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Team Leaders and the Honors Freshman-Year Experience[1]

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In this article, we report on an effective means to enhance the honors freshman-year experience and thereby reduce the high rates of attrition commonly associated with the first year in college. Research by Tinto (1975; 1987) has shown that academic as well as social integration contributes to student persistence and success in college. Consequently, the successful transition from high school to college requires that freshmen make adjustments both academically and socially. The lack of integration in either of these domains will reduce student persistence and increase the likelihood that students will be college drop-outs. The effects of academic and social integration are particularly acute during the first year of college, as borne out by statistics indicating that student attrition is greatest during the freshman year. For instance, Levitz and Noel (1989) report that there is a 50% decrease in student attrition rates per year in college. Moreover, among all freshman drop-outs, half occur during the first six weeks of the first semester (Myers, 1981). Fostering a successful freshman year is the most significant intervention that can increase student persistence (Levitz and Noel, 1989).

At many large campuses, some students, particularly freshmen, will develop a sense of isolation and social alienation. The consequence is that these students will be less engaged in their studies and campus activities. Results from the National Survey of Student Engagement (Kuh, 2003) suggest that, while there is a great deal of variability, smaller schools generally engage students more effectively than larger schools. Because of our large campus, we wanted to minimize possible feelings of isolation and social alienation in our Honors freshmen. Therefore, the Team Leader program that we describe here was designed to increase the academic *and* social integration of these students. In developing this program, we considered the following goals for the freshman-year experience as outlined by Upcraft and Gardner (1989):

- Developing Academic and Intellectual Competence
- Establishing Social Relationships

[1] Portions of this paper were presented at the 2004 annual meeting of the National Collegiate Honors Council, New Orleans, LA.

- Developing an Identity
- Maintaining Personal Health and Wellness
- Developing an Integrated Philosophy of Life

We will describe how our Team Leader Program assists Honors freshmen make the adjustment to university life with regard to each of these factors. However, before describing our Team Leader Program, it will be helpful to first provide the context for this program and its development. Therefore, we describe our university and Honors College before discussing the Team Leaders Program with regard to Upcraft and Gardner's (1989) framework for shaping the freshman-year experience.

THE UNIVERSITY

Our Honors College is located on the campus of a large metropolitan research university whose total enrollment is 43,000 students. Last year, the incoming class of 4,075 freshmen (technically defined as "First Time in College" students) had an average high-school GPA of 3.80 and an average SAT score of 1186. The overall first-year retention rate for the freshman class was 86%.

THE HONORS COLLEGE

Our Honors College has a total enrollment of 1,550 students. Last year we enrolled a freshman class of 505 Honors students. The incoming class had an average high-school GPA of 4.24 and an average SAT score of 1335. The first-year retention rate for this freshman class remaining in the Honors College (82%) was somewhat lower than that of the university. However, it should be noted that the overall GPA needed to remain in Honors (GPA $\geq$ 3.20) is considerably higher than the overall GPA needed to remain a student in good-standing at our University (GPA $\geq$ 2.00).

Our Honors College has met each of the criteria established by the National Collegiate Honors Council's (1995) "Basic Characteristics of a Fully-Developed Honors Program." We offer our students a four-year honors experience starting with a liberal arts background and ending with advanced courses and interdisciplinary seminars. As one requirement for graduating with Honors, all incoming students must enroll in "Honors Freshman Symposium" during the fall semester of their freshman year.

Honors Freshman Symposium is the cornerstone course for our honors experience. One purpose of the Honors Freshman Symposium is to expose our students to the diversity of scholarship, creativity, and passion for learning that exists among our university's finest faculty. In this sense, it is a speaker series in which each week a renowned scholar gives a presentation on his/her research area. But Symposium is more than a series of presentations. It is also the place where we instill the Honors Code of Conduct and build an Honors learning

community. We encourage belongingness and Honors identity by placing freshman "symposiasts" in teams of 19-20 students headed by a Team Leader. Last fall semester, our symposiasts were randomly assigned to one of twenty-six teams. An important function of these teams is to have breakout discussions on the topic presented earlier that afternoon in Symposium. These breakout discussions are held at various pre-determined locations around campus immediately following Symposium. Team Leaders are responsible for facilitating these thirty- to forty-minute discussions.

TEAM LEADERS PROGRAM

Our Team Leaders are advanced Honors students who serve as peer mentors, guides, positive role models, and resources for their team of incoming students. Selection of Team Leaders is highly competitive and is based on academic performance, a personal statement, and a group interview. First-time applicants must also submit a letter of recommendation from the Team Leader they had during their freshman year. We typically receive twice as many applications as there are positions to fill.

