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More Than an ID Number or a GPA: Developmental Advising in Honors

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Developmental advising is a common form of advisement used with students in honors programs; it is defined as a “special advising relationship with students that both stimulates and supports their quest for an enriched educational experience” (Ender, 1997, p. 171). In a developmental advising relationship, students continuously interact with the advisor to achieve personal and educational goals. The relationship goes beyond typical advising issues such as registration and class scheduling, tapping into academic competence, personal involvement, and developing life goals (Ender). According to Ender and Wilkie (2000), developmental advising is challenging yet supportive, thereby allowing students to learn from their advising experience. The ideal developmental advising relationship is ongoing, balances between challenge and support, and is goal directed and intentional (Ender & Wilkie, 2000). Honors students tend to favor this type of collaborative advising relationship where they are learning while receiving support from their advisor (Kem & Navan, 2006).

In the advising relationship, advisors should focus on academic issues, student involvement, and life goals at various points with honors students. However, it is often challenging for advisors to decide where to devote their attention at any given time with honors students who have so many interests (Ender & Wilkie, 2000). Kem and Navan (2006) suggest that it is helpful for advisors to take the time to get to know students as individuals beyond just an educational capacity. Additionally, it is beneficial for advisors to assist students in understanding the importance of gaining the most from their college years: through getting involved on campus, leadership activities, and study abroad opportunities (Kem & Navan; Tacha, 1986).

Research on honors student personalities confirm the advantage of advisors practicing a developmental approach when working with undergraduates enrolled in honors programs. The personalities of honors students differ from non-honors students in various ways. Honors students score higher than non-honors students on two constructs of personality, conscientiousness or the will to achieve and openness to experience (Long & Lange, 2002). Additionally,

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research indicates that honors students are autonomous (Lease, 2002), value intrinsic learning rather than only high grades (Stephens & Eisen, 1986–1987), are likely to ask questions in class, rewrite a paper, discuss academic issues with a professor, and socialize with faculty outside of class at higher rates than their non-honors peers (Long & Lange). Students enrolled in honors programs are also more involved with co-curricular and volunteer activities than non-honors students (Mathiasen, 1985).

The Macaulay Honors College (formerly The CUNY Honors College) is a somewhat unique program in that it has a central administrative structure but the student body is spread out over seven individual CUNY campuses. This complex administrative arrangement requires the central Macaulay Honors College (MHC) to be in constant communication with the individual campuses. Every campus has a program director and at least one full-time designated honors advisor. Each month directors and advisors meet with the MHC Dean and the Director of Academic Affairs to discuss MHC policy and student issues and to plan cross-campus activities that are both academic and community building.

In addition to the unique structure of MHC, there are a number of distinct characteristics of our students (referred to as university scholars): (1) Our honors students are traditional in age (18–22 years old) since they are admitted directly from high school (a large percentage of students attending the City University of New York do not fall into this traditional category, making our students unique within our university); (2) The majority of the students are commuters. Only one out of the seven campuses has a substantial residential life program; (3) Many of our university scholars are children of immigrants and they are the first in their family to attend higher education; and (4) The ethnic diversity of the student body is related to cultural and family enmeshment issues that have an impact on our students' college experiences.

Students accepted into the MHC must meet specific requirements. The program requires every student to graduate within four years, which is not the norm within the rest of the university. The academic requirements stipulate that the students must take a sequence of four interdisciplinary seminars in their first four semesters. These seminars focus on various aspects of New York City: the arts; immigration and neighborhoods; science and technology; and urban planning. Our students must take a minimum of four additional honors courses, and they must also complete either an honors-level internship or study abroad experience. (We find that our highly motivated students often do both!) In addition to the academic and experiential requirements, the MHC requires that students complete a minimum of thirty hours of community service. Finally, students must complete honors in the major, an honors thesis or project, or an honors colloquium. These aforementioned MHC requirements are in addition to each student's local college's core liberal arts and major course requirements. Upon completion of all requirements, students officially graduate from both their home campus and the Macaulay Honors College.

The MHC offers a number of orientation activities to assist students in making a smooth transition from high school to the Honors College. There are four days of general orientation before the start of the academic year. The orientation includes opportunities for students to get to know each other through team-building exercises, and it provides information about the policies and requirements of the Honors College. Additionally, each campus extends this orientation to a semester or year-long series of workshops or transition seminars for all first-year students. These seminars may be credit-bearing, or they may fulfill a local orientation requirement depending on the structure and requirements of the local campus.

Peculiar to MHC, our honors advisors do not work out of the campus advising center, instead they have offices within each local honors center, thus ensuring ready accessibility as advisors' "open-door" policy encourages frequent interaction with students socializing in adjacent honors lounges. Additionally, following a developmental model, advisors are assigned to work with students from their first year through graduation, thus providing foundation for the development of a solid relationship as students progress through the honors program. Capping the advising caseload at an average of 150 students further ensures that advisors quickly become familiar with the individual academic strengths and weaknesses of each student. Honors advisors are a vital resource to students in the Macaulay Honors College. Having a designated advisor is unique to this program in that most undergraduate students at these seven campuses who are not part of the Honors College do not have easy access to an academic advisor or have the continuity in advising that MHC promotes. According to one MHC student, "The biggest benefit of having a full-time designated honors advisor is a psychological one. To know that there is someone on campus who knows me by face, someone to whom I can come and can ask any question, someone who genuinely cares about me and my academic endeavors, that is the biggest benefit."

