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Teaching an Honors Course Tied to a Large University Event

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ABSTRACT

College- or university-wide events take place fairly often at academic institutions, and these events can easily provide honors programs the opportunity to offer a curricular focus based on the event. Herein, we describe a course centered on the sesquicentennial celebration of Butler University and the teaching model implemented to deliver the course.

BACKGROUND: BUTLER UNIVERSITY'S SESQUICENTENNIAL

In the 2005–06 academic year, Butler University celebrated its 150th year of matriculation. A variety of university-wide events were spotlighted Butler and showcased the academic tradition of the university. The Sesquicentennial Planning Committee, made up of Butler faculty, staff, and administrators, crafted a series of events beginning with a community “birthday party” celebration, bringing speakers to campus such as Anna Quindlan, David Halberstam, President Bill Clinton, and President George H. W. Bush, bringing notable performers and artists to campus, inviting prominent Butler alumni, and highlighting the university’s role in the city, state, and region.

In addition to planned, formal events, Butler staff also collected stories about the university and posted them on the university’s website. Butler events were widely publicized in the local newspaper, and substantial efforts were made to include faculty, staff, and alumni in the sesquicentennial celebration; however, little opportunity was provided for either student input or a curricular focus on this large university event. Similar events of this caliber such as dedications of new buildings, installations of new presidents, and anniversary celebrations can provide opportunities for institutional reflection while including current students but only if academic units choose to take the challenge. As the Honors Program at Butler University has often served as a laboratory for curricular development and innovation, we felt that this was an academic opportunity we could not ignore.

A CURRICULAR FOCUS: AN HONORS CLASS ON THE 150 YEARS OF BUTLER UNIVERSITY

THE IDEA

Early in the spring of 2005, the University Honors Board unanimously voted to offer and fully support an honors course on the sesquicentennial during the 2005–06 academic year entitled “The 150 Years of Butler.” The director of the program was listed as the instructor of record while the structure of the course was deliberately left shapeless. The director sought volunteers from the faculty and staff to assist in teaching the course, to publicize the course and promote enrollment, and to get a sense of what resources would be available for its preparation.

As the spring progressed, it became clear that student input for the sesquicentennial was minimal. Thus, in order to facilitate student involvement in the celebration, all honors students were invited to participate in the preparation of the 150 Years course as an independent study during the fall semester of 2005. Four students elected to assume the challenge and serve as the steering committee for the direction of the Honors course.

THE PLAN

Having students serve as collaborators in the planning of a course was an innovative step in curricular development at Butler University. Honors students often shape the direction of individual honors courses by presenting projects or selecting from a limited choice of topics during the second half of the course; however, students have never participated in initial subject selection, course design, course development, or the actual responsibility of running the course.

The steering committee engaged in developing the syllabus for the course, contacting the speakers for the early meetings of class, finding partners within the Butler community, alumni base, and local community, and planning class events. The director was made “convener” of the course. A sense of student ownership and contribution to the sesquicentennial permeated the discussions about the course design. A schedule of events, visitors, and class trips were included in the syllabus. In addition, the projects for the course (a time capsule, a “past-meets-present” honors student/alumni event, and separate group projects) reflected the steering committee’s desire to allow current students to have an impact on the legacy of the sesquicentennial. The university president was invited to the last meeting of class in order to hear the honors students’ legacy and share his impressions of the university.

THE COURSE

The student steering committee created excitement around this course, making it one of the most popular honors courses offered in the spring of 2006. A full enrollment of twenty-one students, including three members of the steering committee, elected to register in this course (the fourth steering committee member spent the semester abroad). The student makeup of the course bridged all five university colleges (Liberal Arts and Sciences, Education, Business Administration, Pharmacy and Health Sciences, and Fine Arts), both genders, many ethnic backgrounds, and all four academic years as well as a fifth-year pharmacy student. The makeup of this course was a microcosm of the composition of our honors program and comprised a small group of students interested in learning about the history of Butler University.

Class activities included a series of speakers throughout the semester as well as several trips. Early speakers (the second most senior faculty member, a history professor, and the university archivist) gave historical background and perspective. Later speakers moved into more detailed discussions, including histories of each of the professional colleges, a presentation on how faculty and administrators are evaluated, a perspective from a 1960's alumnus, and the university president's perception of how decisions made in the past have affected the path of the university as a whole. Descriptions and tours of campus, including a tour of the formal Holcomb Gardens on Butler's campus, provided visual understanding of Butler's past to enhance the university's narrative. Two relevant off-campus sessions were also held. One trip was devoted to the second site of the University (the first site having been demolished for highway construction). The second was to the local cemetery to view the final resting places of the majority of influential people in Butler's history (the founder, major donors, significant sports icons, etc.).

In order to facilitate instruction, two online resources were used: Blackboard and Facebook. Weekly Blackboard posts were required in response to the previous week's activities. The majority of these posts were in the form of online discussion, but they were also used to organize class projects. Additional postings included favorite snacks and photographs for the time capsule as well as a "day in the life" of a current college student as anonymous posts.

The "day in the life" assignment was suggested by the Butler University archivist as a method to provide useful insights into the lives of current college students for the time capsule. According to the archivist, the university archives are full of details about what happened at given times but lack student reaction or insight into these events, nor do the archives describe what it was like to be a student 50, 100, or 150 years ago. The class chose to take this up as a required additional assignment for successful completion of the course. The evolution of a Facebook page dedicated to the class was also a useful tool to provide a glimpse into the lives of current students. The class Facebook page linked to the students' personal pages, and these pages offer a great deal of insight into the personal lives of the students.

