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First-Year “Initiation” Courses in Honors

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In 1993, the new director of the recently revived Honors Program at Eastern Connecticut State University discovered that even seniors in this small program did not know each other and that some of them, not wanting to be branded nerds, were reluctant even to identify themselves as honors scholars. The program clearly needed a culture, a sense of community, and pride. With ideas lifted from NCHC conference sessions, a number of initiatives were launched, including contracts with students, a revived honors club, student-sponsored social events, and active student participation in regional conferences. The most interesting and perhaps controversial method of achieving *esprit* was the development of intensive first-year courses, taught by the director, in which the entire cohort worked in groups with interns, upper-division honors students, who served as discussion leaders and mentors and graded papers and quizzes. This first-year program became very loosely analogous to basic training or boot camp in that it was an intense experience, eventually shared by everyone in the program. It fashioned a strong bond between all members of the freshman cohort and initiated them into the honors community.

HONORS 200: A WRITING WORKSHOP AND SEMINAR

The director had inherited Honors 200, a standard writing course for first-semester honors students. Taken in lieu of the required freshman comp course, Honors 200 socialized new students to some extent by placing them all in the same section. The new wrinkles added by the director were to make substantial use of interns, to establish small groups for student responses to papers, and to include variations of City as Text[®] in some writing assignments.

The course, which met on Tuesdays and Thursdays, required students to read a chapter illustrating a rhetorical category (narration, description, process analysis, etc.) each week from a book of essays, review sections of a writing manual from time to time, and complete two writing assignments a week. The Thursday assignment, written in class, was a quick response to a question posed by the instructor about one of the assigned essays; it was graded by the instructor and returned the following Thursday. Students found writing an organized

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paragraph or two with specific details in ten or fifteen minutes the most stressful component of the course, but they learned how to write a "topic sentence" (or at least get their point somewhere up front), provide transitions, and include relevant details. As the semester progressed, the quick-response writing became noticeably more fluent, and responses became longer, more detailed, and to the point. This once-a-week exercise was meant, among other things, to prepare students to perform well on essay exams and to think quickly and respond coherently in meetings, seminars, and colloquia.

During all class sessions students sat together with their interns in designated groups of four or five. Each Tuesday they came to class with papers that had been assigned by their interns the previous week to be completed out of class on a word processor. Class time was spent for the most part working with the hard copies of these papers. The interns, together with the instructor, usually devised a different strategy or approach each week to enliven discussion. One week students might begin by reading just their first sentences or paragraphs, the rest of the group indicating what such openings had led them to expect in the rest of the paper; another week students might be asked to jot down concrete nouns, specific adjectives, vivid verbs, or effective or awkward phrases while one of them read her paper; or the papers might be scrambled and randomly distributed and read to see if the group could identify the author by the style or point of view. The variations and added wrinkles, many of them suggested by the interns, turned out to be endless. There were only two rules: everyone in the group had to talk, and all reactions and comments had to be specific. "The paper was good" or "I didn't like it" was not sufficient; the student was required to say specifically what made the paper good or what might improve it.

Recruiting and guiding interns was easier than might be expected. For the first year, the instructor chased down potential interns in person, especially students who had been trained by the English department to be tutors, occasionally gently twisting a few arms. Thereafter, recruitment was easily taken care of online by choosing students who, as they had taken the course and were aware of what an intern did, volunteered for the position. In time, it became clear that, though tutor training was helpful, it was not necessary and that sophomores did as well as juniors and seniors. The instructor was pleased to discover that average, competent writers were often excellent interns, that quiet or shy interns were often more skillful than voluble ones in eliciting responses from groups, and that everyone who volunteered took the job seriously and was responsible.

