in which I inform the students about the honors housing option, the fall honors seminars, the summer-reading book, my availability during summer orientation sessions, and the late-August honors orientation and barbecue. As an old-fashioned person, I feel more in touch with the new students when I send mail with a stamp affixed, and some students have told me that they took the communications more seriously when they arrived in that form. E-mail distribution, however, could certainly save time and money, savings that in a larger program could be considerable. Online publication is another reasonable option, although I am reluctant to post on our honors website any personal information at all about our students since those pages are open to viewing by any casual surfer anywhere; but programs that restrict access to certain sections of their websites could make bio-blurbs available online and worry-free to the rest of the honors community (potentially an excellent community-builder on a much grander scale than we have tried as yet) and could include photographs as well.

One student has suggested that, in the coming year, we begin to exploit the blurbs at another level: we could unofficially match each first-year with an upperclass student as much as possible in terms of common interests and have the older student serve as a mentor or resource if the younger is interested. “Nothing forced and nothing very formal,” said Toni the Riot Grrrl whose idea this was and who will be a student co-director of the program next year, “and don’t call anybody a Big Sister, whatever you do; but if these people have some common interests, the freshmen might feel more inclined to initiate a relationship or even just ask a question.”

Toni’s idea illustrates why an honors program needs student directors and/or a student advisory board—members of the program who can not only help to plan and organize social events but also brainstorm and critique a range of ideas and procedures from the student point of view. Although I am proud of developing the blurbs to jump-start community feeling among the first-year students, I confess that in their first trial year I did not use the sketches for all they were worth. Many possible follow-ups come to mind, besides Toni’s suggestion. An obvious and easy one: at the honors orientation session for new students just before classes begin, we should introduce each person with a juicy slice of information from his or her bio-blurb, to reinforce the value of the written introductions and to associate faces with paragraphs. This year, I will also compose biographical sketches for the few students who begin the program as internal-transfer sophomores or as transfers from other institutions. Both of these groups feel rather out of place in their early honors courses, having missed the first-year-seminar experience where students most readily make friends with others in their class cohort. E-mail distribution of their

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bio-blurbs to the rest of the honors community, as well as delivery to the transfers of the biographical sketches that we already have on file, could help the transfer students feel more immediately at home.

I suspect that the introductory biographies could have a useful developmental function as well. In the coming year, I intend to have all of the first-years read their blurbs again as their first college semester draws to its close. At the final session of the first-year seminar (I teach one English section, along with a colleague who teaches one in Writing), we can discuss as a group who the students were when they submitted answers to the summer questionnaire as compared to who they are now. The discussion will be primed by a followup questionnaire: Do you feel that the blurb still describes you? How have you changed after a semester at college? Are you participating in the extra-curricular activities that you planned, or have your interests developed in other directions? Would you now list new favorite films or writers or academic subjects? Do you have any different notions of what makes you unique? Before the students leave the first-year seminars and disperse through the various intermediate honors courses, perhaps a profounder sense of community can come from their sharing these self-reflections and thinking about how they have grown together over the past four or five months. The bio-blurbs have made a good beginning in the H&S Honors Program at Ithaca College and are already an established tradition after just one year, but thanks to suggestions from students, faculty, and administrators, and to probing questions from reviewers of this article in its earlier stages, the tradition continues rapidly to evolve.

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