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# Integrating an Honors Minor, Education Major and Global Teacher Preparation

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# Integrating an Honors Minor, Education Major and Global Teacher Preparation

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## INTRODUCTION

In the pages that follow we will describe an exciting collaboration between our university's College of Education and Honors Program. In the twenty-two-year history of the Honors Program at Northern Kentucky University (NKU), we have averaged only one education major per year completing an Honors Capstone Project. This statistic stands in stark contrast to the fact that Education regularly has the third or fourth highest number of pre-majors beginning an honors minor. Some efforts have been made in recent years to mesh requirements for the two programs and to improve student advising. However, the number of honors minor/education major students completing requirements in both programs has remained low. The Honors International Teaching Fellows (HITF) is changing this situation for the better.

The College of Education has had one of the lowest rates of international travel at NKU. However, the new dean of the College of Education brought with her both direct experience in international education and a charge from the university to make major changes to increase awareness of global perspectives and improve the frequency of international study among education students. This same dean also changed the atmosphere in the College of Education to invite more experimentation with ways of providing course offerings for preparing teachers. The Honors Program, with its history of successful international study and unusual interdisciplinary courses, provides a good match on these issues.

Many education majors at NKU have voiced their disappointment at not being able to gain admission to the College of Education until the end of their sophomore year despite trends in the field toward earlier career exploration and involvement in schools. The proposal to launch the Honors International Teaching Fellows in 2005 was designed to orient students to the profession immediately—in their first semester in college—as well as to address the concerns mentioned above relating to completion of honors requirements and an increase in international study and global awareness.

## RECEPTIVE CLIMATE FOR INTERNATIONAL PROJECTS

In his Fall Convocation 2006–2007, Dr. James C. Votruba, President of Northern Kentucky University, offered a challenge:

. . . one of the greatest contributions that NKU can make to our region is to become a more internationalized campus. Vision 2015 emphasized the need for the region to become more global in its perspective and the University can and should lead the way. This would involve more of our domestic students studying abroad, more international students studying on our campus, more partnerships with international universities, more faculty exchange programs, more partnerships with international companies, and revisions in our curriculum to make it more international in its scope. It's clear to me that, for our students to succeed in their careers and as citizens, they must have an international perspective. We need to become a more international campus for the sake of our students and our region.

Thus, the president's address helped to support what the Honors Program had been doing successfully for some time and the College of Education was just beginning to explore. The linkage of these two efforts provided momentum to both.

## GLOBAL EDUCATION AND U.S. TEACHERS

The terms "global education" and "global perspectives" have worked their way into common parlance in the United States. Most often, one sees these terms used to exhort U.S. public schools to prepare K–12 students to compete in a global economy. Curricula have been changed to emphasize learning the history, literature, geography and politics of countries other than the U.S.; to boost competence in using various media and other technology; and to increase offerings and requirements in languages other than English. Consequently, much collateral effort has focused on boosting the abilities of currently practicing teachers to implement curricula with a global perspective (Merryfield et. al. 1997).

What of the next generation of teachers, however? As Burch (1997) asserted, "Ensuring that our teacher preparation programs are undergirded with global education perspectives is an absolute priority" (vii). Many recent developments and events underscore the importance of developing a global perspective while educating students. Patterns of immigration to the United States have changed its demographic portrait. Global terrorism has influenced the U.S. view of how secure and separate we are and has heightened awareness of regions of the world previously ignored by many Americans.

Simultaneously, the fear of continuing global terrorism has led many Americans to unthinking, stereotypical views of foreigners. Our paper will focus on efforts to develop an undergraduate program of teacher education that produces new teachers comfortable with the changes wrought by globalization and the perspectives necessary to teach their own students effectively about an increasingly interconnected world. This program is called the Honors International Teaching Fellows (HITF).

## **HONORS INTERNATIONAL TEACHING FELLOWS IN CAPSULE**

Begun in 2005, HITF is a program integrating four key concepts, each of which will be discussed in detail below. The first is the international emphasis, which includes study and teaching in another country during at least three of the students' four years in college. Second, all students admitted to this program must be eligible for and accepted into the NKU Honors Program. One component of the requirements for graduation is completion of an honors minor with an accompanying thesis or capstone project. Third, students in HITF must declare a major in education. Each student selects a grade-level emphasis and subject-matter competence. An undergraduate degree leads to initial teacher certification. Fourth and finally, HITF members join a learning community for selected courses during their first two years. The major purposes of this community are to (1) develop a coherent, mutually supportive cohort group and (2) integrate learning in courses from the College of Education and the College of Arts and Sciences.

### **INTERNATIONAL EMPHASIS**

HITF students participate in a minimum of three international study and teaching opportunities. These trips combine study of and participation in the educational system of other countries as well as exploration of cultural and historical resources. The cost of these trips is shared by students and the university.

