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They Filched Our Program! How to Turn That into a Good Thing

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BUTLER UNIVERSITY

“The honors program, in distinguishing itself from the rest of the institution, serves as a kind of laboratory within which faculty can try things they have always wanted to try but for which they could find no suitable outlet. When such efforts are demonstrated to be successful, they may well become institutionalized, thereby raising the general level of education within the college or university for all students. In this connection, the honors curriculum should serve as a prototype for educational practices that can work campus-wide in the future.”

—NCHC Basic Characteristic of a
Fully Developed Honors Program

ABSTRACT

The Butler University Honors Program, like many other honors programs and colleges, is often the generator of “good ideas” on campus. We are considered an experimental classroom environment for piloting new courses, programming ideas, and/or introducing potential new areas of study. Both faculty and students recognize this characteristic of the program, and we are pleased to serve as a sort of laboratory for other campus initiatives. However, several key pieces of our Honors Program were recently folded into other aspects of our own university. While we know that imitation is the highest form of flattery, maintaining a distinct honors program becomes challenging when many of our most innovative and successful ideas are filched by other areas of the university all at once. In this article we outline the background of our Honors Program, describe the ideas that were filched, and state our intentions for dealing with this issue in the future.

BACKGROUND

Butler University is a comprehensive university of approximately 4,000 undergraduate students with five colleges: the College of Liberal Arts and

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Sciences; the College of Education; the College of Business Administration; the Jordan College of Fine Arts; and the College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences. Students from all five colleges participate in the Honors Program.

Governance for the Honors Program includes a College Honors Board (CHB) for each of the five academic colleges. The CHBs are responsible for review of incoming applications, thesis proposals, and other issues that may be presented within their college. The chair of each CHB serves on the University Honors Board, chaired by the director of the Honors Program. Honors students self-select for participation on the Student Honors Council and also have a representative seat on the University Honors Board. The University Honors Board handles over-arching issues pertaining to the Honors Program such as campus collaborations, graduation honors, and national conference involvement; it also provides feedback regarding other major decisions that could potentially affect the program.

The Honors Program at Butler University is an interdisciplinary program that is both selective and elective: we select students to apply to the Honors Program and then, based on their application, decide whether to invite them into the program. Incoming students admitted to Butler who meet certain benchmark requirements (1320/30 or higher SAT/ACT or top 7 percent of graduating class) are invited to apply to the Honors Program. Students also may be invited to join the Honors Program at either the end of their first or second semester at Butler based on academic performance. In addition, students may petition to join the program at any time provided they are able to complete the Honors Program requirements prior to graduation.

The primary requirement of our Honors Program is the completion of four interdisciplinary, elective honors courses. Our honors courses are taught by faculty from all five colleges as well as selected community members in areas of expertise not offered by our faculty base. Students from any discipline may enroll in these courses. With only one exception, these courses do not fulfill Butler core curriculum requirements, and, unless approved by petition to a department chair (which is rare), none of these honors courses may be counted toward the academic major of the student. The exception to this rule has been a first-year seminar "Inquiries into the Human Condition," a year-long course which grants credit for three first-year courses: English 102 (required of all students), Humanities 103 (required of all students), and Honors 100 (offered only for first-year, first-semester honors students). We ask students to take these interdisciplinary, elective courses so that they have practice in the arduous task of thinking for themselves—that is, developing and supporting their ideas with peers and faculty—a process meant to prepare them for their honors thesis, the final requirement that students undertake in order to complete our Honors Program.

Thesis proposals are developed and submitted in the spring of the junior year (or the year before graduation). Proposals must be approved by the

appropriate College Honors Board. Approximately one year later (in the semester of graduation), students submit their completed honors thesis and give an oral presentation of their work.

Outside of the classroom, we ask that our students report their attendance at and participation in a designated number of cultural events—plays, readings by visiting writers, lectures, concerts, ethnic festivals, and the like.

Perhaps our honors students make excellent test subjects for new course topics and pedagogy not only because there are fewer of them in an honors classroom but also because honors students want to be challenged to think in new ways. At any given time approximately 350 students, or ten percent of Butler students, are active in the program. However, these students may not be the *top ten percent* of Butler students in terms of cumulative GPA. We believe this is an important distinction. Honors classes are electives, and honors students know that our thesis expectations go above and beyond any term paper requirements.

