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Where Are the Education Majors and Faculty?

LYNNE STEYER NOBLE AND JENNIFER E. DOWLING

COLUMBIA COLLEGE

THE QUESTION

As an Associate Professor of Education, I (Lynne Steyer Noble) became involved in the Columbia College Honors Program because I designed and taught an honors seminar based on my experiences living in Northern Ireland, not because of my education background. In 2004, on the way to present at the National Conference in New Orleans, I happened to look around the airplane and notice that there were very few education majors in the fairly large contingent of Columbia College Honors students. In conference workshops, as participants introduced themselves I noted that there were no other education professors in any of the sessions I attended. I began to wonder why education students and faculty were so underrepresented in honors.

SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS

I began to look for information that would help me identify the issues that make participation of education majors in honors difficult and also for ways to overcome those difficulties. I didn't find any research relevant to the needs of, or programming for, education majors in honors. There were, however, many articles about creating specific and meaningful experiences for honors students in the humanities, math, and sciences. I then asked for Columbia College's student statistics and finally, began talking to students who were qualified to be in the Honors Program or who in fact had been in the program but had dropped out. I also sought out education students who were currently in the Honors Program.

THE NUMBERS LOOKED LIKE THIS

Honors Completers at Columbia College

Year of Graduation	Number of Education Major Honors Students / Total Honors Students	Percentage of Education Major—Honors Students
2002	3 / 13	23%
2003	0 / 16	0%
2004	4 / 20	20%
2005	4 / 21	19%

Current Honors Participants at Columbia College

Expected Year of Graduation	Number of Education Major Honors Students	Percentage of Education Major—Honors Students
2006	1 / 25*	4%
2007	3 / 12**	25%
2008	7 / 50	14%
2009	4 / 50	8%

*In September 2005, there were 5 education students in the Honors Program. Only one of these is scheduled to complete the Honors Program requirements.

**Only one of these students expects to complete the Honors Program. These two charts demonstrate how our education students drop out along the way. Clearly, the students are competent and able to successfully participate in the Honors Program experience but meet barriers they believe they cannot overcome.

THE CONVERSATIONS SOUNDED LIKE THIS

“There were no honors courses in education and I couldn’t get enough hours.” This problem is especially hard for elementary, early childhood, special education and speech, language, and pathology students, who are required to take the majority of their college credits in their major. “My education advisor didn’t really help me find the honors courses I needed.” “I lose a semester due to student teaching, and I didn’t have enough time to complete the honors seminar or honors project requirements.” In addition, after

education students take their general education courses and their required education courses, they have only two hours of electives left. However, they have to take at least six additional credits—Honors Project and Honors Seminar. “I couldn’t think of a topic for an honors project.” Students often didn’t consider inquiry or research in education as possibilities for an honors project. They assumed they would have to do something outside of their major for it to count. “There really wasn’t a group of education majors in the Honors Program to work with and the more I got involved with my education studies, the less connection I had to the Honors group.”

ONE PERSEVERING STUDENT’S PERSPECTIVE

As an elementary education major and Honors Program student, I (Jennifer E. Dowling) have found that the Honors Program and the education program do not seem to mesh together very well. As an education major, I have a very full schedule of coursework and clinicals, and from the sophomore year on my classes have basically been laid out for me. However, not a single education class has been listed as an Honors class. Luckily, I was able to take the majority of my Honors Program hours in my freshman year. I did this by taking almost every general education requirement as an Honors course. However, many education majors in Honors aren’t able to do this. None of the other education majors who started out in Honors from my year have kept up with the requirements, and they won’t graduate with honors. Also, I have combined some work for education with my honors project. I will do a research study on the socialization of ESOL students, and I will use the results to create my final project. This focus really helps me to connect honors and education. My advisor and I developed the study, applied for a grant, and received funding.

Faculty Note

Luck shouldn’t be a player in this situation. Education students clearly must be advised from the beginning to take honors courses as general education requirements whenever possible. Then, they should also be advised about fitting in their honors seminar and how to use clinicals and inquiry projects as the basis for their honors project.

When I partnered with Jennifer, we developed a proposal for the 2005 national conference to 1) explore and expand our perception of barriers to education majors’ participation in honors programs and 2) solicit solutions to some of these barriers. The proposal was accepted, we presented, and...

THIS IS WHAT WE FOUND

First, we found that our experience at Columbia College was not unique. In the workshop, there were 10 education students, 10 other students and 2 faculty members (not in education). They all agreed about the barriers we had listed: advising issues, few or no honors education courses, not knowing how to

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tie education requirements to an honors project, few education faculty involved or interested in the honors program, and lack of time due to state certification requirements. All mentioned the lack of a substantial honors cohort in the education program as a secondary barrier.

In addition, because each state has slightly different requirements for teacher certification, there are sometimes opportunities but more often additional barriers created by state requirements.

THIS IS WHAT WE'RE TRYING

- Have one education faculty member advise all education Honors students.
- Help students plan ahead and use their observation and clinical hours, co-curricular requirements, and/or foreign clinical experiences to gather information/data for their Honors Project.
- Designate a few education courses as Honors choices and develop a module that faculty members can use to augment the curriculum and the requirements.

CAN WE COLLABORATE?

What is working on your campus to encourage qualified education majors to become or remain honors students? Or not working? How does your education program or department or college interface with the honors program? To what extent do faculty members in education participate in the honors program? Are you interested in creating a collaborative group to further explore this issue? I am happy to facilitate. Please contact me if you want to explore the inclusion of education majors and education faculty in honors.

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