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Honoring Experiential Education

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INTRODUCTION

In the Center for Honors, Scholars and Leadership at the University of Northern Colorado (UNC), we are actively pursuing expansion of our experiential-education offerings and are working collaboratively with a variety of community partners and key campus offices to develop, track, and promote opportunities for students. Our efforts focus on providing honors and leadership students with a variety of experiential-education placements and giving students across the campus opportunities to engage more fully in service, internships, and research. Central to our efforts is a philosophy that all students can choose to exercise honor in their academic careers not solely through outstanding achievement but also through out-of-classroom activities and engagement with community. Honors programs and colleges are in a unique position to foster such student experiences and promote a culture of honorable civic engagement on our campuses.

BRIEF BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON EDUCATION TRADITIONS INFORMING OUR ACTIONS

In moving to expand experiential-education offerings within our center and on our campus, we have drawn from a variety of philosophical traditions within education. The promotion of democratic and peaceable societies, views on civic and global engagement, and national honors traditions of student-centered learning have all informed our actions.

EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION AND PEACEABLE DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES

The philosopher John Dewey was a major contributor to the experiential-education tradition and wrote extensively of its importance to democratic society. In *Democracy and Education,* he proposed that "since democracy stands in principle for free interchange, for social continuity, it must develop a theory of knowledge which sees in knowledge the method by which one experience is

made available in giving direction and meaning to another" (2007, p. 248). Providing practical guidelines for such educational delivery in *Experience and Education*, he argued for "a sound philosophy of experience" (Dewey, 1938, p. 91) with educators serving as facilitators connecting learning to students' experiences; helping shape student understanding through "cooperative enterprise, not dictation" (Dewey, 1938, p. 72); and, ultimately, aiding in group social development as well as the development of individual judgment and exercise of power (Dewey, 1938, pp. 56–58).

Elise Boulding, renowned for her extensive academic work on the study and promotion of peace, has noted the power of experiential education and service-learning, in particular, in promoting peaceable communities (2000, p. 232). In *Cultures of Peace,* she expresses her appreciation of experiential education for its ability to connect students to "real-life situations," expand student "personal development and capacity for intellectual analysis," and help students gain "hands-on peacebuilding [sic] skills" (Boulding, 2000, p. 231). Such activities are part of "open learning systems" that Boulding sees as rooted in "values of human relationship and relationship to the planet" and that she believes universities ought to pursue to connect students to the world meaningfully and peaceably (2000, p. 232).

EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION AND CIVIC AND GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT

Leaders in both the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) have advocated for experiential education as a means of fostering civic and global engagement in our time. In a May 2008 concept paper for AASCU, George Mehaffy, Vice President for Academic Leadership and Change, and Harry Boyte, the Co-Director of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the University of Minnesota, challenged institutions of higher education to remain connected to the communities in which their students are themselves engaged (p. 3). Mehaffy and Boyte stated their belief that higher education ought to be promoting "citizen learning" that connects students to place and gives them opportunities to develop the "skills and learning habits" to live fully and integrally in community (Boyte & Mehaffy, p. 5). Incorporating both local and global perspectives in their Greater Expectations initiative, AAC&U leadership also declared in 2002:

> Liberal education in all fields will have the strongest impact when studies look beyond the classroom to the world's major questions, asking students to apply their developing analytical skills and ethical judgment to significant problems in the world around them. By valuing cooperative as well as individual performance, diversity as a resource for learning, real solutions to unscripted problems, and creativity as well as critical thinking, this newly pragmatic liberal education will both prepare

students for a dynamic economy and build civic capacity at home and abroad. (p. xii)

EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION AND NATIONAL HONORS TRADITION

In undergraduate honors tradition, experiential education has figured prominently in curricular and co-curricular programming for decades. In the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) monograph on *Teaching and Learning in Honors*, Rinda West describes honors as education that seeks to "empower students to take ownership of course material and . . . foster learning through active engagement" (2002, p. 3). The *Teaching and Learning* monograph offers many examples of the strong communal nature in honors (Fuiks, 2002), with students working collaboratively "to teach themselves and each other, as well as enlighten the instructor" (Edman, 2002, p. 106). NCHC's *Place as Text* monograph further affirms the role of experiential education in honors-based studies (Braid & Long, 2000). Highlighting Honors Semesters, for example, William W. Daniel connects the "active learning" (2000, p. 9) in place-based education to David Kolb's theory on learning through experience (1984). Student-centered learning is at the core of honors education tradition and richly enhances student experiences on our campuses.

