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Dominican University of California's Honors Program and its Relation to University Heritage and Mission

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we discuss how we came to restructure the honors program at Dominican University of California and fit it more closely to the institutional mission and Dominican values. The mission statement of Dominican University of California reads: "We are an independent, learner-centered, international university which interweaves Dominican values, the liberal arts and sciences and the skills and knowledge necessary to live and work in an independent world." The four Dominican values are study, service, community, and reflection. Our primary interest is the way adaptation of an honors program to its unique campus mission and values can strengthen the program and give it character and integrity.

BACKGROUND

In 1989, the honors program at Dominican University of California was designed to provide enhanced and alternative modes of education for excellent and highly motivated students. In fall 1989, there were 357 undergraduates out of a total student population of 657; in fall 2004, there were 1340 undergraduate students out of a student population of 1977. To graduate as honors program scholars, students completed a required number of honors seminars or honors contracts and a senior thesis. Students enrolled in the Pathways program, which was designed specifically for working adults, fulfilled their requirements through the contract system. The original program offered one course per semester for fifteen students, and the course was chosen by the Honors Board from a call for applications to the whole faculty. Unless the course also fulfilled a general education requirement, it was under-enrolled. Honors students chose instead to work individually with faculty on a contract system. As the number of honors students increased, faculty compensation through this contract system became costly.

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In fall 2003, the university began the process of restructuring the honors program. There were several reasons that demanded we reevaluate the program. First, the student body of the university has more than tripled since 1989, and the program created for a much smaller student population was no longer serving the needs of its honors students. Second, we saw a growing interest on the part of students from professional programs (such as nursing, business, and teacher preparation). These students, however, felt restricted because some honors course offerings were electives, and their majors had no room for elective courses. Finally, we thought we could spend the budget more efficiently. Therefore, we decided to establish an enlarged, inclusive, and thematically coherent honors program which fulfilled all or part of the General Education (GE) requirements. Further it would contribute to recruitment, retention, and the overall vitality of the academic climate of the university.

IDEALS OF DOMINICAN EDUCATION

In looking to redefine the honors program, we chose to look at our Dominican heritage (part of the university mission) for inspiration. The four values (sometimes called ideals or pillars) of Dominican life are Study, Service, Reflection, and Community (Tugwell, 1982; Koudelka, 1997). These values date to the thirteenth century in southern France when the Spaniard Dominic Guzman founded a religious order composed of men and women with the sole idea of preaching or spreading the Good News of the Gospel. Dominicans almost immediately became involved in the academic world. Since preaching presupposed knowledge, Dominic sent his early members to universities to learn and then to teach. Dominic set *study* not as an end in itself but as a means to be of *service* to others. Study then was to be combined with *reflection* (prayer) on the world and on the needs of the time in order to envision and to work toward a better, more just world. Dominic, a deeply contemplative and compassionate man, illustrated a passion for social justice all his life. One day, during a famine in Palencia, Dominic sold his precious books (hand-written manuscripts in the thirteenth century) to set up a dispensary to provide food and clothing to the poor, saying: "How can I study dead skins, when living skins are dying of hunger" (Rubba, n.d.). Dominic recognized the need for the members of his order to live in *community*, to live a shared life and to be brothers and sisters to one another and to become interdependent with one another.

The four Dominican values have been passed down the centuries. In the fourteenth century, Catherine of Siena, an uneducated, poor woman, pointed out the injustices of her time in 382 extant letters to popes, princes, prisoners, lawyers, queens, abbesses, prostitutes, military leaders, relatives, friends, and opponents. In the sixteenth century, Bartholomew de Las Casas saw and protested the injustices committed against the Indians in Latin America by the Spanish conquerors. In the middle of the nineteenth century, a Franco-Belgian Dominican nun in a Paris monastery, Mother Mary Goemaere, traveled to California and began a congregation of Dominican sisters whose mission

originally was to educate girls. Her group began in Monterey, then moved to Benicia, and eventually centered in San Rafael, California. In 1890, Mother Louis filed articles of incorporation for a college which became Dominican College and which granted its first BA's in 1917. This educational institution has more recently become Dominican University of California.

With such a tradition of study, service (seeking social justice), reflection, and community, the design for the new honors program had a solid base on which to build a dynamic, coherent program that could serve more students effectively. And, of course, the institutional mission informed our work.

HONORS PROGRAM: 2005 AND ONWARDS

We chose to emphasize in the revised program several elements of the university mission: "learner-centered," "international" and the four "Dominican values." We named the program "The Scholar in the World" to show our commitment to the holistic development of scholars with global perspectives. We designed a distinctive and enriched curriculum that satisfies half of the general education requirements for the honors students. The honors program developed specific student learning outcomes (SLOs) for all the honors courses. The curriculum consists of honors seminars (26 units) over the four years. To graduate from the honors program, an incoming student must successfully complete two honors seminars during the first year, two during the sophomore year, three during the junior year, and one during the senior year. In addition, students must complete a portfolio, a senior thesis or project, and a multicultural or international experience. The portfolio is one means of assessment for the individual and the program.

The four Dominican values are the organizational principles of the "Scholar in the World."

