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Creating Community: Honors Welcome Week Programming

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ABSTRACT

The Northeastern University Honors Program established its first-year Welcome Week initiative in 2006 as part of our movement toward enhancing the goals of an Honors Living Learning Community. The Welcome Week is characterized by a series of linked events that bring together various on-campus members of our honors community for the common goal of welcoming new students to campus. Members of that on-campus community include faculty, administrators, staff, and upper-class honors students. Welcome Week introduces new students to the opportunities and challenges of a university honors experience.

BACKGROUND

The Northeastern University Honors Program is roughly 20% larger than that of many institutions our size because we are a cooperative education university with a five-year undergraduate program. All of our 1,400 honors students are never on campus at the same time because of co-op and study-abroad opportunities. When a new director took over the program in fall 2004, we were poised for change. Realizing that with large numbers comes the opportunity to create a robust community, we looked towards other honors programs to see how they were building their honors communities on larger campuses. Part of that process involved inviting NCHC-recommended site visitors to our campus to make recommendations on a variety of issues including what we began to call “the first-year experience.” We also looked at national campus trends and found several important initiatives that we adopted.

In addition, in the summer of 2006 our office moved from the basement of an old building to a brand new facility that included the Honors Program office (computer lab and lounge, small seminar room, reception area, and professional offices) as well as apartment-style housing for 224 first-year honors students. We continue to use our older first-year honors housing for 60–100 additional students. Our concern with moving into the new building was that our students would hide in their apartments without experiencing the camaraderie that many students build in those first few weeks by wandering the halls. We

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collaborated with the Department of Residence Life to make it possible for all of our first-year students to move onto campus a week early, and we focused our events around those early days; that was the official beginning of our commitment to a living-learning philosophy. If our change could be represented as a formula it would look like this:

New director + New building + NCHC advice = Shake Up (aka Welcome Week)

Welcome Week highlights some of the major goals of the Honors Program including a commitment to an Honors Living Learning Community, recognition of the importance of interdisciplinary learning, and participation in civic engagement. All of these opportunities, and more, take place within the supportive environment that includes faculty, staff, and upper-class students.

PREPARING FOR WELCOME WEEK

The goal of Welcome Week is to have programming that threads through the first days on campus. Each day there is a group event and also time set aside for the students to settle into campus and the city of Boston. The schedule highlights include:

Wednesday	Move-in day; evening social
Thursday	Faculty panel to discuss the First-Year Reading selection; small faculty/staff-led panels to discuss the book; students join with their discussion leader for lunch
Friday	Group team-building experience at a day-long ropes course retreat
Saturday	Assistance in campus-wide move-in
Sunday	Author visit and book signing reception
Monday	Honors Induction Breakfast
Saturday	(after first week of classes) Honors Outreach Project

The preparation for Welcome Week begins about ten months before the first-year students set foot on campus. The academic linchpin of Welcome Week is the First-Year Reading Project. This project was inspired by a national movement toward college reading programs (Ferguson, 2006; Twiton, 2007). In addition, the highly integrated reading program of the Honors College at the University of Massachusetts Commonwealth College, known as the Dean's Book Club, also proved to be a wonderful resource (www.comcol.umass.edu; Bartlett, 2003).

Our program staff compiles a list of suggested books from a number of sources, including campus best-seller lists, other reading programs, and suggestions from faculty, staff, and students. Working with a committee of four

students, four faculty members, and four administrative/staff members, we discuss the books they read and recommend a book to be selected for the First-Year Reading Project. So many of our students want to participate in the process that we have created a separate group known as “Honors Readers,” and thirty students read possible selections over the semester break and make recommendations to the smaller committee. Once a book is selected, usually by the end of January, we work with the library to create a “webliography” that, like a bibliography, includes a list of interviews the author has done, more detailed information about the topics that are covered in the book, and links to videos and other media. Students are able to view the webliography on their “student portal” before coming to campus.