Our program is voluntary, meaning students may come and go as they wish. Once invited to join, students have a “golden ticket” for participation in the Honors Program. We allow students to determine their own path through the Honors Program and encourage them to take ownership of their education. We hope that experience in the honors classroom, experiences shared outside of the classroom with other honors students, and the experience of researching and writing an honors thesis will help our students to learn to think for themselves. This freeform approach to our program and our courses has led to a perception that many aspects of the program are up for grabs.

WHY STEAL FROM US?

The interdisciplinary and rather maverick nature of our program—including the mandate that students learn to think for themselves—grants faculty members a great deal of latitude when planning their honors courses. We allow our professors significant leeway in their honors classrooms and do not micromanage. Our program is highly malleable and student-focused; changes that specifically benefit students are always welcome. Honors course enrollments range from five to twenty students, and faculty are encouraged to think innovatively and outside of their discipline when planning their honors courses. For instance, we had a biology professor offer a course entitled “The Western Gunfighter,” and a music professor celebrated the Wright Brothers’ centennial by offering a course entitled “Wings for our Dreams: The First 100 Years of Flight.”

We are fully aware that being the progenitor of many good ideas can lead to the co-opting of those ideas into other programs. Several initiatives that were begun in our Honors Program have been successfully incorporated into other programs at Butler University, but recently three key components of our program were co-opted in less than a year: the honors application essay, the cultural events requirement for the program, and our model for interdisciplinary

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courses. While we accept this imitation as a form of flattery, we also must be continually vigilant and constantly seek methods for renewal, or else this poaching could easily bankrupt an otherwise strong program.

HOW OUR IDEAS WERE FOLDED INTO OTHER PROGRAMS

THE HONORS APPLICATION

Admission to Butler University is based on students' completed applications for admission, including an essay. Applicants have been given two essay options for the past several years: an essay from a high school competition or senior English class, complete with teacher's comments and letter grade, or an original essay discussing an issue of personal, local, national, or international concern. To be considered for departmental or freshmen scholarships, applicants must submit the original essay. Students must be accepted to Butler University before being asked to apply to the Honors Program.

The Honors Program has long struggled with its application process. We have determined that meeting minimum invitation criteria such as class rank and standardized test scores does not always accurately display a student's readiness for the academic and intellectual rigors of our Honors Program. Rather than give all interested students a blanket acceptance, our current Honors Program application process has come together after five years of trial and error application cycles. Efforts during this time period engaged two faculty directors, two program coordinators, and several versions of our student and faculty Honors Boards. We had been searching for a process that would enable applicants to demonstrate they were ready to begin to think for themselves. After numerous attempts at various essay options, including use of students' general Butler application essay, a scholarship application essay, and a copy of a graded essay from high school, we adopted a personal statement application essay for the 2004–05 Honors Program application.

Initially this essay met with some resistance from the admissions board. We were strongly encouraged to include a line in the honors consideration letter that stated, "If you submitted essay option A (discuss an issue of personal, local, national, or international concern) with your Butler application and feel that it addresses questions like those listed above, please feel free to *resubmit* that essay to us." Reluctance from the admissions board clearly focused on requiring students to submit an additional essay.

The reasoning behind asking students to go above and beyond the general Butler application with an additional honors personal statement essay is twofold: first, certainly, we used it as an opportunity for applicants to prove their readiness to be honors students here at Butler; and second, frankly, it helped us to eliminate students who would simply check a box indicating interest in our Honors Program when they had none. The latter reasoning has allowed us to recruit more effectively and to manage the number of students

genuinely interested in our program and our university. We have seen a marked decline in the number of application essays we receive (which the College Honors Board members must review, and which they actually enjoyed reviewing last year): we reviewed nearly 825 applications in 2001 and were down to only 275 applications in 2005. Each year we work to cultivate a freshman honors class of 10% of the incoming class, or around 100 students maximum. After nearly five years we arrived at this very manageable, productive number of applications.

The personal statement application essay not only brought the number of incoming honors applications down but also allowed us to choose students who were ready to start thinking for themselves—a cornerstone of our program. There were many bright students who simply listed their accomplishments in essay form, which was not an acceptable essay from our perspective. We feel that many of those students will gain entrance to the program based on academic success while at Butler, and with a little more college experience we are confident they will make fine honors students. The students who were ready to take on the challenges afforded them in the Honors Program easily rose to the top of our applicant pool through their personal statements. Faculty members from each academic CHB found these essays a far better indicator of students who had the potential to be successful in our Honors Program than previous essays. We began the 2005–06 academic year with the goal of eliminating the few remaining hiccups in our application process.