Intern meetings with the instructor took place at the beginning of each class while the students reviewed their assignments in the hallway. When necessary, interns might also get together briefly at the end of class. At these meetings writing and discussion strategies that worked or bombed were reviewed, as were any problems with groups or specific students, and their possible solutions. At the outset the instructor distributed the following handout:

Guidelines for Interns

Throughout the semester you will be conducting discussion groups, and assigning and evaluating papers. If at any time during the semester you feel you are being asked to undertake responsibilities beyond your competence or which make you feel uncomfortable, please bring the matter up immediately, either with the instructor or at an intern meeting.

Please keep a log of your experiences. Include comments on your group, the assignments, and each session. Feel free to write about individual students and their papers, problems, successes, and the like. These will be handed in whenever interns switch groups.

When grading papers, at least at first, give them a quick read, placing papers in three piles: the best in the excellent pile, most of them in the good pile, and the worst in the weak pile. You need not "correct" everything in a paper. A good strategy is to indicate what you as a reader had problems following. At the end of each paper say something positive and indicate one or two areas that might be improved. Grade from 1–10, an 8.5 being an average paper. Keep a record of student grades. At first grades should not be higher than 8.9 for those in the excellent pile, since we have to leave room for improvement. ***Be sure to make all corrections and comments in pencil!***

You will each have four or five students in your group. You may have to devise means of keeping everyone alert and participating. One method is to have the students write something from time to time, such as a response to a paper read. To include the shy and avoid a monopoly of talkers, have every student reply in turn to a question. Do not have students read entire papers at first. You may conduct business with your group via e-mail and schedule conferences if you wish.

Finally, read all the assigned essays thoroughly, and be prepared to engage students in discussions of this material. Prepare (or have students prepare) leading questions about the reading and turn to the anthology of essays whenever you have free time.

The instructor made an effort to create heterogeneous groups by mixing males and females as well as students from various backgrounds, but inevitably groups took on a character of their own. Some groups were outspoken and voluble, others quiet and reluctant to talk. Interns were, of course, much happier with the talkative groups, but techniques to restrain overly eager talkers and to encourage the shy were discussed at intern meetings. At specified dates throughout the semester, the interns switched groups so that students would

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spend several consecutive weeks with each of them. At the outset of the course, each intern chose a general topic, such as the Eastern campus, the Windham/Willimantic area, home towns, friends and family, or social, political, or ethical problems. Then the intern developed, with the help of the instructor, specific topics for weekly assignments. For example, a number of specific assignments concerning, say, the Eastern campus might include a report on a club meeting, an event on campus, the story of a typical day or class, the atmosphere in the library or the gym at a specific time, an interview with a professor or administrator, and the like.

About twelve weeks into the semester, the quick-response writing on Thursdays began to wear thin, so the instructor decided, after discussing possibilities with the interns, to schedule formal debates during the final three weeks. For the purpose of these debates, teams of six were devised by mingling members of various groups more or less randomly. The teams chose topic statements and determined which members would take the affirmative and which the negative sides, who would be first or second speakers, and who would provide the rebuttal. The winning team and best speaker in each debate were decided by the interns. Students took these debates seriously, even with less than profound topics such as dogs vs. cats as pets or tampons vs. maxi-pads, the lone male in this debate holding his own with aplomb based on the experiences of four sisters! This exercise promoted fluency in speaking and the ability of students to think and react quickly. It also integrated students from different groups.

The most interesting and successful feature of the course was having the interns assign topics and grade papers. Since corrections and comments were in pencil, the instructor was able to erase those he deemed inappropriate or unnecessary and add his own remarks. There was no attempt to assure that all papers were graded on the same scale, but the instructor, by occasionally suggesting that a grade seemed too high or too low, made sure that the papers within any given group were graded relative to their merit. Most frequently the instructor found himself erasing corrections of perfectly acceptable locutions interns had been taught were incorrect, such as using contractions, ending sentences with prepositions, using the first person in an analysis, and the like. Students never questioned the suitability of being graded by other students; in fact, they rather liked the idea since the instructor, playing good cop/bad cop, used a lower average grade for the in-class papers written for him than the interns had been instructed to use for the out-of-class assignments. Similarly, there was no problem with one intern being more demanding than the others since all groups worked with each of the interns in turn. The fact that the groups and the interns were very different turned out to be a plus. Students learned to deal with the varying demands and expectations of the interns, some spirited groups looking forward to taking on the "tough" intern, and the interns learned how to work with very different groups.