As Welcome Week approaches, we begin organizing an interdisciplinary faculty panel, rounding up workshop facilitators, scheduling buses for our retreat, working with the Department of Residence Life and the Center for Community Service, and planning other logistics that are necessary for Welcome Week to occur. Student preparation for Welcome Week begins during summer orientation when all students receive a copy of the First-Year Reading Project book. This book establishes a common ground for beginning conversations in the honors community during Welcome Week. The 2007 selection was Michael Patrick MacDonald’s *Easter Rising*; in 2006 it was Tracy Kidder’s *Mountains Beyond Mountains*.

The day the students move in, they sign a “participation” contract stating that they understand that all Welcome Week events are mandatory. This contract works particularly well because their parents are with them as they move in and we often hear them say “I told you it was mandatory!” Before the events get started, each student receives a folder with a detailed personal schedule for the week (see Appendix A). The folder includes personalized information on the students’ breakout group for the workshop discussions, detailed information on their Honors Outreach Project community partner, an Honors Program “Viewbook” of all of their peers, and a raffle ticket for a chance to join our author for lunch the day of his or her visit.

A WEEK OF PROGRAMMING

Welcome Week begins with a low-key **ice-cream social** sponsored by the Department of Residence Life right after the students have moved in. During this event, first-year honors students are joined by upper-class resident assistants, residence directors, and upper-class honors mentors. This event is also a way to get students from both of our residence halls together since we cannot house everyone in the 224-person hall in which we are located. After Welcome Week, we survey students on their experiences; their comments are interspersed in the text, and the survey instrument appears in Appendix B.

I loved that all the events centered on getting to know Northeastern and our new classmates. It gave everyone a comfortable place to be social and meet new people. (Student A)

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The **First-Year Reading Project** gets off the ground on the second day. The morning after students move in, everyone meets for a faculty-led panel discussion centered on the book. RAs and GAs help sign students into the event. After the panel, students break into small discussion groups. Facilitators are given a list of students, an outline of questions to help guide the discussion, and a ticket for lunch if they choose to join their group in the dining hall after the breakout discussion.

Our interdisciplinary panel includes professors from four different colleges who discuss topics from the book that are relevant to their particular fields. The goal of the experience is to allow students to see how different disciplines ask sets of questions about the reading and to move toward an introduction to interdisciplinary thinking. So, for example, for Kidder's book on social justice and health care in Haiti, a professor of engineering talked about constructing clean water systems, a professor in human services discussed issues of poverty and development, a professor in architecture talked about innovation in housing for the poor, and a professor in business talked about global microfinance initiatives. Students then move into workshops to discuss the First-Year Reading book in smaller groups. The workshops are facilitated by faculty and staff from all over campus, including the Dean of Arts and Sciences. Students have a chance to discuss and reflect upon the topics discussed by the faculty panel as well as offer their own thoughts and opinions within their breakout groups.

I liked that it wasn't just a series of icebreakers . . . It was a way for us all to get to know each other without the cliché name-sharing over and over again. (Student B)

The third day students are whisked off campus to attend an **all-day team-building retreat** at Northeastern's Ashland Campus. The Warren Conference Center is located just forty-five minutes west of Boston. We hire group facilitators who challenge the students throughout the day with both physical and mental tasks. The minute the students step off of the buses, they are broken up into four groups in which they will remain throughout the day-long round robin of activities, including a high ropes course element. Students are challenged to step out of their comfort zones and rely on the trust of others to complete the team-building tasks and games. Once again, RAs and honors mentors are a vital part of the day's activities. They facilitate the bus rides and participate in the activities with the first-year students.

I really enjoyed the ropes course and getting to meet other people. At first, I was dreading the course and the day because it didn't sound interesting and sounded like some corny activity. After completing the course, my perspective totally changed and it was a really fun day. I'm so glad it was mandatory . . . (Student C)

It was things that put some of us out of our element and it was cool to see how each person reacted. (Student D)

This past year we added an opportunity for our students to assist with campus-wide move-in activities; while in principle it is a good idea for honors students to give back to the NU community from the beginning, in reality the move-in is already so well organized that our students had little to do. We will probably look for another type of give-back experience for next year.

