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“BBQ with the Profs” and the Development of Collegial Associations

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INTRODUCTION

Western Kentucky University (WKU) is a medium-sized, open-enrollment public institution, classified by the Carnegie Foundation as a “Master’s College & Universities Larger Programs.” WKU has 15,978¹ undergraduates spread across four campuses. The Honors Program, created in 1963, currently has around 500 students. Enrollment is based on an eligibility standard, with entry requirements for the program being a combination of minimum ACT/SAT scores and high school grade point average. However, the program’s philosophy is that a student is more than the accumulation of his or her “numbers,” thus allowing students to petition into the program if they are low on one criterion or the other. In addition, the program allows students to apply after taking a certain number of credits at WKU. Once in the program, a student must complete eighteen hours of Honors credit in general education, upper-division, and Honors colloquia courses and a six-credit Capstone Experience/Thesis (CE/T) Project.

In 2005, a new director was hired to provide energy, increase the program’s visibility on campus, and improve retention. In conversations with students and faculty, the director discerned that one of the major problems was the lack of both “community” among the students and a sense of collegial association among and between faculty, students, and staff. The dearth of Honors community and collegial association meant the program was little more than students taking smaller, harder courses. The new leadership believed that identity, community, and a sense of shared purpose were key variables that needed to be instilled in order to accomplish the program’s mandate.

The development of collegial association is a prerequisite to achieving the overall goal of the WKU Honors Program: to simulate in every way practical the sense of belonging and experience of attending a small liberal-arts college. We believe that all other elements and benefits of Honors participation emanate from the foundation of collegial association. One facet of our multi-pronged strategy to build this foundation was through the development of a program we called “BBQ with the Profs.”²

BBQ WITH THE PROFS

BBQ with the Profs is an opportunity for freshmen Honors students to connect with faculty, administration, and staff³ in an informal setting during the first week of school. During the first annual BBQ with the Profs in the fall of 2006, small groups of freshmen were led by HonorsToppers⁴ to the hosting-professors' homes. After eating dinner, which was provided by the Honors Program, the hosts played various outdoor games, made homemade ice cream, and encouraged students to engage in discussions about study abroad, graduate school, and the life of the mind. The goals of this event included giving Honors freshmen a jumpstart on networking with faculty, opening students' minds to the possibilities awaiting them in college, providing a forum for students to get acquainted with one another, and showing students a side of their faculty that might promote future mentoring relationships.

PLANNING BBQ WITH THE PROFS

The planning stages of BBQ with the Profs began in April 2006, five months prior to the event. Planning generally fell into three broad categories: 1) issues related to the hosts' homes, 2) issues related to advertising the event to students and getting them to the correct homes, and 3) assessment and institutionalizing the event. Initial ideas for the program were drafted, including how many students would attend each home, how long the program should last, what kind of food should be provided, and how students would find the faculty's homes. Looking over conflicting dates and times during the busy first week of school, the date was set for the evening of the first day of classes.

HOST FACULTY

One of the first challenges was securing individuals to host BBQ with the Profs sites and then framing the program goals for the event. Because it was our first attempt at this type of program, we lacked a built-in pool of experienced hosts from which to draw. We envisioned the ideal host: a faculty member living within easy walking distance of campus, one who was comfortable interacting with students, and one who regularly teaches Honors courses. Although the university is set in a scenic, residential part of town, with a number of faculty and staff living close by, we were not sure how many faculty we could recruit. A final challenge was related to the director's social/professional network, which was somewhat limited because he had been at WKU less than a year.

With these challenges to overcome, the director began contacting colleagues to serve as hosts. The goal was to find enough faculty and administrators who lived near enough to campus so everyone could easily walk to the event. After securing seventeen host sites,⁵ the Honors Program sent letters of thanks to the faculty members and their families⁶ for their willingness to host a group. Each correspondence also provided host faculty with basic information

about the program, including the date and time, food options,⁷ and goals/expectations of the event. We endeavored to communicate our primary goal of creating an interdisciplinary environment in which faculty and students could interact in a relaxed manner, while subtly shaping the perspective of freshmen regarding the Honors experience (i.e., research, study abroad, nationally competitive scholarships).

Approximately two weeks prior to the event, the Honors Program sent a final letter and packet of information to both the faculty hosts and the HonorsToppers. The packets included detailed information regarding the timing of the event, the arrival of the food, recruitment efforts, the role of the HonorsToppers, a list of possible icebreakers, and, once again, our goals for the event. Additionally, the packets contained a roster with contact information for both the students attending and the HonorsTopper assigned to the host's home.