The ideal MHC honors advisor is expected to hold at least a Bachelor's Degree and have four years of experience in higher education, or a graduate degree (Master's or Doctorate) and two years of higher-education experience. Most honors advisors also have teaching and writing skills, an understanding of how to work with academically talented students, and strong interpersonal skills. Honors advisors serve as mentors to university scholars and advise students on course selection and co-curricular educational opportunities. Additionally, honors advisors act as a liaison to the campus on which they work and the central honors college office, and they develop relationships with campus support service offices, some of which include the registrar, study abroad, student activities, career development center, and counseling center. MHC advisors also create and oversee a peer mentor program, assist in graduate school applications and internship preparation, facilitate educational programming, provide advisement on the senior thesis, write letters of recommendation, and serve as instructors for first-year seminars and workshops.

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Each year honors advisors devote special attention to the first-year transition experience. The first-year seminar or workshops are an extension of the summer orientation in which students participate before the start of their first year. The goals of the first-year seminar/workshops are to help students learn and develop a set of adaptive coping, critical-thinking, studying, and problem-solving skills; to provide additional training in goal setting, decision making, time management, and group or team work; to help identify key college resources such as the library, Career Center, Counseling Center, Writing and Tutoring Centers, and Health Centers; to aid in the discovery of a mentor; to develop a social network; and to enhance a respect for diversity and tolerance. Suggested topics for these workshops include academic integrity, time and stress management, note taking, study and test-taking skills, research skills, career planning and resume writing, experiential learning, faculty connections, health and wellness, and multiculturalism, diversity, and tolerance.

During the first-year seminar/workshops MHC advisors often use the campus calendar as a tool for time management. Class visits, guest lectures, or panelists from essential campus resource centers are used to help students familiarize themselves with various student service offices. Reading lists and writing exercises are also incorporated. Oral communication may also be enhanced through reading and discussion using the *New York Times*. Participation by upper-division honors students in these first-year seminars is extremely important. In fact, the seminars or workshops can be linked to a peer mentorship program or student leader program. The peer mentors or student leaders provide additional help with registration, mid-term and final support, and insights into majors and programs.

To complement the orientation that first-year MHC students receive, advisors introduce and facilitate the development of each student's college narrative. Essentially, the college narrative is a portfolio of essays, self-reflections, and evaluations of formative academic experiences that is developed over the four years and maintained by each student in collaboration with his or her advisor. The college narrative focuses on students' college experience, and comprises a summative and speculative narrative that incorporates students' academic and personal goals, specific challenges encountered (or anticipated), and directions for further study and growth. Founded on our belief in the importance of writing and self-reflection during the first year, students are required to write a short paper (4–6 pages) that describes their attempts to choose a major; consider pathways for an honors track and the senior thesis: explore research, study abroad, and internship opportunities; and balance the demands of study and extra-curricular activities. This essay anchors each student's ongoing college narrative and leads to more extensive conversations between advisor and student about how all of these elements are related and how the pieces of the puzzle fit together to form a coherent narrative of the student's academic journey. According to Ender and Wilkie (2000), working through issues about the purpose of life will be the largest focus of the honors advising relationship.

The college narrative is a tool used throughout our university scholars' college career. Using the college narrative as a "road map," honors advisors work with students to help them explore possibilities, maximize potential, and develop or shape their educational experiences. Over the course of four years, students and advisors work in collaboration to incorporate the co-curricular (study abroad, internship, senior thesis) and extra-curricular (community service) requirements of the MHC into the broader academic requirements related to each student's major. Ideally, these co-curricular experiences enrich the major by building upon concepts and providing avenues for practical applications. Additionally, student involvement on campus facilitates learning and leads to personal growth and development (Astin, 1984). When all these pieces come together, our university scholars typically draw from this portfolio of experiences in the writing of a personal statement for graduate school.

Study abroad is one of the co-curricular experiences that our advisors highlight as one of the formative pieces of the college narrative. However, the demographics of our honors programs—including the tendency for many to be first-generation college attendees, have immigrant parents, and live at home—make long-term study abroad a "tough sell" to the families of MHC students. Although advisors encourage students to consider either semester- or year-long programs, a compromise is often made by introducing students to shorter programs such as those offered over winter intersession or summer. MHC has developed several honors-level courses in Florence, Hong Kong, and the Galapagos that are offered during the intersession to match the needs of our honors population.