The majority of Welcome Week is based around the **First-Year Reading Project** book and the **author's visit** to campus. On the fifth day of Welcome Week, seven students join the author for lunch. Earlier in the week, students enter a raffle to have this opportunity. Once the author arrives in the early afternoon, he or she meets with the Honors Program staff and then heads over to a catered lunch with the students as well as other students, faculty, and staff who facilitate Honors Welcome Week. After lunch, the author addresses the entire first-year honors class and answers student questions. The address is then followed by a book signing and reception.

I also really enjoyed listening to Michael Patrick MacDonald and hearing about his perspective of his book. It was fascinating meeting him and I am so glad he could sign my book. (Student C)

Having Michael Patrick MacDonald come to NU made me feel like a VIP. (Student E)

I was able to have lunch with him and that made the experience by far the best of the week. (Student F)

The annual **Honors Induction Breakfast** is on Monday morning, the sixth day of our Welcome Week. This event is a formal welcome to the students from members of the campus community such as the Dean of Admissions, the Director of Residence Life, and the Vice-Provost for Undergraduate Education. The breakfast ends with a pinning ceremony for the students, officially welcoming them to the Northeastern University Honors Program, followed by a class photo.

I really enjoyed how these events helped to create a feeling of community among the honors students. (Student G)

The culmination of Welcome Week is the **Honors Outreach Project**, which takes place the Saturday after classes begin. Throughout the spring and summer, we work with the Center for Community Service, which helps us plan this event. At their summer orientation, students select an issue area for their service project such as hunger, children, or the environment. Their assignments are given to them at the beginning of Welcome Week when they get their personalized schedules.

On the day of the event, the students all meet in the morning to break up into their assigned groups, led by honors mentors, and go out to serve their new community. Projects may include painting a fence, helping teachers decorate

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classrooms, or packaging food at a local shelter. Last fall, students and upper-class group leaders completed about 1,800 hours of community service.

I thought the Outreach Program was a good way to remind students all they have to offer and to make students aware of their surroundings. I also feel that by having this outreach program, more students will be likely to volunteer on their own. (Student H)

POST-WELCOME WEEK PROGRAMMING

The first year we offered Welcome Week, we all felt that we lost the momentum during the term by not having some type of follow-up academic experience that built upon this week. This year we feel that we have effectively been able to build on that positive energy. Once again, the ideas and resources of NCHC were critical in this development. In 2006, a group of students accompanied us to the annual NCHC meetings in Philadelphia. Their assignment was to attend workshops and presentations on first-year courses. American University presented a particularly helpful model. The students who attended the NCHC meetings established a committee in spring 2007 to get a course off the ground. We now offer a new course required for all incoming honors students. The course, *Enhancing Honors 101*, is team-taught by upper-class honors mentors and the Director of the Honors Program. The course introduces all first-year students to the larger opportunities available in the program as they begin to chart a plan for their undergraduate years; it includes advising opportunities, information on fellowships and basic navigation skills for the students' first year.

With the recent restructuring of the university's general education requirements, we were also able to develop the *First-Year Inquiry Series*, inaugurated in fall 2007. The courses in this series are designed to meet the requirements of comparative understanding of cultures, social sciences, arts and humanities, and science and technology. We offer courses in both the fall and spring. One of the unexpected consequences of the fall course on *Ethics and the World Religions* is that at least several students are now going to major in religion; that must have made for some lively Thanksgiving table conversations this past fall!

COST

Our annual budget for Welcome Week activities hovers around \$76,000, or \$230 per student. The off-campus ropes course and the First-Year Reading Project make up the bulk of the cost. The off-campus day of programming, including transportation, food, and facilitators, costs approximately \$125 per student. The types of events that occur throughout the day, minus the ropes course, could be recreated on campus with student facilitators keeping the costs to a minimum for smaller budgets and programs.

The first-year reading book and speaker fee also comprise a large part of the cost. We are able to secure a 40% discount on books from the campus

bookstore because we order them in bulk. Programs that do not have a significant budget to cover these costs could do without a speaker and still have programming and events, including a panel discussion and smaller breakout sessions using faculty, staff, and graduate students to facilitate discussions.

Our Welcome Week staff includes three professionals, a staff assistant, and two part-time graduate students. We also have the support of Residential Life and numerous upper-class honors students. We could not run such a program without their help.