In many ways, familiarity with Honors Symposium and the Team Leader Program begins in the freshman year. However, formal training beings with a two-day Team Leader Retreat that occurs the week before the fall semester begins. In order to instill a sense of community, this retreat is attended by all Team Leaders as well as the Honors staff and is facilitated by the Associate Dean of the College. This past year, twenty-six Team Leaders and twelve staff members attended the retreat and all of its sessions. One guest speaker led a workshop on leadership development, and a psychologist offered a presentation on "identifying the at-risk student." Several "best practices" sessions of the retreat were led by returning Team Leaders. One such session involved having "rookie" Team Leaders role-play some of the difficult situations that they might encounter with their team members. Ensuing discussions allowed rookies to process the underlying issues and appropriate actions associated with each of these situations. Examples of situations that were role-played included how to deal with a disruptive student in breakout discussions and assisting a student who is homesick.

We also had all Team Leaders participate in a "ropes course" to build communication and camaraderie among Team Leaders. In addition, several sessions focused on the various roles and professional responsibilities expected from the Team Leaders. In this regard, it should be noted that Team Leaders are paid hourly wages for all activities related to Honors Symposium and their team activities.

However, the retreat is not just about work. Several sessions are entertaining ice-breakers involving Team Leaders and Honors staff, and high levels of enthusiasm and conviviality pervade all retreat activities. The fact that all retreat participants dined together for group meals also reinforces the sense of community among Team Leaders and staff. We believe that the retreat's milieu of

sociability and inclusiveness is critical to the success of our Team Leaders Program because the creation and core of our Honors community begins with the staff and its Team Leaders.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF TEAM LEADERS

In addition to facilitating breakout discussions, Team Leaders are also responsible for maintaining the Symposium attendance records and call-logs for their team members. Call logs are weekly records of telephone calls and meetings between Team Leaders and each of their symposiasts.

Team Leaders are expected to meet or call all team members at least once per week outside of Symposium. On average, Team Leaders spend about 10 hours per week on team activities. This time is spent organizing social activities, meeting with individual team members, and going to educational and cultural events (e.g., theatre performances, campus observatory) with their team members. In addition, Team Leaders are responsible for arranging a field trip whose destination is determined after reaching a consensus among all team members (not always an easy task). A mandatory symposium requirement is that all team members must participate in this field trip.

TEAM LEADERS AND THE FRESHMAN-YEAR EXPERIENCE

Having described the Team Leader Program within the context of our university and Honors College, we now turn to how this program addresses each goal of the freshman-year experience described by Upcraft and Gardner.

Developing Academic and Intellectual Competence.

Honors Freshman Symposium builds active listening skills and fosters an appreciation for diverse research topics and interdisciplinary thinking. We also stress civility in the classroom. These competencies are further developed in subsequent breakouts when Team Leaders facilitate discussions that heighten the relevance of symposium topics to students' lives. During any given evening, a symposium topic will elicit diverse viewpoints from students who agree or disagree with the opinions of the presenter. For instance, one presenter discussed his research on genetic engineering. Subsequent breakout discussions revealed that many students held views either supporting or opposing the speaker's opinions. The ensuing debate required that team members critically evaluate all arguments and defend their own views in a cogent and persuasive manner. Symposiasts appreciate this opportunity for debate because it occurs in the low-threat environment of a breakout group. That is, they can hone their communication skills without the reticence they might experience if a faculty member were present and a course grade were in the balance.

Finally, the small group setting creates opportunity for symposiasts to form study groups during midterms and finals. This opportunity serves as

another means whereby freshman are academically integrated into the university setting.

Establishing Social Relationships.

Freshman team members discover that their Team Leader and team members form a support network that can assist in the establishment of new social relationships. Many beginning freshmen are hesitant to ask questions about campus life for fear of being perceived as naive or stupid. In breakout discussions they realize that many others share this fear and may even have the same questions such as "where do I get scantrons?" or "what does SARC stand for?" (it stands for Student Academic Resource Center). In sharing these experiences, team members start to develop the trust and communication that can be the basis for new-found relationships.

Team Leaders attend retreat sessions on ice-breakers and team building. Consequently, many of the activities organized toward the beginning of the semester are highly popular pizza and ice-cream socials that promote familiarity and peer-bonding among team members. Educational and cultural events, including the mandatory field trip, tend to be scheduled later in the semester. The most popular field trips have included visits to local museums, theatre performances, and community service projects such as *Habitat for Humanity*, *Ronald McDonald House,* and a beach clean-up day.