EXPANDING EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES AT UNC

Getting our House in Order

In the fall of 2005, the UNC Honors Program, the President's Leadership Program, and a variety of smaller undergraduate scholarly programs at the University of Northern Colorado were formally charged with working collaboratively under a center structure. The charge came from the provost following two years of strategic planning in which faculty, staff, and students from honors, scholars, and leadership areas on campus laid the groundwork for the center design.

In establishing the Center for Honors, Scholars and Leadership, we jointly made a commitment to enrich the university campus through academic opportunity, scholarship, leadership, civic engagement, and community service. Our mission provided immediate benefits to honors and leadership students through expanded promotion of national and international student exchange, internships, field experience, and community service opportunities. Additionally, we instituted undergraduate and graduate course-by-contract options to allow students to engage in independent non-thesis research as a means of enriching their learning.

In the fall of 2007, center faculty, through the direct contributions of our award-winning Life of the Mind program, focused more specifically on student

civic engagement in relation to experiential education, and we began to think about how the center might expand our offerings to all undergraduates. Subsequently, we began delivering three-credit semester-long courses in which students at large, as well as those in honors and leadership, could actively apply knowledge and theory to real-world experiences. In the first course offered that fall, students identified local concerns of importance to them, such as gang violence in our community and child-care needs on our campus. In spring, a select few had the opportunity to engage in cross-cultural and international engagement through a course on Western and Middle-Eastern perspectives and took part in weekly video uplinks with other students in the United States and the Middle East through Soliya, an organization based in Massachusetts that is "using new technologies to facilitate dialogue between students from diverse backgrounds across the globe" (Soliya, 2008).

In both Life of the Mind courses, student connections to local and global communities were enhanced, and students were able to take part in a dynamic exchange of ideas and meaningfully contribute to community through projects aimed at deepening their understanding of the issues they examined. The courses also gave us a new foundation from which to launch expanded opportunities for experiential education on our campus and to focus more specifically on civic-engagement initiatives.

Reaching out to Community Partners

Our new curricular offerings in experiential education and our focused efforts to foster student civic engagement have led the center leadership to form partnerships with a variety of local, regional, and national organizations in order to generate service, internship, and research-based opportunities for our students. At the local level, for example, we have helped lead the establishment of a community Youth Gang Prevention/Intervention Initiative and are working with our students and members of the local school district, law enforcement, and other organizations to help address issues related to gang violence; students are helping with after-school programs for at-risk youth, tutoring at-risk high school students, and conducting independent honors thesis research on how gangs and gang violence are portrayed in the local media. Also at the local level, our honors and leadership students have been collaboratively expanding community service opportunities by partnering with organizations such as Habitat for Humanity and the United Way. At the regional level, we have worked with Colorado Campus Compact and AmeriCorps/VISTA to obtain AmeriCorps stipends for students willing to commit to long-term service placements, and nationally we are one of the lead universities within the National Collegiate Honors Council helping to develop Partners in the Parks placements for honors students in our own program and across the nation.

By seeking to focus on civic engagement within the broader experiential-education tradition, we have, in short, found ourselves and our students passionately connected to community and actively redefining what it means to

take part in honors experiences on our campus. While not all students may be eligible for or, in truth, interested in undertaking the rigors of our honors program requirements, those affiliated with the center can engage in meaningful experiential-education placements and find ways to apply their in-classroom knowledge to out-of-classroom experiences. Students from across campus can take part in the center's Life of the Mind courses, community service activities, and AmeriCorps service placements just by demonstrating a willingness and commitment to engage.