We were, therefore, surprised to find that a personal statement essay had been incorporated into the general application package for 2005–06 application cycle for the university as a whole. Rather than submit an original essay discussing an issue of concern, students must now submit a personal statement in order to be considered for departmental scholarships as well as admission to Butler University. Amid cries of “they stole our essay!” we quickly met with our Admissions liaisons to figure out what had happened and what we could do to move forward with our own application process. As with many Admissions groups on college campuses, the turnover is high, and the individual ultimately responsible for the “theft” of our essay (and failure to inform us of the change in Butler’s general application) had left our campus. Upon discussion and consideration, the University Honors Board determined that Butler’s general application essay topic is broad enough that we could modify certain parts of our solicitation letter to incoming students and still receive favorable applications for the Honors Program.

We will continue to use a personal statement for our honors application essay and hope that perhaps those students who are indeed qualified to be Butler University honors students (but who did not want to write *one more* college application essay) will feel comfortable resubmitting their general Butler application essay for honors consideration or may even revise an already strong application essay written for admission to Butler University.

CULTURAL EVENTS

At the heart of Butler's education is the university's core curriculum, academic requirements that define a liberally educated person at our university. All students at Butler complete the same core requirements, regardless of academic major. The core curriculum serves to create well-rounded, holistically educated individuals who will leave Butler prepared to be active members of their community after graduation. Like other areas of the university, the core curriculum has not remained static since its inception in 1945 and has continued to evolve to meet the needs of our students.

When the university was considering a new core curriculum in the 2004–05 school year, a cultural events requirement for all students was incorporated into the new core. The inclusion of this requirement has been supported by the following learning objectives, which are very similar to the reasons the Honors Program has required attendance at cultural events: 1) to discover that some of the most valuable and exciting learning opportunities at Butler take place outside the classroom, and 2) to develop habits of participation in artistic and cultural events that will lead to lifelong engagement within the creative arts and public intellectual life. In fact, the core curriculum report clearly states, "We have two existing models for this requirement—the JCFA recital credit and the honors cultural events requirement. Our aim is to create a similar requirement for all students at the University." We support this endeavor and hope that all Butler students will find the cultural community at Butler and in Indianapolis to be as rich and fulfilling as our honors students have found it to be.

Once students become active in our Honors Program, we seek to have them engaged both on campus and in the community through our cultural events requirement. We expect our honors students to become involved in the cultural community in which they live; we want honors students to be entertained by, excited by, and educated about opportunities that are happening around them. Our hope is that once students become engaged in such a non-classroom-based campus experience, they will have the desire to continue supporting culture and arts throughout their academic career and beyond Butler.

While there was ample opportunity for the Honors Program to contribute to the general discussion regarding the inclusion of this requirement for all students, that opportunity came after the decision had been made, and there was little to no discussion regarding its impact on the Honors Program. The honors cultural event requirement is far broader than the one adopted in the new core curriculum (the core recommends only including Butler-sponsored events); however, we are now faced with changing our requirement. It is important to us that the Honors Program remain distinctive and interdisciplinary, not merely core "plus" or AP-style core. Asking students to do essentially the same activities and double-report their attendance seems incongruous with our goal of helping students learn to think for themselves.

Upon consultation with our Student Honors Council, we have decided to modify our cultural events requirement so that honors students must attend a

certain number of events sponsored by or provided specifically for students in the Honors Program. To accomplish this, our Student Honors Council has restructured its governance to include a Public Relations and Academic Affairs officer as well as a Vice President of Social Activities. We also have secured space in a unit of one residence hall that will be reserved for honors students. We have already begun planning a series of events that will take place specifically for students who live in that unit and hope to bridge the space between honors classes and honors students' intellectual and cultural interests through our programming. Examples of such programming are Lunchbox Lectures, where honors students are invited to have lunch and casual conversation with faculty members; having dinner and attending a Butler Theatre production together; and participating in service activities sponsored by the Student Honors Council. We expect students will be able to count honors events toward their core curriculum events requirement and hope that by requiring honors students to attend honors events we will garner more extracurricular participation in the Honors Program. We hope to see more honors students planning and participating in honors events on campus.