Team Leaders are also resources for helping their symposiasts locate student clubs and organizations. On a large university campus, there is an assortment of student interest groups that many freshmen would find bewildering. For instance, there are student clubs catering to chocolate enthusiasts, medievalists, or devotées of the novelist Ayn Rand. Encouraging Honors freshmen to locate and join campus organizations is another important means whereby Team Leaders help their students socially integrate into the university setting.

We mentioned earlier that we reinforce the sense of community and Honors identity during the Team Leader retreat. As Team Leaders interact with their symposiasts throughout the fall semester, the friendship, sociability, and conviviality established in the Team Leader retreat now extends to the newest members of the Honors community.

Developing an "Honors" Identity.

As freshman become socialized within the Honors community, they start to develop a concept of what it means to be an Honors student. This begins during the first Symposium meeting in which we welcome our freshmen and explain our college mission statement and the Honors Code of Conduct. It is important to note that our Honors Code is not simply a prescriptive list of do's and don'ts. Rather, it describes the values that are cherished by members of the Honors community (e.g., "To strive for the highest levels of performance in all scholarly endeavors and to do so with the enthusiasm that stems from a true love of learning and a devotion to academic excellence"). Team Leaders are

expected to uphold and exemplify these values to their freshmen in all of their academic, co-curricular, and social activities.

Team Leaders also serve as a personal bridge between the Honors staff and their freshmen. For instance, our Honors College is the campus representative for all prestigious scholarships such as the Rhodes and Marshall. These scholarships require qualifications that exceed the information found in students' transcripts. In this regard, Team Leaders serve a vital role in that they are responsible for introducing outstanding members of their team to the Honors staff. Such students include those who have demonstrated high levels of maturity, leadership skills, or unusual proficiencies in a musical instrument or second language.

Our Honors College offers many opportunities for freshmen to establish a sense of belonging and identity. One such opportunity is our Honors Educational Reach Out (HERO) Program that provides community service opportunities for our students to serve two inner-city elementary schools. About eighty students volunteer for this program each semester. We sponsor many other student-oriented events including an Honors luncheon series in which a notable public figure has lunch with a small group of students. Past luncheons have included the noted science fiction writer Ben Bova, astronaut John Young, and the editor of the *New York Times Book Review*. Team Leaders are instrumental in promoting these events to their team members.

Team Leaders also encourage freshman involvement in Honors Congress activities. Honors Congress is the official student organization of our Honors College and sponsors many social activities such as the float build for our university's homecoming festivities. This past fall, about seventy Honors students participated in building a homecoming parade float that won first prize in a juried competition.

It is important to note that, in promoting a sense of Honors identity and community, we try never to lapse into elitism. Our Honors College does not exist as an elitist institution isolated in its own ivory tower. Rather, we work very hard at being central to the mission and to the academic community of our university. This interconnectedness is reflected in our students who are active in all aspects of the university including student government, Greek organizations, research labs, and community partnership projects. Thus, rather than being elitist, the Honors College and our students are very much a part of the everyday life and community of our university.

Maintaining Personal Health and Wellness.

Team Leaders are in a position to monitor the personal well-being of each of their symposiasts. After the Team Leader retreat they are equipped to handle virtually all of the issues or concerns raised by their freshmen. During the retreat, an important lesson is that they should not function as therapists or counselors. Thus, if one of their freshmen is experiencing acute distress or exhibiting maladaptive behaviors (e.g. eating disorder, substance abuse, or

depression), they are to notify the Honors staff as soon as possible. Moreover, depending upon the circumstances, Team Leaders will accompany their student either to the university counseling center or health center. While these circumstances are exceedingly rare, the retreat prepares Team Leaders for the possibility that they might need to act in emergency situations.

On a more positive note, Team Leaders are role models for how successful Honors students should conduct themselves both in and out of the classroom. Through modeling and prompting, Team Leaders help their freshmen hone adaptive skills such as studying for college-level tests, prioritizing, time management, and establishing healthy relationships. At the same time, Team Leaders help their freshmen recognize the perils of excessive lifestyles such as all-night partying or video gaming. Thus, as freshmen are making the transition from high-school to university life, Team Leaders assist them adopt a new, healthy lifestyle that strikes a balance between work and fun. Team Leaders are effective in this role because they don't act like mom or dad. Instead, they are peer mentors and role models who, as successful Honors students, can lead by example.

Develop an Integrated Philosophy of Life.

From a developmental perspective, freshmen enter college as adolescents and should graduate as mature young adults. This greater maturity should be marked by a deeper awareness of one's abilities and interests and a heightened understanding of how these abilities and interests relate to one's goals in life. Moreover, with growing maturity one should have a greater sensitivity and appreciation for the diversity that exists across people and places. These are also the qualities that we seek to develop when we speak of nurturing well-roundedness in our students.