TEACHING AN HONORS COURSE TIED TO A LARGE UNIVERSITY EVENT

One of the class projects was a past-meets-present alumni event. This event was coordinated with our alumni office, and invitations were sent to all alumni of the Honors Program. The students enrolled in the class hosted alumni and speakers who had addressed the sesquicentennial course. The class members organized a brief program and several of the “day in the life” essays were read aloud while alumni shared recollections of their experiences at Butler. The time capsule items and a slide show of pictures were displayed to facilitate conversation over a catered luncheon.

The final four weeks of the course were spent on group projects. In groups of two or three, students chose projects on areas of Butler’s history that interested them. For the in-class projects, the students prepared presentations and often brought in additional outside speakers. The projects chosen by the student groups included influential women at Butler, sports at Butler, the Holcomb Gardens carillon, Butler Bands, buildings around campus, Butler at war, and Butler scandals. Throughout their planning, the students used many of the resources available at our library, much to the delight of the library staff.

The entire semester intermittently focused on the time capsule. Several discussions occurred about what should be included. An interesting progression took place starting with very general items (Butler sesquicentennial swag, lists of popular movies, etc.). More specific items were then included upon prompting from honors alumni to make attempts to capture all the idiosyncrasies of being a college student today. Personal photographs were added of the students with their friends as well as homecoming t-shirts, cell phones, DVDs, and take-out menus from favorite local eateries. Even the university president suggested inclusion of the Facebook pages!

Student response to the course was very positive. Over half of the student evaluation comments included a sense of institutional pride.

“I think that it was so neat that we were able to sit with the President of our school and “chat” so informally. That was truly a unique experience that most students, especially at other colleges, will never have the opportunity to do.”

“The class was awesome! It seems like we just started the course a few weeks ago!”

“...I’m sad this class is over, it was very interesting and I believe that I learned more “take home” material in this honors class than I have in any other honors class.”

“This was my favorite class by far too! It just gave me a whole new love for Butler.”

“This class has really allowed me to appreciate and love this university even more than I did before. It has also deepened my sense of pride that I have for Butler. I am so thankful to have had the opportunity to enroll in such a course... I know that my

decision to take this course will definitely change the way that I perceive Butler now and after I graduate.”

“I am very thankful to all of the people of the past who have made decisions to get Butler where it is today. I am leaving this class with a new found pride and appreciation for BU.”

STEERING COMMITTEE REFLECTION

As this was the first time that Butler students had so much input into the shape and direction of a course, their thoughts about the experience as members of the steering committee are important. Did this work? Could this be a model for future courses? Are there other considerations?

The steering committee and students enrolled in the course agreed that, for the most part, the steering committee was effective. There was a minor breakdown as to who was actually “in charge” in the classroom on a minute-by-minute basis, but this was not considered a major issue. The convener would have liked the students to take more control and step in when it seemed there was confusion. Younger students, however, were not intimidated in the classroom because of the atmosphere created by student direction; we had full participation from our first-year students.

The members of the steering committee were surprised to find themselves speaking as equals to faculty and staff on campus while planning for the course. During the development of the syllabus, the steering committee was able to include items from other honors courses they had enjoyed (outside speakers, field trips, student projects, and presentations). All the students on the committee commented that they did not realize how much work went into the planning and preparation for a course, and they each garnered a sense of respect for this aspect of the educational experience.

As a whole, the steering committee felt that this was an excellent structure for an honors course and for honors courses in the future. One of the goals of our program is to get students to “think for themselves,” and the steering committee found that this gave them a sense of ownership over a course offering. The collaboration of the members of the committee with a faculty member in this way was a valuable experience.

THE IMPACT

The students themselves were surprised by how much they learned about their *alma mater*. The on- and off-campus trips, the speakers, and their own class projects gave the students a keen understanding of the university. They were transformed by the experience and have become unlikely ambassadors for Butler and its place in history. As an unexpected consequence, the course created a sense of empowerment and institutional pride among the twenty-two students involved in it.

TEACHING AN HONORS COURSE TIED TO A LARGE UNIVERSITY EVENT

“This is one of the most beneficial honors [courses] I have taken or will take. I have a sense of pride in Butler that I would not have had otherwise.”

“It’s a very special course and event to be a part of... It was great to have a class that brought together people from so many colleges!”

“I think that every [Butler] student should have to take this.”

“The projects allowed me to see Butler in a deeper way, and the visitors were all effective speakers. I loved this class, thanks for the opportunity!”

“This was the best HN class I have taken—I learned so much about Butler and I can actually use this in the future!”

“I further developed a great sense of pride in Butler, and really began to question and further realize Butler’s importance to not only myself but the Indianapolis community.”

Another unexpected outcome of this course offering was the involvement of university administrators with current students. An invitation to address current undergraduates (not prospective students or alumni) is not often offered to administrators. All the guests, from deans to the university president, commented that they had sense of the “real” Butler as it is now just from attending a single class session. Many of the deans were surprised at how interested current students are in the university and how it came to its present form. Providing a venue for administrator-student interaction is yet another important function that the Honors Program can serve.

The new teaching paradigm using a student steering committee and a faculty convener was also a qualified success. While details of steering committee/faculty convener roles are still a little unclear, initial student interest in the course was generated *because* this was a student-run course. Our honors students are ready to apply this paradigm to other courses, and we plan to offer one per year.

Honors programs and colleges have an opportunity to use their own university or college as a text when university-wide events occur. The potential benefits to the students are compelling. Students gain a sense of their institution’s history and their role in it post-graduation. The advantages of using a university as the text in a course include the following: student involvement in the preparation of such a course; the excitement that they will generate for class enrollment; increased participation in each class period as all students are stakeholders in the course material; and the unforeseen impact that honors students can have on the legacy of the institution.

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