INFORMING AND ORGANIZING THE FRESHMEN

By June 2006, three months prior to BBQ with the Profs, major preparations for the event began in earnest. We had decided to make the program voluntary, to avoid starting the year with a program which sounded like "mandatory fun," so advertising was going to be key. We needed to both build excitement for the event and figure out how to get over 200 freshmen Honors students to seventeen different homes. Because the event was scheduled for the first day of classes, almost all of our advertising needed to be done prior to students' arriving on campus. Our efforts included letters, emails, phone calls, and posters. We put references to BBQ with the Profs in all the welcoming letters that were sent to freshmen's permanent addresses. Additionally, emails were sent to the students over the summer. In all of our correspondence, we told students they would hear from an HonorsTopper two weeks prior to the BBQ regarding the details. Finally, posters were placed in the Honors residence halls during freshmen orientation week, and reminder postcards were sent to students' on-campus mailboxes. Our marketing was laced with enticing phrases such as "Ever wondered what the inside of a professor's house looks like?" and "Save your meal plan tonight—eat free with Honors!"

To provide a second level of recruitment and to lead students to the correct homes, we assigned HonorsToppers to serve as group leaders. Each HonorsTopper contacted his or her group, personally invited each of them, endeavored to get them excited about BBQ with the Profs, and, of course, made sure they knew how to find their host professor's home. To make this latter task easier, we created a map showing the location of all the faculty homes. Additionally, we designed and ordered "Honors Program Event" yard signs and asked each HonorsTopper to drive/walk by his or her assigned home at least once prior to the event.⁸

As we began creating our groups, we discovered some complications. Our goal was to build community, so we decided we would organize the groups by residence hall floors, not by major or college.⁹ We quickly realized, however,

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that because our residence hall floors are single-gendered, our groups would be all female or all male. Additionally, a significant portion of freshman Honors students are local and live at home. Therefore, groups were re-organized by drawing students from two floors and including some off-campus students.

ASSESSMENT AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION

Although the Honors Program staff members were very excited about the BBQ with the Profs concept, we were also cognizant that there would be mistakes, unforeseen problems, and teachable moments we wanted to remember and learn from for the next year. With this in mind, throughout the project we kept copious notes during meetings, scheduled a debriefing session after the event to gain immediate feedback, and designed an assessment tool to elicit feedback from both the hosts and students.

Knowing we would ask the faculty to host again sometime in the future, we wanted to demonstrate the program’s appreciation of their time and efforts. Each faculty’s home received a thank-you card signed by the entire group of students, and the Honors Program sent an official letter of gratitude. We received a tremendous amount of positive feedback from our modest efforts to thank our hosts. We are currently looking into ways to increase our expression of gratitude for next year.

EVALUATION OF BBQ WITH THE PROF

At the conclusion of BBQ with the Profs, students and hosts were asked to fill out a short survey to provide feedback. The survey included both open- and closed-ended questions (see appendix for assessment tool and summary of quantitative results). Additionally, the director followed up with most of the host faculty personally to glean anecdotal information, and the HonorsToppers were requested to do the same in the Honors hall and on “Facebook” to hear what was in the “networks.”

The overall feedback from students, faculty, and staff was overwhelmingly positive. The director received a number of complimentary emails and phone calls, including a number of laudatory comments from senior administrators, many of whom, up to that time, had not interacted directly with the Honors Program and had minimal understanding of the philosophy of the Honors experience. Although we were very pleased with the anecdotal feedback, the empirical data has been the most helpful in planning for next year. The aggregate data is provided in the appendix; therefore only a brief overview of the findings is presented below.

FACULTY COMMENTS

Twenty-six surveys were filled out by faculty, with at least one from each host site. The responses from faculty members were very positive. Of the 10 questions asked, 90-plus percent of the responses “Strongly Agreed” or “Agreed” with the applicable statement. Overall, we believe the best indicator

of the success of the event (from the faculty host point of view) was that 100% of our hosts “Strongly Agreed” or “Agreed” with the statement that they would recommend to other faculty members that they host a BBQ with the Profs site in the future. Additionally, 24 out of 25 responses¹⁰ (96%) “Strongly Agreed” or “Agreed” with the statement that they would be interested in hosting another BBQ with the Profs event again next year.