The four-year travel plan is designed to move students gradually toward independence psychologically and intellectually. The overwhelming percentage of students admitted are (a) local—80%, (b) of traditional age (18–19)—90%, and (c) of Scots/Irish/German/English ancestry—65%. Therefore, the first trip is done as a group, is professor-led, takes place at the end of the second semester, and focuses on schools and cultures in one country in the British Isles. The English language lends some familiarity when more than 75% have never visited a foreign country before.

The second-year trip adds a service-learning component to the comparative education begun in the first experience. This trip focuses on the Caribbean, Central America, or Mexico. It too is a professor-led group experience.

Beginning with the third year students design individual experiences. All the students develop a prospectus, much like a research proposal, describing where they wish to travel and tying their travel experience to their future

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teaching plans, acquisition of knowledge and skill in subject-area majors, and enhancement of global perspectives. A board of reviewers approves all proposals. The fourth-year experience involves international student teaching or, if that is not feasible, placement in a student-teaching position in a local classroom where the supervising teacher is receptive toward including significant international content and global perspective.

During the students' first two years, college course work is closely linked to the international study. Seminars from the Honors Program, general education from the Arts and Sciences College, and pedagogical courses from the College of Education are not only linked (see "Learning Communities" below) but have undergone significant changes in content to reflect the new international slant. Additionally, syllabi have been left open enough to integrate fortuitous occurrences. In the autumn of 2006, for instance, a local school hosted delegations of teachers and students from four European countries for a week; two HITF cohort groups participated in the week's activities and interviewed teachers and students from each country.

### HONORS PROGRAM

Students are admitted to the NKU Honors Program based on high ranking and/or GPA in high school, high scores on standardized tests like the SAT or ACT, positive recommendations, and a record of involvement in community and service activities. Honors students who are provisionally admitted based on these criteria and who choose teaching as a profession are eligible for consideration in HITF. As with all students pursuing an honors minor, HITF students must complete 21 semester hours of honors-designated coursework and complete a thesis or project approved by the director of the Honors Program. The focus of HITF is primarily but not exclusively on education-related coursework. Students also take honors sections of general education courses and upper-division honors seminars on interdisciplinary topics. To remain in good standing in the Honors Program (thus in HITF) students must maintain a 3.25 GPA on a scale of 4.

### EDUCATION MAJOR

The typical education major at our university applies for admission to the teacher preparation program after successfully completing 48 semester hours. Thus, the typical student first experiences education courses at the end of the second year or beginning of the third year of college. (N.B. As this is being written, the College of Education is experimenting with a new course called "Orientation to Teaching" that is offered somewhat earlier in a student's career.) The Honors International Teaching Fellows, in contrast, begins exposure to education coursework immediately, during the first semester of the freshman year. Whereas the typical student takes four semesters of general education coursework before encountering courses emphasizing teaching, the HITF students take one education course per semester paired or

tripled in a learning community with general education courses and /or honors seminars.

Thus, the admission semester (the first semester after admission to the teacher preparation program) consists of a block of five courses for the typical student:

- Introduction to Education,
- Human Growth and Development,
- Exceptional Children in Regular Classrooms,
- Computer Applications for Teachers, and
- Observation/Participation Practicum.

The HITF students, however, take Introduction to Education the first semester, integrated with the introductory Honors Seminar and Honors Composition. During the second semester of freshman year, the HITF students take Human Growth and Development paired with a literature course. Once the first year is successfully completed, HITF students receive their observation/participation credit by working in schools during the aforementioned first-year British Isles international study trip.

### **HITF Semester 1 Learning Communities**

- Introduction to Education
- Introduction to Honors Learning
- Honors Freshman Composition

### **HITF Semester 2 Learning Communities**

- Human Growth and Development
- Honors Literature and the Human Experience

### **Intercession**

- Observation Practicum (currently in Ireland)

### **HITF Semester 3 Learning Communities**

- Exceptional Children in Regular Classrooms
- Race & Gender Issues in the Classroom
- Introduction to Philosophy

### **HITF Semester 4 Learning Communities**

- Computer Applications for Teachers
- International Studies

### **Spring Break**

- Service Learning (currently in Mexico)

One of the reasons for offering this immediate-exposure program is to recruit and reward high-achieving high school graduates who express a strong interest in teaching. By involving these students in an early exploration of teaching as a profession the Honors Program and College of Education are increasing the likelihood of heightening students' perspectives on whom, what, and where to teach. In addition, this program affords students the opportunity to gain insight from how other countries educate their youth.

### LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Learning Communities have become enormously popular on U.S. college campuses, especially in support of the first-year experience (Knight, 2002). Learning communities can take many forms, serve different purposes, and be labeled in a variety of ways (see, for instance, Kellogg, 1999). The term "Learning Community" is used officially on this campus and refers to paired courses where some or all of the students take the same section of both courses; where professors attempt to coordinate and co-develop syllabi and occasionally co-teach some or all sessions; and where some assignments are developed that draw on learning in both courses. All officially designated learning communities are targeted to freshmen and others taking general studies requirements. In addition to these first-year learning communities, the College of Education has had a long-standing tradition of blocking courses together for upper-division teaching methods semesters. However, the HITF learning communities are considerably more involved.

The HITF learning communities are designed to fulfill the following purposes:

- to link Arts and Sciences courses with Education courses;
- to encourage Arts and Sciences and Education faculty to collaborate and co-teach;
- to increase possibilities for students to explore differing perspectives on topics and issues;
- to develop group cohesion;
- to enhance scheduling of events and activities needing large blocks of time; and
- to underscore the importance of students learning from students in seminar format.

Each of these purposes, of course, stimulates corollary benefits. Group cohesion, for instance, eases the awkwardness experienced when a group of students who don't know each other embark on an international course.

It is important (perhaps even critical) to establish a positive learning community experience during the first two semesters. A lot is expected of HITF students; having a solid base of friends as well as fellow students who are going through the same experience is important for support and self-fulfillment. In addition, once the first two years are completed, students join new cohort

groups for the blocked courses in the College of Education. Since these blocks are different for elementary, middle, and secondary majors, the HITF students are not together as an entire group. In a similar vein, international study becomes individualized instead of professor-led in the third and fourth years although we have plans to bring the group together through informal means—seminars, roundtables, optional travel opportunities, and social gatherings.

Due to the importance of the early learning communities, it may be useful to present some detail on the first two semesters' experiences. Students join a learning community their first semester consisting of HNR 101, the Honors Program Introductory Seminar; ENG 151, Honors Composition; and EDU 599, Introduction to Education. The themes and content of the seminar change from year to year. However, the composition course draws upon both the seminar and the education course for writing topics. The learning community is both reading- and writing-intensive. Students read at least one fictional and one non-fiction work of literature for the themes used in seminar and composition courses, a collection of articles related to field trip sites, a standard "introduction to education" text, and *Why We Teach* (Nieto, 2005), a collection of personal essays from inspiring teachers. They write weekly reaction papers on literature and film, and they create aesthetic works—poetry, fiction, memoir.

The education course has two main goals: studying the standard "introduction to education" topics and participating in several direct experiences connected to education. These direct experiences usually take the form of a field trip once a week. Over the course of the semester students visit about seven schools that vary widely in purpose and organizational pattern. They also visit about seven field-trip sites for K–12 students, all the sites being related to major school subjects. The intent of these field trips, beyond the idea of expanding students' horizons, is to make real the topics they read about: curriculum, teaching, learning, diversity, building organization, and the like.

Schools visited include those with a focus on learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral problems, Montessori, Waldorf, creative and performing arts, Islamic studies, and urban charter schools. (It should be noted here that students will eventually see more conventional public school patterns in suburban, county, and city schools during Professional Semesters I and II and Student Teaching if completed in the United States.)

Field trip sites other than schools have included an art museum; a museum dedicated to the Holocaust and Jewish history; the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center; a museum dedicated to local art, culture, and natural history; a mosque; a conservation park; a farm museum; and a naturalist-led stream study excursion. Show-of-hands statistics indicate that students had never attended and were previously unaware of all but the most prominent sites. Since one of the goals of the HITF program is to promote greater engagement with the world at large, these field trips help to begin that process at the regional level. The field trips also help to strengthen the linkages among the three courses. For instance, the trip to the conservation park connected to the



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“River Dreams: Flow of Culture” theme of Honors Seminar, to the focus on nature writing in composition, and to education course content on the value of field trips and hands-on nature study.

Both professors are present for all three courses about 90% of the time, allowing for both planned and spontaneous integration of content. Indeed, student comments indicate that they only occasionally can isolate assignments and activities into separate courses. They see this as a positive feature of the learning community. This integration and blurring of lines between courses leads to a natural conclusion for the coursework—a multigenre research project (Fulwiler, 1986) consisting of three-dimensional exhibits, papers, and other artifacts that show what each student has learned from all three courses over the semester. Students present these works to a selected audience of university personnel during the final exam week.

During the second semester, the learning community focuses on integrating the content of the College of Education’s Human Growth and Development course and a general studies requirement for literature called Literature and the Human Experience. As with Introduction to Education in the first semester, the human growth course employs a standard textbook used in regular College of Education sections of the course. However, the literature course draws on two important sources for its content: (1) literature of the country in which students will study and work in schools, and (2) literature for youth that focuses on one of the developmental stages explored in the human growth course. This learning community serves as valuable planning for the first-year international experience as well as continuing the idea of learning communities as outlined above. During this semester HITF students also begin a program of mentoring and tutoring in a local school. Generally, the HITF student is matched with one or two gifted/talented middle-grade students from a school with a diverse population and lower socio-economic status. This is the beginning of a three-year service-learning assignment spanning the HITF students’ college career and the middle-school students’ transition to high school.