Coordinating with Campus Student Affairs Units

The metamorphosis in the Center for Honors, Scholars and Leadership has inspired us to forge new university connections to further benefit the students in our center and across campus. Since the fall of 2008, we have been working with our Student Activities Community Connections office and with Career Services to actively track all service, internship, and student research opportunities brought to our attention through campus and community partners. Focusing our civic engagement initiatives through collaboration with these student affairs units has proved beneficial in centralizing the data collection for such placements and managing the work in fostering the related community connections.

Early on, we had important discussions on what kinds of data management tools would be needed to track service, internship, and research placements. Career Services Online (CSO), an online database maintained by Career Services on our campus, was identified as capable of supporting our collaborative efforts. The CSO system allows students and faculty, as well as employers and organizations such as governmental agencies and nonprofits, to have online access to job listings and career events; it also allows for consistent management of contacts with those employers and organizations. With the approval of our assistant vice president of undergraduate studies, CSO data tracking has subsequently been expanded to include service and service-learning placements generated from the Student Activities Community Connections office; it continues to maintain the internship contacts and placements generated by Career Services staff; and it now tracks the service, internship, and research opportunities being developed with community partners engaged with the Center for Honors, Scholars and Leadership. With CSO features for managing these contacts, automatic, system-generated emails are sent to community partners to notify them of expiring placements, confirm event-related updates, and request additional placement opportunities for students. The comprehensive nature of the data system is helping us build integrity into the coordination of the placements and will help ensure good working relationships between the university and our external partners going forward.

Our next phases of implementation include making sure that CSO keyword search functions are fully utilized to help students quickly find placements of interest to them. We will be formalizing the processes between

Student Activities, Career Services, and the Center for Honors, Scholars and Leadership for contacting community partners so that we have a uniform and mutually supportive system for fostering placement opportunities; such processes should also eliminate any potential future confusion caused by two or more offices inadvertently contacting the same employer or organization. Additionally, Career Services is planning for the development of CSO web portals tailored to specific student populations and based out of academic department or unit sites that the students access on a regular basis.

Assessing and Supporting Student Learning

In our work, we remain mindful that the delivery of experiential-education opportunities—in whatever form—must be based in appropriate student-development theory and be measured with effective assessment tools to meet students' developmental needs. Since we recognize that "education in an academic discipline represents for the individual student a process of socialization to the norms in that field" (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 213) and since we understand that the role of our honors program is to support the academic disciplines on campus while providing enhanced opportunities for student learning, we have worked closely with faculty in all colleges at the university to develop appropriate assessment tools to aid students in their learning and help us in evaluating their experiences. Additionally, we have worked closely with Career Services to standardize our center's student learning agreements and liability waivers as well as provide students with technology-based resources in relation to their honors service and internship placements. Finally, our assessment of experiential education has benefitted from the inclusion of student portfolio development (Zubizarreta, 2004)—both print and electronic.

HONORS IN THE VANGUARD OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Those of us in the Center for Honors, Scholars and Leadership recognize, in our roles as teachers and researchers, that we have a responsibility to support and foster educational experiences that aid in student moral and ethical development as part of our university's mission and the broader social contract to which the university adheres as a public institution. We are seeking to provide experiential-education opportunities to help students apply their learning and come to understand values and principles of civil, democratic, and peaceable societies. Through our active engagement with community and campus partners we hope to support the development of a mutually respectful and ethically conscientious global citizenry one student at a time.

Honors programs and colleges have consistently been in the vanguard in helping foster such new avenues for student learning on their campuses. As stated in NCHC's Basic Characteristics,

> The Honors Program [or college], in distinguishing itself from the rest of the institution, serves as a kind of laboratory within which faculty can try things they have always wanted to try but for which they could find no suitable outlet. When such efforts are demonstrated to be successful, they may well become institutionalized thereby raising the general level of education within the college or university for all students. In this connection, the honors curriculum should serve as a prototype for things that can work campus-wide in the future. (National Collegiate Honors Council, 2007)

Indeed, our evolving activities and philosophy on experiential education are helping reshape our campus and our community, challenging us in the great tradition of honors to think about how our Honors Program can contribute more meaningfully to undergraduate student education at the University of Northern Colorado.

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