STUDY

Study is the overarching theme of the curriculum, which is interdisciplinary in approach and promotes undergraduate research and creativity. Honors students at Dominican engage in research related to their majors. Sederberg (2004) acknowledges that undergraduate research by lower-division students is a valuable tool for their future senior theses. Since 2002, students from Dominican have regularly attended and presented at the National Conference on Undergraduate Research (NCUR). The new honors program encourages all honors students to conduct research, to engage in creative work, and to present at national and honors conferences. Study is also embodied in the requirement that honors students must orally present and defend their honors senior theses.

All first-year students enroll in two honors seminars: "The Scholar" and "The World." Faculty members propose courses which fulfill the SLOs for these seminars. These seminars draw themes from humanities, history, science, and social and cultural studies, which are named in the university mission. Both seminars, like all the honors seminars, are student-centered and incorporate

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creative and critical thinking. In order to keep the curriculum dynamic, the seminars are taught by faculty from different disciplines. The seminar entitled "The Scholar" focuses on identification and comparison of the social, political, artistic, and intellectual values of different cultures. In fall 2005, an art historian chose the theme of biography and portraiture for "The Scholar." In the other seminar, "The World," students had an opportunity to understand and analyze world issues from historical and contemporary perspectives. For this seminar a business professor focused on "The World: Issues and Interdependence." In spring the two seminars are being taught by a psychologist and an historian. In both seminars students are introduced to, and begin to organize and develop, the portfolios that they will keep over the four years. These seminars fulfill the first-year students' GE requirement.

SERVICE

The Dominican value of service is achieved in the sophomore seminar "Ethics in Service" and in service opportunities both on and off campus. The seminar gives students an opportunity to examine ethical theories and to apply and evaluate the concepts through service learning and community involvement. Moreover, students tutor at middle schools; they serve as peer-tutors; they participate in the La Bamba trip to Mexico (where they help the local citizens in constructing homes, etc); and they also volunteer at international charities, education projects, and community connections (where they visit and plan activities for the elderly), to name a few opportunities. Service learning began in honors and has now spread throughout the university.

COMMUNITY

The third Dominican value of community is the desired outcome of the enhanced interaction between the student and faculty as well as with the local and global community. Honors students, faculty, mentors, courses, and activities are an integral part of the university community, and this broad community should be fostered both in and out of the classroom (Rosenthal, 2000). Junior honors colloquia are three inter-related courses across disciplines and are a university-wide requirement. Non-honors students have a wide choice of geographic and thematic colloquia that vary each year. For honors students, the colloquium's theme is "Global Community and Social Justice" because it helps fulfill the Dominican values of service, community, and social justice as well as the university's mission of providing students with "skills and knowledge to live and work in an interdependent world." In fall 2005 and spring 2006, three faculty from Business, Natural Sciences, and Psychology are offering the colloquium entitled "Global Crises and Social Justice: Poverty, Natural Disaster and Health." Another example of a colloquium is "China and India: Art, Revolution and Globalization" to be taught by faculty from Art History, History, and Business.

Besides courses on global and world issues, students are required to engage in a multicultural or international experience that will introduce them to the global and local community. Each year the program sponsors a trip to a different country where students observe another culture. Countries visited by honors students in recent years include China, France, Greece, India, and Italy. There are also multicultural opportunities (e.g., internships, tutoring) in our own local area—the San Francisco Bay Area. Students' reflections on their multicultural/international experiences are included in their portfolio.

REFLECTION

The fourth value, reflection, is incorporated in the sophomore seminar on "World Religions" (one half of the religion requirement), which was specifically developed so students not only learn about world religions but also experience and reflect on different religious practices. Also, students reflect upon their learning, lives, and world by developing their portfolio over the four years. The portfolio includes one paper from each honors seminar, three from non-honors courses, and a last reflection essay during the senior year in which they reflect on their honors education and their individual growth. Finally, all students are required to meet with their honors advisor during university designated advising periods to reflect on their ongoing experiences.

CONCLUSION

Dominican's honors program, "The Scholar in the World," is mainly aimed at traditional-age undergraduates. It was implemented in the fall semester 2005 with enrollment of twenty-eight first-year students in the thematic seminars "The World" and "The Scholar." For the working adult students who enroll in the Pathways program, the honors contract system remains because they attend at night and there are too few of them to offer a complete program.

The GE for the university consists of cafeteria-style courses generally based on discipline. The GE is not constructed around the Dominican ideals. In contrast, half of the GE requirements within the honors program are thematic seminars that embody the Dominican values and the university's mission. Thus, it is a unique, thematic curriculum which stems from and affirms our institutional mission and the Dominican values. Themes such as multiculturalism, social justice, community, reflection, and service pervade the curriculum and co-curriculum our students will experience. The assessment of the program and its goals is informally done through the one-on-one advising, the portfolio, and the meetings of faculty and students as focus groups. Since the seminars meet GE requirements, the rubric and process developed by the Assessment Committee and undertaken by the Associate Vice-President for Academic Affairs are being followed. The portfolio will be an important instrument for assessment of the program. Upon graduation, our graduates will be knowledgeable about the world and its issues and willing to commit to making the world better.

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