Advisors stress the importance of the academic fit of study abroad programs, encouraging students to match academic or research interests. Obvious examples are language or cultural studies in the country of origin; however, we have also advised music and dance majors to study flamenco guitar and dance in Spain and pre-law students to enroll in undergraduate law courses in London. With guidance some students have incorporated senior thesis research, such as archival research at a specialty library or documentary film study, into a well thought out study abroad experience. Ideally, study abroad will enhance the learning opportunities available on the home campus. For example, a student in the Honors in Mathematics and Natural Science track became fascinated with lizard behavior during her participation in the Galapagos program. Her field research on the behavior of the San Cristobal lava lizard was the springboard for continuing study of the behavior of Green Anole lizard behavior at her home campus. Further, her senior thesis examines the endocrine and sensory regulation of species-typical aggressive behavior in these lizards. Not only have these findings been presented at national conferences and submitted for publication, but they are also the foundation of a well-integrated personal statement sent out with her medical school application.

In addition to study abroad experiences, honors advisors spend time working with students to obtain meaningful internships in their areas of interest.

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MHC has begun developing partnerships with NYC companies to offer internship opportunities to our honors students. The ideal internship program offers students practical experience that extrapolates from the academic content of the student's major and provides one-on-one mentoring. Advisors encourage long-term involvement at an internship placement and stress the importance of continuity as a means of gaining the most knowledge about a corporation and/or profession. Not only do meaningful internship experiences allow students to test interest in specific professions, develop career-specific skills, and engage in active networking, but they also promote personal growth as students transition to professional roles. For example, one student with an intention of applying for medical school interned with an EMS service in Israel during one summer. She soon realized that emergency medicine was not for her and that her interest in the health field was more related to her enjoyment of working with people. The internship experience helped crystallize her plans to work as an allied health professional, and she is now enrolled in a clinical psychology doctoral program.

Writing senior theses is another major element of the college narrative for MHC students. For most MHC students, the senior thesis (research using primary or secondary sources) is the capstone experience of their honors program. Honors advisors play a critical role in guiding students in the selection of a topic of interest and in choosing an appropriate academic mentor. This process often begins in the first year when students complete the assignment of "interviewing a professor" and begin the first vital step in making faculty connections. Along the lines of an apprenticeship model, students are often encouraged to work in established research laboratories at their home campus to develop the training and skills essential for independent research. Undergraduates receive important preparation for graduate work as they are introduced to the world of academia; experience being part of a research team; learn to write abstracts and journal articles; and give presentations at national conferences. Frequently honors advisors are also involved in helping students deal with "blocks" to the completion of the senior thesis; they help students deal with feelings of being overwhelmed by the complexity of the task, show them how to break down the thesis into manageable steps, and provide strategies for handling conflict with the thesis supervisor.

To complete the college narrative, honors advisors assist MHC students in seeking out opportunities for community participation and understanding the importance of giving back to their communities. MHC values student participation in service for a number of reasons. Young adults who form a habit of community involvement are likely to continue this involvement throughout their lives (Balsano, 2005; Sax, 2004) as well as benefit personally (Balsano). Community engagement contributes to an increased understanding of social problems and multicultural issues; enhancement of character such as morality; reduction of judgmental beliefs about the needs of the individuals who are served; and cultivation of caring and selfless attitudes (Balsano; Eyler & Giles,

1999; Giles & Eyer, 1994; Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000). It also leads to development of responsibility through focusing on the needs of others (Keeter Zukin, Andolina, & Jenkins, 2002). As a result, young citizens who are not provided with civic engagement opportunities may be at a developmental disadvantage compared to their civically engaged peers (Balsano).

While the MHC only requires that students complete a minimum of thirty hours of community service, advisors make an effort to assist students in finding long-term service opportunities that will extend beyond the minimum requirement. Unfortunately, many students see their community involvement as an individual experience such as volunteering in a soup kitchen, tutoring, or voting, rather than making large social changes that have an impact on public policy (Gibson, 2001; Jacoby, 2006; Lopez et al., 2006). Community service opportunities that have appealed to our university scholars include service-learning courses and volunteer work for organizations like New York Cares (assisting NYC communities through cleaning and/or painting city parks and schools).

From college transition activities to working through the process of developing a college narrative, it is important that MHC students feel supported by the entire honors community. With all the pressures that honors students encounter, feeling part of a community is essential for successful participation and completion of the program. Honors advisors have found that students who feel that they belong to a community feel comfortable pursuing all the opportunities available to them such as study abroad, internships, senior thesis, and community service. To create a sense of community, honors advisors create programming initiatives focused on learning, relieving stress, having fun, and getting to know fellow university scholars. A few successful programs that have been implemented are Honors Resumes workshops, Yoga De-Stress workshops, Knitting Circles, and a Faculty Brown Bag Lunch series. Additionally, most campuses have a designated honors space/lounge where honors students can congregate, work on assignments, hold club meetings, and get to know each other.

“The honors college student is an ideal candidate for a developmental advising relationship” (Ender & Wilkie, 2000, p. 123). Students in the Macaulay Honors College of the City University of New York indicate that having a designated honors advisor is one of the highlights of the program. When asked about the advantages of having an honors advisor, one student indicates that “the biggest benefit is having the security of knowing that you have an advisor who knows you personally, your goals, and your aspirations for the four years of college . . . you’re not just an ID number or a GPA score to your honors advisor.”

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