Just how do Team Leaders promote well-roundedness in their freshmen? One means is through facilitation of the breakout discussions following each Freshman Symposium. It is through our symposium presentation and the ensuing discussion that Honors freshmen are exposed to diverse perspectives and ways of knowing. While disagreements arise during discussions, the Team Leader's responsibility is to ensure that all student viewpoints are treated with respect and thoughtfulness. Many of our freshmen come from high school and family backgrounds that are fairly homogeneous with respect to diversity. Having the opportunity to engage in discourse with others who do not share their perspective is a benefit of Team Leader-facilitated breakout discussions. Another means whereby Team Leaders promote well-roundedness is by virtue of positive role modeling and prompting. Because Team Leaders are advanced and highly successful Honors students, they are very convincing examples for showing incoming freshman "how to lead the good life."

This past fall, we initiated a Service Team program in partnership with the national organization Junior Achievement. Honors freshmen volunteered to be members of service teams led by Team Leaders. Each Service Team worked with

children in elementary and middle schools who were identified as "high risk" for student drop-out and failure. Fully one-half (250 students) of our incoming freshman class volunteered, and by the end of the semester they contributed a total of 1,500 hours of community service to these schools. We believe that this community service activity serves two important purposes. First, it promotes the values embodied in our Honors Code of Conduct (e.g., "To demonstrate self-discipline, commitment, and responsibility in fulfilling my obligations as a member of the academic community"). Second, it develops qualities of well-roundedness (e.g., sensitivity, empathy, and civic engagement) in our students.

FRESHMAN PERCEPTIONS OF TEAM LEADERS

At the end of the Symposium, freshmen anonymously complete an evaluation of their Team Leaders. This survey asks freshmen to identify their Team Leader's strengths and weaknesses as well as to provide a numerical rating of their Team Leader's performance (from "1 = Poor" to "5 = Excellent"). Overall, the numerical ratings were strongly positive ($\underline{M}$ = 4.73), and this was reflected in the comments of freshmen. When commenting on their Team Leader's strengths, typical observations were "[I appreciated] her sincerity and interest in the well being of each and every student" and "she really reached out to all of us and made us feel that she cared...I never had to worry about things because of her.".

Very few comments were elicited when freshmen were asked about their Team Leader's weaknesses (most students left this question blank). When students did respond, the most frequent comment was that the breakout discussions could have been better organized and facilitated by their Team Leader ("There was no structure to our meetings"). This type of comment only occurred for first-time Team Leaders and was absent for returning Team Leaders.

THE TEAM LEADER EXPERIENCE

We thought that a fitting end to this article would be a section that describes the experience of Team Leaders. Their overall experience is positive as evidenced by the fact that, in any given year, almost half of the applicants are returning Team Leaders (graduation and conflicting class schedules prevent others from re-applying). Rewards of both an extrinsic as well as intrinsic nature contribute to this positive experience. While an hourly wage certainly counts as an extrinsic reward, this seems to be only a minor factor in why students apply to be Team Leaders. A more important factor is that students look upon the role of Team Leader as having prestige and high visibility among the Honors community. This role is particularly attractive to students who have had prior leadership experience in high school or in student organizations at our university. For many students, being a Team Leader also serves as a passport for other leadership and service activities on campus.

However, the most important rewards for being a Team Leader are intrinsic in nature. When students were asked "What is the best thing about being a

Team Leader?" the overwhelming response was the opportunity to help freshmen make the transition to college life. A typical Team Leader response to this question was "There is nothing like seeing a student grow from a high-school senior to a college freshman and to know that you had a role in that transition." Another Team Leader appreciated "having the opportunity to help students not only academically, but also with social issues." It should also be noted that all of our Team Leaders indicated that they would recommend this experience to other students thinking of applying for the position.

Another intrinsic reward is that the Team Leader experience helps develop leadership skills to a level that is quite uncommon for student leadership positions. After all, how many other positions carry the responsibility of overseeing the adjustment and personal well-being of college freshmen? Team Leaders also find that their experience allows them to develop mentoring and listening skills to a high degree. These skills serve them well not only in breakout discussions but also in interactions with students on a personal level. In developing their leadership and communication skills, Team Leaders noted increases in their self-confidence, particularly in situations that require public speaking, team building, and consensus building. One final source of intrinsic reward comes from the pride and personal fulfillment felt by Team Leaders as they assist members of their team. In so doing, our Team Leaders exemplify and substantiate another set of values represented by our Honors Code of Conduct: "To show thoughtfulness, understanding, and empathy toward my peers, and to offer encouragement as they pursue their intellectual goals."

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