Although many of the written comments dealt with issues beyond our control (e.g., weather, bugs, humidity), a great deal of valuable feedback was shared. Most of the written comments can be placed into several themes. First, we need to communicate more with both the faculty member and the “home office” (especially the latter). Several host spouses felt they were not adequately informed. Although we did send most of the information to the home address of each faculty member, we believe the official business envelope with the university seal on it was interpreted as being for the faculty member and thus may not have been seen by the spouse. Another comment was the need to provide both indoor and outdoor icebreakers in addition to a broader selection of “get-to-know-you” activities.¹¹ Finally, hosts stated repeatedly that the number of students should be kept below ten (our plan was for 15 per home). Overall, the written comments were helpful, quite positive, and in congruence with our quantitative data.

STUDENT COMMENTS

One hundred and ten student surveys were returned, which indicates an approximate 50% return rate. Like the faculty responses, students were overwhelmingly pleased with the event. Several sets of responses were especially encouraging. First, 97% of the students “Strongly Agreed” or “Agreed” with the statement that the program provided them the opportunity to learn about a faculty member whom they might not have met otherwise. Second, and we believe closely related, was that 101 of our 110 students responded that they felt more comfortable approaching their faculty member in the future (92%). The response was supported by numerous written comments to the same effect, reaffirming the type of response the program was geared towards creating.

Finally, 99% of students “Strongly Agreed” or “Agreed” with the statement that they enjoyed the opportunity to network with faculty/peers, and 96% of the students answered “Strongly Agreed” or “Agreed” to a statement related to recommending BBQ with the Profs to next year’s freshmen. Again, the empirical data were supported by the written comments, where students suggested we needed to use student testimonials in future advertising for the event.

Although the data were quite generous in praise, they did show a couple of areas for concern. First, among questions related to evaluating the event, only 36% of students “Strongly Agreed” with the statement that they felt properly informed about the event. Although another 51% “Agreed” with the statement, we believe the data support the notion that we must do a better job of informing students about the event. Second, only 37% of the students “Strongly

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Agreed” with the statement that BBQ with the Profs jump-started their excitement related to being involved with, and participating in, other Honors events. We must improve in this area, too.

Interestingly, the students did not complain much about the bugs, heat, or humidity, but they took issue with the “long walk” (note: the farthest any student had to walk was four blocks). Additionally, as was mentioned above, they wanted more information in advance about the program and their host. The positive comments were overwhelmingly focused on how great it was getting to know professors, talking about the college experience, and spending time with Honors students/making new friends. Related to such feedback in the written comments and in the “network” (i.e., Facebook) was the extreme excitement of students who had dinner with the Dean of the Business College or with the Dean of the Liberal-Arts College, or who talked with the President of WKU for two hours about his time as an undergraduate at WKU.¹²

LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

Although anecdotal and empirical evidence strongly suggest that the event was a success, we believe, for those interested in replicating the program, that there are several areas where BBQ with the Profs can be improved. First, start planning earlier and have a larger pool of staff from which to draw. At the time of planning BBQ with the Profs, the authors (Honors director and student worker) were the only staff in the Honors Program and predictably the brunt of the work fell to the junior author. Although the HonorsToppers were vital to the success, they were not available for tasks until just before school began, and by then almost everything was already completed. In short, those contemplating such an event should consider the time intensive nature of the program and plan to have adequate staffing available.

Second, be flexible and in possession of adequate back-up contingencies. As mentioned above, the original plan was for there to be only one home which was not within walking distance (and this was by special request). We did not plan to keep a house “in reserve,” so when we lost one of our homes¹³ two weeks prior to the event, we were scrambling. Although we found a host who volunteered the use of his or her in-ground pool and other amenities, we had to drive the students to the house. We thought we had been saved. Later, we discovered that only two students attended each of the homes in which we needed to provide transportation. We were puzzled until we learned from a number of no-shows the reason for the low attendance: students were unsure of the event and did not want to be “trapped” at a boring event. According to student logic, if you walked to a professor’s home and the event was boring, you could always excuse yourself and walk home, but if you rode in Honors-provided transportation, you were stuck at the event until someone brought you home. Next year, if one of the homes is not within walking distance, we must make a special effort to get those students to commit. Additionally, next year we will ask the HonorsToppers to get RSVPs from the students.