In addition, we are strongly encouraging honors faculty to propose significant events that connect to their honors courses. For example, in fall 2005 we offered an honors course entitled "Everyday Gods." Students in this course examined the ways in which the sacred and the profane blend into everyday objects of devotion and consumption, keeping photo journals throughout the semester that were then put on display at an open-house, gallery-style event. The entire campus was invited to the open house for the opportunity to view student photographs, shrines, and other artifacts on display. For this event we secured sponsorship from two major constituencies on campus: our Center for Faith and Vocation and an Executive Board of our Student Government Association known as R.E.A.C.H. (Reaffirming Ethnic Awareness and Community Harmony). Despite a terrific snowstorm the afternoon of the event, we had nearly 100 people attend, including a reporter and photographer from the *Indianapolis Star*, which garnered us a three-photograph article on the front page of the *Star's* "Faith and Values" section. Such prominent co-sponsorship on our campus raises the bar for future honors participation and campus involvement, which we hope will shed even greater light on the pursuits of our students.

THE NEW CORE CURRICULUM COURSES

In addition to the cultural events, the core curriculum has now put in place first-year seminars similar to our current interdisciplinary honors courses at all levels. The new core requirements are specifically modeled after a year-long course piloted in the Honors Program entitled "Inquiries into the Human Condition." This honors course examines the treatment of the human condition in significant texts of world civilization from the ancient and medieval periods in the fall semester to the Renaissance and modern periods in the spring

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semester. Texts for the course come from the disciplines of literature, philosophy, and history, and the course emphasizes questions about the nature of the individual soul as well as the relationship of the individual to family, friends, community, and state. Students who enroll in the first semester of the course earn three credit hours for English 102 (EN102), Butler's freshman writing requirement. The second semester grants three credit hours for Interdisciplinary Studies 103 (ID103), Butler's freshman reading requirement. Each semester of "Inquiries into the Human Condition" is worth four credit hours; honors students earn two hours of HN 100 credit by completing both semesters of the course. This course was piloted for two years in the Honors Program before being adopted as a regular honors offering, HN 110–111.

The new year-long seminars proposed for the core curriculum are entitled "Self, Community, and the World" and have replaced freshman writing (EN102) and interdisciplinary studies (ID103) courses. The only apparent curricular difference is that students will not earn credit for HN 100. The format is very similar to HN 110–111, including two main components that apply to all honors courses: "1) they should carry no prerequisites, and 2) their primary purpose should not be to prepare students for more advanced work in a particular discipline." Another goal of this new core curriculum component is to foster "communities of students whose shared experience will extend beyond their individual classrooms." In addition to the "Self, Community, and the World" seminar, the general new core requirements are interdisciplinary, or at least multidisciplinary. According to the core curriculum report, "Each of the common element requirements is designed to encourage participation from faculty across the University. While we would not preclude courses in these areas that have particular disciplinary content, no discipline should dominate these courses, and ideally these are courses where faculty from more than one discipline can teach collaboratively."

Here again we find an echo of our honors teaching philosophies: faculty members from all areas of the university are encouraged to teach in the Honors Program; we have no requirements to include or preclude specific disciplines in honors courses; and we strongly encourage and solicit team-taught courses and have offered courses in the recent past that have incorporated seven or eight different faculty members from separate departments, such as our course on *Carmen*. This course boasted as its faculty the Dean of the Jordan College of Fine Arts, a Professor of English who is also Associate Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, the chair of the Theater Department, the chair of the Dance Department, an art historian, a Professor of Music who is Conductor of the Butler Symphony Orchestra, a professor from the Spanish department, and the Education Outreach Coordinator from the Indianapolis Opera, a major stakeholder in the Indianapolis cultural community. Honors students flocked to the course and gave glowing reviews, practically begging that another course of its type be offered again. We agreed, and since then we have offered two similar courses: one on *The Crucible* and one to be offered in spring 2007

entitled "The Dead Man Walking Project." Several faculty members who team-taught these courses have been impressed with the quality of our students and have since independently proposed and taught successful honors courses of their own.

We support the desire to excite faculty about core courses they offer and the efforts to provide an exciting core curriculum that will engage all Butler students. We also support many of the changes and the impetus behind the changes suggested in Butler's new core curriculum. During discussion around core curriculum changes, some felt that offering honors-style courses would allow *all* students, not just honors students, to be able to take "cool" community-based, interdisciplinary classes. Thus the broad interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary courses that will be incorporated into the new core were modeled on the exciting and intellectually challenging courses offered in the Honors Program. However, we have had some difficulty with the recommendation that "the Honors Program review its requirements to consider whether they could be consolidated and perhaps integrated with the proposed core."