CONCLUSION

Through Welcome Week programming and the new curriculum initiatives for first-year students, we have made significant strides in first-year programming. Students have opportunities to meet their classmates and interact with upper-class students in a variety of settings beyond the classroom. We feel that we have effectively met the challenges of integrating a first-year living learning community and have established close ties with units across campus. An unexpected consequence of these activities is increased awareness of the activities of the Honors Program campus-wide and a greater appreciation of the opportunities and contributions that the program and our students make to the larger university community and the city. Increasingly, faculty, staff, and other campus programs want to collaborate with us on a variety of initiatives, and the opportunities for all our students will grow as a result.

Another consequence of the initiatives is the positive effect that we are having on recruiting students to Northeastern University and the Honors Program. Last spring and this fall, our students have spread the word about activities that have "made" the experience for them. Indicators of our success range from parents writing to find out what the book is so that they can read it to our hefty over-subscription in honors this fall.

We also would be remiss not to acknowledge once again the generous resources that our peers in NCHC have shared with us. Starting with the talents of our NCHC consultant team led by Bob Spurrier, together with Rosalie Otero and Bruce Carter, we have used the ideas and talents of others to help us move our program to the next stage. We look forward to future NCHC meetings where we will have a chance both to share our ideas and to learn from other programs how to make our program stronger.

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APPENDIX A
YOUR PERSONALIZED WELCOME WEEK SCHEDULE
STUDENT EXAMPLE #1

Thursday August 30th

Your group for the Easter Rising Discussion and room is: Group A 162 Meserve

Friday August 31st

Report to the Forsyth Circle by 7:45am to sign in on the bus—give your ID to check in.

Saturday September 1st

Please report to Frost Lounge in Ell Hall to sign in. Your Shift for move in help is: 10am–12pm

Sunday September 2nd

Please report to the Solomon Court at 1:30pm to sign in. Make sure to bring your book to be signed by Michael Patrick MacDonald!

Monday September 3rd

Report to the Curry Student Center, Indoor Quad by 9:00am to sign in. Your Placement for the Honors Outreach Project is: Nuestra Comunidad

How will you get there?

You will be taking the T—your group leader has a pass for you.

What to bring for lunch:

Your organization will be providing lunch OR bring your own lunch.

Special Instructions:

Volunteers must wear closed-toe shoes. Don't forget—wear your NU Honors shirt and comfortable clothes that you don't mind getting a little dirty!

APPENDIX B

HONORS PROGRAM WELCOME WEEK ACTIVITIES SURVEY 2007

1. How would you rate the Honors Program Welcome Week?

- a. Excellent
- b. Good
- c. Average
- d. Fair
- e. Poor

2. Which of the Welcome Week events do you think we should offer again next year? (select all that apply)

- Wednesday Night—Ice Cream Social
- Thursday—Panelist and breakout groups
- Friday—Ashland Ropes Course
- Saturday—Help with Move In
- Sunday—Speaker, book signing
- Monday—Honors Induction Breakfast
- Saturday—Community Service Awareness

3. Please rate each program:

- a. Wednesday Night—Ice Cream Social
 Excellent Good Average Fair Poor
- b. Thursday—Panelist and breakout groups
 Excellent Good Average Fair Poor
- c. Friday—Ashland Ropes Course
 Excellent Good Average Fair Poor
- d. Saturday—Help with Move In
 Excellent Good Average Fair Poor
- e. Sunday—Speaker, book signing
 Excellent Good Average Fair Poor
- f. Monday—Honors Induction Breakfast
 Excellent Good Average Fair Poor
- g. Saturday—Community Service Awareness
 Excellent Good Average Fair Poor

4. What did you like about the events?

5. What do you think could be improved?

6. Was the First Year Reading Project a valuable experience?

Yes No

7. Please rate the Honors Program First Year Reading Project book, *Easter Rising*:

Excellent Good Average Fair Poor

8. Do you have any suggestions for next year?

9. Would you like to be involved in any of the following student committees:

a. Honors First Year Reading Project Planning Committee

Welcome Week Planning Committee

Global Awareness Committee: World as Text

Alternative Spring Break Committee

Honors Student Council

b. Please provide your name and email if you would like us to contact you about joining these committees: _____