HONORS 201: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY COURSE ON THE FAMILY

Eastern's honors curriculum, by national standards, was rather slender, and the director realized that an additional interdisciplinary course would bring it closer to the norm and also insure that honors students would automatically complete the major category of general education requirement. Since all honors courses were usually filled by the time second-semester freshmen got to register, the obvious solution was to offer a new course for the entire cohort, thus plugging the gap. In 1997 a committee of students and the director developed a proposal for an interdisciplinary course on the family that would involve faculty from several disciplines as well as the director, who represented literature and would serve as majordomo participating in all class meetings. Many of the "guest faculty" eventually gave their three-week presentations to more than one cohort, but faculty as well as the disciplines represented varied from year to year according to availability and interest. So that most faculty would be available, Honors 201 was offered one evening a week in a three-hour session.

Each session of Honors 201 was divided into two parts: an hour-and-forty-minute presentation by a guest faculty member followed by a fifty-minute discussion, in groups run by interns, of case histories or other assigned reading. Two ten-minute breaks during the three-hour class restored everyone's alertness. Each week students read essays from an anthology on the family as well as articles and/or chapters from books that were provided by the faculty presenters and used as springboards for topics to be developed in class. Guest faculty lectured and encouraged discussion, each of them assigning one project or mini-paper using a concept or method in their discipline. Course grades were based on (1) these projects as evaluated by the faculty, (2) weekly quizzes developed, administered, and graded by interns, and (3) a semester project on some aspect of the family approved and graded by the instructor and presented, not read verbatim, by the student to the entire class at the end of the semester. The point was made that these semester projects were not just assignments to earn a grade but individual contributions by students to the substance of the course.

The group discussions, particularly of case histories, which took place after the second break when the guest presenters had left, at times got quite personal and emotional, with students recounting their own or close friends' experiences involving divorce, violence, abuse, and in one shocking case an attempted murder. Such frank discussion, which often went beyond the scheduled class time, suggests that students had become very comfortable with each other and their interns. Since much of the literature dealt with dysfunctional families and problems, the instructor from time to time emphasized positive aspects of family life.

Disciplines represented in Honors 201 included history, biology, sociology, law, psychology, economics, fine arts, and literature. Students enjoyed the change of pace provided by instructors representing different disciplines, and

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again student evaluations gave high marks to the use of interns. Faculty were recruited from the Honors Council, from colleagues the director knew to be supportive of honors and lively classroom instructors, and from new faculty reputed to be exceptional teachers or recommended by honor students. The syllabus proclaimed in bold letters that enthusiastic and informed class participation was expected, and most students were willing to get involved. Almost all cohorts developed an *esprit* and made a point of impressing the guest faculty, and some presenters made a point of treating the class as advanced students rather than as freshmen. For example, a sociologist, who was also a lawyer, announced that she assumed honors students could handle the pile of legal briefs she distributed just as law students were expected to. The instructors were also aware that they were showcasing their discipline and might attract students to take more courses in their department or perhaps might attract new majors. It was an eye-opening experience for students to see the very different presuppositions and methods used, say, by a biologist as opposed to an economist in explaining the function of the family. Interns for Honors 201 were easily recruited on-line from students who had already taken the course and had demonstrated responsibility, tact, and common sense.