Next, as was made repeatedly clear, we need to do a better job of explaining the event to both faculty hosts and students. Too many students reported that they were not sure what the program was intended to accomplish. Additionally, a very large percentage of our no-shows expressed a less-than-solid understanding of the event. This is also true for our faculty hosts, who, despite our efforts, too often had only a vague idea of the program's goals. Although we can certainly do a better job of framing the event, we believe this criticism is in part a statistical artifact resulting from the program's novelty. We now have not only a core of returning hosts, who have done the program once, but over a hundred students who have experienced the program. As a result, the program now exists in the collective memories of the students. Additionally, we have testimonials, and, no doubt, a number of next year's HonorsToppers will be students who attended the inaugural BBQ with the Profs.

Finally, one of the more interesting glitches is related to the divergent goals of the Honors Program and a particular host faculty member's academic department (a department which is a strong supporter of Honors). Each year this particular department hosts a start-of-the-year social for the faculty/staff. When they heard that one of their own faculty members was hosting a BBQ with the Profs site, they assumed that the Honors Program would send only the department's majors to the faculty member's home. The department assumed that developing community is about developing *disciplinary* community. When the final packets were delivered with information on student attendees, department members were upset because only one of their majors was in the group (the HonorsTopper). The hosts had also invited the department's entire faculty/staff to the event. It took quite some time to explain that the goal was interdisciplinary community based on residence-hall floor and not major. In sum, we learned that not everyone shares the same type of interdisciplinary goals as the Honors Program.

CONCLUSION

Balancing the successes and failures of the inaugural event, the Honors Program was quite pleased with the outcome of the BBQ with the Profs experience. Not only did it succeed in its primary goal—laying the groundwork for developing collegial associations between and among faculty, staff, and students—but it also created positive energy and raised the profile of the program. Although these are laudable successes for the first day of the fall semester, the real success of the program was the buzz and sense of excitement Honors students felt during the first week of school. The energy and excitement have continued throughout the year and have been an unexpected benefit of BBQ with the Profs.

ENDNOTES

1. The total enrollment, including graduate students, is 18,645 students.
2. The idea for the program is not original to the senior author but was transplanted from a small (approximately 800 total students) private liberal arts

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college where he taught for five years. The small liberal arts school did a variation of this theme annually for their entire freshman class.

3. Although the program is called “BBQ with the Profs,” host families ranged across the spectrum of WKU employees: current and retired faculty, deans, coaches, senior vice presidents; even the president of the university opened his home, but for ease of reading this essay referred to them all as faculty.
4. HonorsToppers is our new voluntary Honors-student ambassadors club. The BBQ with the Profs event was their inaugural program.
5. Of the seventeen sites, none belonged to a faculty member from the College of Business, so the business college representative on the Honors Development Board decided to arrange for transportation out to her house in order to host a group at her home.
6. It was very important for the family members of host homes to feel included in the event and we endeavored to be inclusive as possible.
7. For various reasons, we used the WKU catering service. We provided each host several options from which to select: burgers and hot dogs (if the host wanted to grill out) or pulled pork BBQ (if they did not want to do any grilling). Additionally, through communication with hosts, families, and students we knew how many vegetarians were attending each home and made arrangements for them. Finally, we wanted the event to be as non-stressful as possible for host families, so Honors provided everything from napkins to clean up. We did however encourage hosts to make their BBQ special by adding a family recipe to the menu, such as an iced tea or special dessert. Two of our hosts had homemade ice cream for their students, and, according to the evaluations, it proved wildly popular.
8. The map and the Honors Program Event yard signs (although they did look like political campaign signs) were also very beneficial in assisting the WKU catering staff in delivering food to seventeen different locations within a thirty-minute window.
9. Our philosophy is that the Honors experience is interdisciplinary, not a solely disciplinary experience. We found out later that not every department saw things from an Honors perspective.
10. One survey was left blank on this question.
11. Related to this, but not mentioned by the faculty, is our perception that we need to increase our training of the HonorsToppers related to facilitating these types of activities in order to rely less on the faculty hosts. We were very pleased that almost 20 out of 26 hosts (77%) “Strongly Agreed” with the statement that their HonorsTopper was helpful and knowledgeable, an asset to the event (four other “Agreed” with the statement). Although a 92% approval rating for their inaugural program is strong indication of the talent and quality of our HonorsToppers, we believe (and so too do the HonorsToppers) that there is a great deal of room for improvement.

12. Over the next several months we heard from a number of parents who received calls from their freshmen children raving about getting to meet deans, the president, etc. on the first day of class. One parent even told the senior author of having been worried about sending a child to such a large public school, but programs like BBQ with the Profs made the school seem smaller.
13. A remodeling job, which was supposed to be complete prior to the school year was way behind schedule and forced us to locate another house very quickly.

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