When it was suggested that the Honors Program needed to change or perhaps be phased out, a great deal of buzz was created among Butler faculty. A response was drafted by the Honors Program to address specific concerns raised by the new core curriculum, but we chose to take a patient approach rather than to panic. Our belief that the Honors Program does and will have a place at Butler University separate from the core curriculum has been supported by our University Honors Board, by our honors students, and by faculty currently teaching in the Honors Program. Faculty on the University Honors Board stated that an honors course is not made by pedagogy or topic alone but also by the caliber of students in the course. Similarly, our honors students agree that they often look forward to taking honors courses in order to interact with their peers in ways that simply do not happen in "regular" courses, regardless of topic. Finally, when honors faculty members were approached and asked to offer their honors courses as core courses, many simply said that their courses would not work outside of the Honors Program, demonstrating that faculty also rely on the honors students to provide the spark that is so important in an honors classroom.

The excitement of teaching a new core curriculum has drained some of the traditional faculty members from our honors teaching pool, but we are slowly staffing our courses for the upcoming year. We are collecting new honors course offerings from faculty members who may not have offered honors courses before or who have not taught an honors course in a while. The main objective of an honors course—to get students to think for themselves—is still going to be the hallmark of our offerings. In addition, we rely on the students themselves to keep honors courses different from any core course through their interaction and interest in the course topics we offer through the Honors Program. We feel that many of our honors offerings will continue to be unique because of both the topic and the professor. Many of our courses do not fit elsewhere in

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the curriculum, whether as a core or major course, and we feel that these out-of-the-box courses are just what our honors students need. In addition, we assume future core offerings will be piloted in the safe space of honors classes with motivated students and a smaller class size before incorporation into the core curriculum as has happened in the past, and we will continue to welcome such efforts.

THE NEXT STEP

The Butler University Honors Program will always be evolving to meet the needs of our students. We will continue to allow non-honors students to enroll in honors courses if they have interest and if there are open seats in the section of their interest; in some cases students who had decided not to participate in the Honors Program will sample an honors course and realize that our Honors Program might be a good supplement for their Butler education after all. We are not trying to be an exclusive program; rather, we believe we are meeting the needs of students who self-select and are willing to face the challenges of learning to think for themselves—both honors and, occasionally, non-honors students.

In addition, we are excited by a number of new initiatives we are pursuing in conjunction with many other campus constituencies. We have partnered with Residence Life and will be offering an upper-class honors housing unit for the first time on Butler's campus beginning in the 2006–2007 academic year. We have begun developing heartier academic programming and honors courses with the help of ancillary academic units such as International Programs and Study Abroad, the Center for Citizenship and Community, the Center for Faith and Vocation, and various academic departments. Our relationship with other campus administrative units such as the Alumni Office has been renewed: we are inviting Indianapolis area honors alumni to campus for an Honors Program "Past Meets Present" reception to commemorate Butler's Sesquicentennial this spring, which happens to coincide with the tenth anniversary of the current version of our Honors Program. In addition, we are soliciting alumni in the Indianapolis area in order to form an Honors Alumni Advisory Board. Finally, our relationship with the Admissions office remains strong (despite the essay incident!): when our Honors Admissions liaison asked for help recruiting new honors students, almost 70% of our first-year students responded with enthusiasm, much to the pleasant surprise of our Admissions team.

Through such cooperation we have begun to expand the Honors Program into new directions on our campus. As an interdisciplinary program with students from all colleges and departments, we have the ability to be a force of change for the University as a whole. Our collaborative models can serve all the academic units on campus, whether in the classroom or just as an example of campus collaboration. In many ways, the filching of the past year has shown us that, despite the incorporation of many of our key program ideas into other areas, the Butler University Honors Program remains strong and we have the momentum to continue developing and implementing new ideas.

When we consider our efforts in this way, we are better able to look toward becoming a model for positive and meaningful change within our greater university. In the search for a better Honors Program, we have the opportunity to make a deliberate impact on our university as a whole. It is indeed a compliment to have your ideas copied, and good ideas beg for duplication. If our good ideas become part of the university as a whole, then perhaps we can be more intentional about Honors Program ideas in the hope that they *will be stolen in the future*.

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