At the end of the second semester, roughly from the beginning of the second week of May until the beginning of June, students and professors prepare for and participate in the first international experience. (It should be noted here that the same two professors co-teach the first and second semesters, and lead the first international study experience. Beginning with the second year, a new group of professors is involved.) The first week of this three-week course is devoted to preparation—studying the country involved and its education system, creating lessons and materials, and generally getting ready for international travel. The second and third weeks are split between observing and teaching in the host country’s schools, and visiting significant historical, geographic, literary, and cultural sites. Students then have one month to complete a multi-genre representation of what they learned for course credit.

## IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES

- **Cooperation:** Creating a new program is fraught with difficulties. Certainly, integrating colleges and departments can be difficult if only because of coordination issues. Luckily, we have a strong and amiable relationship between the College of Education and Honors Program.
- **Blocked Courses:** Since our courses are really just entrance-semester courses that were already approved, we did not need to create new courses or go through the course approval process. The College of Education allowed us to disassemble the courses normally blocked in the admissions semester in order to pair these with honors general education requirements. Currently, there is discussion between the College of Education and International Programs to develop an opportunity in Denmark that would meet the requirements for the first Professional Practicum Semester.
- **AP Credit:** Many of our students come to NKU with AP credit. We have chosen courses that usually are needed to meet university requirements. For example, some students have received three hours of credit for composition and three hours for literature. NKU requires six hours of composition, and the Honors Freshman Composition completes that requirement. Humanities requirements can also be filled by one course of literature, and our honors literature course qualifies. At the freshman orientation, students are given a list of the learning community courses and choose their other courses accordingly.
- **Finances:** Our hope was to offer the HITF opportunity to all qualified students regardless of economic status. Our first incentive was to offer the initial trip with a minimal student contribution (\$600), and at the time we all felt this was a promise we could make. However, financial constraints combined with rising travel costs have forced us to require a substantial financial commitment from the current students: \$1000 toward the first-year trip and \$600 for the second-year trip. The third trip cost is contingent on what course the student wants to pursue. The College of Education, Honors Program, and an emeritus professor have generously supported these travel costs. Our students are also eligible for the International Study Abroad scholarships. We encourage the students to raise funds through personal solicitation letters and other fundraising activities.

## CONCLUSION: THE EXPERIMENT CONTINUES

As is true of many school reform efforts, this program continues to evolve. One reason, of course, is that everyday circumstances change. Budgetary constraints and availability of resources dictate our actions as much as principle does. However, one factor that influences our thinking continually is the multifaceted nature of our experiment. We are not attempting a tightly controlled experiment where one variable is examined but instead a contextualized case study. We take some comfort in the words of David Barreby, author of *Us and Them: Understanding Your Tribal Mind* (2005), when he says, "If

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you know exactly what will happen you aren't doing an experiment. You're doing a drill" (13).

Here are the major dimensions we continue to investigate:

1. Can we successfully launch students into an immediate program of career exploration in teaching?
2. Can we make international study more than a one-shot, short-term deal? (Lewis and Niesenbaum, 2005; Hudzik, 2006)
3. Can we build a four-year, increasingly more involved undergraduate teacher preparation program with a global emphasis? (Schneider, 2004)
4. Can we help honors minors complete the capstone project while also completing teacher preparation requirements?
5. Can we make learning communities truly integrated, not just "paired courses?" (Knight, 2002)
6. Can we enhance efforts to integrate course work and faculty collaboration between arts and sciences colleges and colleges of education? (Jones, 2002) (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 2004)
7. Finally, can we effect that elusive "change in perspective" so frequently mentioned in discussing desirable attributes of future teachers? (Heist et. al, 2003)

In the future we envision four simultaneous cohorts at different stages of the program. Obviously, this will require more faculty for teaching and traveling. We also foresee the need for an administrative coordinating position. These growth changes will have to be in line with university growth and support. As we fill an important niche in university education, we hope to see the program integrated more closely into existing offices and curricula.

As we extend our discussion outside the university into the community, we find more opportunities for growth. In a recent meeting with a representative from the Kentucky Department of Education, we brainstormed ways to integrate foreign languages and more international studies into the program.

In a very real sense our "conclusion" is no conclusion at all but a bridge to the next phase of investigations. Once we graduate the first wave of students from this four-year experiment, we will need to study whether HITF graduates have a different and positive effect on what their K-12 students learn and how they influence their schools' perceptions of and interactions with the world community.

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