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LINDSAY ROBERTS AND JESSIE SALMON

Creating Faculty-Student Interaction

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TOWSON UNIVERSITY

Creating a thriving community is a challenge for any honors program or college, especially for a program in transition like the Honors College at Towson University. The Honors College has approximately nine hundred students out of about sixteen thousand undergraduate students, and within the past three years it has undergone major curricular and structural changes. To keep honors students and faculty connected and invested in their honors experience through this transition period, the Honors College has focused on establishing a tighter bond between faculty and students, one that is unique to the college and recognized by the university as a whole.

In the fall of 2005, the Honors College Student Council (HCSC) was formed. Like any student organization, we have experienced the triumphs and pitfalls of becoming an established group in the honors and university communities. We continue to evolve from a small group of dedicated honors students to a fully developed organization that includes students, faculty, and staff. Even though anyone at the university can be a member and honors students are automatically considered members, the HCSC is currently operating with about thirty active student members who attend at least a couple of events and several meetings each semester. The purpose of the HCSC is to create community among the Honors College students and to connect students with faculty. While we host typical student events such as game nights, trips to local museums and attractions, community service projects, and fundraisers, we also facilitate faculty and student interaction in a manner that is unique to our organization at Towson University. Faculty and students connect on social, personal, and academic levels through the outlets of our Seminar Night and "Generation Jeopardy" game.

Seminar Night is held once a semester to provide students with information about upcoming honors seminars from the professors who will be teaching them. Because of the nature of these seminars and their varying topics, students often cannot get a good sense of the course content based on the university catalog description. At Seminar Night, each professor has time to summarize his or her course and its basic requirements. As a result, students are able to make informed decisions about course registration. Seminar Night is beneficial to students because it provides them information about upcoming courses, and it increases student-faculty interaction outside the classroom.

CREATING FACULTY-STUDENT INTERACTION

Seminar Night allows students to feel more connected to their honors teachers, and *vice versa*, as they make initial contact with each other. Students gain a sense of what to expect in the courses they are considering by hearing about requirements directly from the professor. Seminar Night also gives faculty the opportunity to answer questions and receive feedback from the students. This preliminary dialogue about upcoming courses sparks student interest in subjects to be taught. Because of such conversation, students come to class at the beginning of the semester with a more personal connection to the subject that enhances the in-class experience.

The most successful event that the HCSC has sponsored thus far was what we called Generation Jeopardy. This student vs. faculty trivia game consisted of questions about pop culture, academic subjects, and random facts from a variety of decades. Three students, including the two authors of this essay, generated the questions. Some of the questions and categories were as follows: "Name the television show: Let's set sail on a three-hour tour"; a Bond category with questions ranging from "Set home run record in 2001 while with the San Francisco Giants" to "Electrostatic donations forming lattices"; and a music category with songs downloaded onto a PowerPoint presentation where the players had to name the song title, artist, and more.

The game was operated via PowerPoint on a screen. Rotations of three students and three teachers stood at the front and answered questions as teams. The three students on one team and three teachers on the other were the only ones answering a set of five questions. Everyone was responsible for keeping the rotation going to encourage a hundred percent participation and to ensure that a few people would not be answering questions during the whole game. Fortunately, the father of one of the students constructed two light-up buzzers for the event. The three students and three faculty members stood around a buzzer; when someone hit the button, a light came on to indicate which team had answered first.

To encourage faculty participation, members of the HCSC decorated personalized invitations and delivered them to their favorite faculty members. The personal invitation not only created a special connection between the student and his or her professor but made the professor more likely and willing to attend.

The night was a great success, and, although the students were defeated, both teams enjoyed the event. Outbursts of laughter from faculty and students alike, especially when a professor broke out in the song "Jeremiah was a Bullfrog," created a fun and relaxed atmosphere not typically seen in a classroom. The room was buzzing with excitement as the competition intensified, and we all forgot that college professors were in the commons room of an honors residence hall.

Generation Jeopardy has had lasting effects on the faculty and students, especially as we now prepare for this year's game. Knowing they will be inviting their favorite faculty members, they have been plotting whom to invite. The returning faculty members who have sent in their RSVP for this year's event have indicated that they are going to continue the faculty tradition of beating

the students; two biology professors, who are good friends and attended last year's game, remind us every time we pass them in the hallways that the faculty will win. Another sign of our success is that a representative from another student organization asked if we would help them invite faculty to one of their events since we have "connections." We are developing a university-wide reputation of being the organization connected with the faculty.

Faculty-student interaction offers numerous benefits for students and faculty. The chance to get to know and appreciate each other as individuals outside of class provides potential for a better in-class experience. Since teachers get to know the students in a more relaxed atmosphere, they can better understand students, which can benefit their teaching. Students participating in activities such as Seminar Night and Generation Jeopardy have the opportunity to make connections with faculty whom they might not otherwise encounter since, once students are engaged in their major, they do not often have the chance to connect with teachers outside of their department. Through such interdisciplinary interaction, students gain a better sense of opportunities available to them.

Through the hard work of dedicated honors students and faculty, the Honors College at Towson University has found some successful ways to cultivate an honors community. Seminar Night and Generation Jeopardy enhance our classroom learning experience and help us build a community among the honors students and the greater university. As we continue to grow, we eagerly seek new pathways to encourage beneficial faculty-student interaction.

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