The interns in both Honors 200 and Honors 201 were unanimously positive about the experience, many of them reporting in exit interviews that this internship was their most challenging and rewarding educational experience. These two courses insured that the director got to know a great deal about the ability, character, and personality of each and every freshman and that first-year students developed camaraderie with each other and with their interns. Another advantage of having the entire cohort taking a class together was the advice the freshmen received from interns concerning course selection for the following semester. Interns, together with other volunteers from the Honors Club, at a session of Honors 200 as well as the Honors 201, made suggestions to students in their majors about course offerings. This advice was given frankly and at times in language the director would be reluctant to use. Since one of the goals of these first-year courses was to initiate students into the honors program, the advice of more experienced students concerning courses and instructors to take or to avoid and the occasional appearance of students representing the Honors Club or the Honors Council to inform to them about upcoming events were added bonuses.

GRADES, PERKS, AND EVALUATION

For many faculty, students grading other students might seem questionable, unprofessional, or even unethical. Before embarking on such an unconventional course, the director gave serious consideration to the implications of interns, sometimes only sophomores, grading the papers and quizzes of first-year students. On the positive side, having this sort of clout, ordinarily a faculty prerogative, gave the interns genuine authority and an increased sense of responsibility while it motivated students to participate meaningfully in workshop sessions

since they knew they were being evaluated for their contributions to the group. After utilizing this technique for more than half a dozen years, the instructor became convinced that this procedure substantially enhanced the experience for interns and students alike. On course evaluations, especially in Honors 200 but also in Honors 201, "The Use of Interns" was consistently rated the most significant feature of the course. Similarly, on senior exit interviews, "The First-Year Experience" was approved enthusiastically.

For those dubious about students grading students, it should be pointed out that it was the instructor who assigned both midterm and final grades. In Honors 200, when it came time to determine grades, the instructor met with the interns to determine a composite "intern grade." The interns considered each student, commenting in turn on the student's writing ability and effort, reviewing the student's grades, and evaluating her/his contributions to the group. Interns ranking a given student substantially higher or lower than the others interns had done were asked to justify their evaluation. After some back and forth, with comments as well by the instructor, who had virtually read all the papers, a consensus was reached and the instructor recorded an "intern grade." The composite intern grade was then considered along with the twelve grades the instructor had recorded for in-class papers, his three grades for debates, and a class grade. In almost all cases there was no problem grading students holistically in this fashion. In the rare case of a student with an abrasive personality or one who had had a disastrous week or two for personal reasons, the instructor would decide whether or how these circumstances would be taken into consideration. In Honors 201, each week the instructor distributed quizzes and answers to the interns for the following week. Most interns made use of these quizzes, which were included in the instructors' edition of the text. They were also free to develop essay-style or short-answer questions on their own. Again, for midterm and final grades, a composite "intern grade" was agreed upon on the basis of the participation- and quiz-grades of each of the interns. These were combined equally with a composite grade from each of the guest professors and the instructor's grade for the semester project in two versions, the written and the oral report.

There were additional perks for interns and guest professors. Interns in both Honors 200 and 201 were awarded three credits in Honors 300, Internship in Honors, which could be used to replace one of the required honors colloquia. Faculty participating in Honors 201 were awarded half a credit toward their FLC, a practice not unprecedented at Eastern where faculty earn partial credit for students taking independent study with them and interns in courses for their disciplines.

At the conclusion of both Honors 200 and Honors 201, the course was evaluated by the students, the interns, and, in the case of Honors 201, the guest professors.

CONCLUSION

Although this article is based on experiences with a small but growing honors program, some of the procedures detailed should be readily adaptable to larger programs. The use of interns with authority and responsibility is accepted enthusiastically by students and interns alike and enhances the learning experience. Treating freshmen in the honors program as capable of working both independently and in groups produces positive results. Rather than predigesting cases for the students, the sociologist/lawyer in Honors 201 expected them to work out for themselves the legal points at issue in several cases and to determine whether judgments were consistent or not. "Let the students do it!" in time became the director's motto in all aspects of honors. His experience with Honors 200 and Honors 201 suggests that honors students given authority and responsibility will do just fine.

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