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Creating Opportunities for Peer Leadership in Honors Education

MARIE E. LEICHLITER

WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

Tell me and I'll forget; show me and I may I remember; involve me and I'll understand.
—Chinese Proverb

INTRODUCTION

As honors educators, we are privileged to work with exceptional students who are also some of the most engaged and motivated students on campus. These students often seek opportunities within their honors experience to study abroad, join community service organizations, conduct research, participate in internships, and develop their leadership skills. We are in a unique position to provide leadership opportunities while teaching students about the theory, methods, and processes involved in the decisions they make every day. Providing intentional, rigorous, and intellectually challenging educational opportunities for students to develop leadership skills is arguably a core mission of honors programs and colleges, and the West Virginia University Honors College has developed several models for developing such experiences that other honors educators may find useful.

OUR PHILOSOPHY OF HONORS EDUCATION

An honors education should provide students with a distinctive academic experience that prepares them for life after their undergraduate career. Students should learn how to think for themselves, not merely reiterate the thoughts of their professors. They must know how to read for understanding of content, how to write a thesis that demonstrates their knowledge, and how to connect the unconnected in a manner that allows them to develop innovative ideas.

“The single most important feature of any honors program is its people: the students who learn there and the faculty who teach them. Next would have to come the substance of what they teach and learn together: the curriculum” (Schuman 33). Like the majority of honors colleges and programs, we offer a combination of course categories: (1) honors sections of regular courses, (2) honors add-on sections that accompany regular courses, (3) special topic honors courses, and (4) research courses.

Both the courses and the co-curricular activities at the West Virginia University Honors College are designed to encourage students to become

independent, creative, and self-motivated learners. Students are challenged to “think beyond the textbook” and are often given real-world tasks that provide them with opportunities to use the professional skills and knowledge they will need in graduate school and/or their careers. We urge honors students to conduct independent research in their field, participate in major-related internships, and study abroad to earn honors academic credit. Additionally, the honors college has a number of peer-led programs designed to provide opportunities for students to develop, refine, and practice their leadership, communication, and critical thinking skills. Students can follow a variety of avenues to become leaders in the honors college, and they have responsibility for the social and academic programming upon which the honors college depends.

PEER LEADERSHIP

The definition of the term leadership has been discussed and debated for many decades. For our purposes, leadership is defined as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse 5). Defined in this manner, leadership is a series of actions that occur between a leader and followers rather than a set of characteristics or traits. “Process implies that a leader affects and is affected by followers. It emphasizes that leadership is not a linear one-way event, but rather an interactive event. When leadership is defined in this way, it becomes available to everyone” (Northouse 5).

Innovators in industry, education, and the non-profit sector all search for individuals with leadership skills, and developing such skills is vital to students’ undergraduate experience. Our honors college especially encourages peer leadership whereby students influence, support, and serve as role models for their peers. A peer leadership program provides students an opportunity to “assist in the development of other students’ leadership skills, knowledge, or abilities” while honing their own proficiency (Haber 70).

Peer leadership programs, often offered in public high schools and four-year institutions, give upper-class students the opportunity to serve as leaders by assisting with extracurricular activities, course teaching, tutoring, and other pursuits. Within academia, a wide variety of peer leader programs exist to cultivate peer leadership (Tiven). The following examples illustrate some of the opportunities for peer leadership at the West Virginia University Honors College.

CO-MENTORS

The honors college’s first-year seminar, Honors 199, is a one-credit-hour gateway orientation course designed to assist students as they transition into life at the university and specifically the honors college. This seminar provides an active classroom environment where students are engaged in discussion, debate, and collaborative learning activities that enhance both their academic proficiencies and social skills.

Two undergraduate peer educators who serve in the roles of mentor, facilitator, and instructor lead each Honors 199 section. Called “co-mentors,” these peer educators help to shape and mold the first-year students’ perceptions of both the honors college and the university. The honors students selected to serve as co-mentors must therefore be chosen for their ability to serve as positive role models for other students in the program. In a training program during the spring term prior to teaching, co-mentors study basic learning theory and teaching techniques. During their teaching semester, they enroll in a teaching practicum course. Co-mentors are required to teach one orientation section and complete academic coursework as part of the practicum experience.

Co-mentors have two primary goals: (1) “guide students from dependent, ‘childlike’ learning that they were accustomed to in high school toward more independent, ‘adultlike’ learning that is expected of them in college” (Lipsky 2) and (2) help transitional students learn how to learn.

HONORS HALL PEER LEADERS

Honors Hall peer leaders are upper-class honors college members who function as live-in tutors with special permission to live in the freshman-only residence hall in exchange for assisting in the Honors Hall community. In our residential college setting, peer leaders serve as community role models for their fellow students. Therefore, peer leaders are carefully selected based on their level of involvement in the residence hall, scholarship, and extracurricular activities.

Upon selection to the program, students enroll in a one-semester peer leadership course, designed as an orientation to peer education, where they are introduced to the basic principles, theories, and practices of peer tutoring. Peer leaders are required to enroll each semester in a course where they receive training, support, and skills development as peer tutors.

First-year tutors enroll in a yearlong advanced peer leadership course that is structured to provide advanced techniques, discussion of educational theory, and a forum for the exchange of ideas between peer leaders. The students read materials from a variety of sources, including Sally Lipsky’s *A Training Guide for College Tutors and Peer Educators*, and they apply the theories to their tutoring.

In addition to tutoring, first-year peer leaders each select an academic community project. Many peer leaders plan, organize, implement, and then assess a series of academic and/or professional development workshops for honors college members, facilitating workshop sessions based on their areas of expertise. This year, students led sessions on finding internships, résumé writing, Rogerian argument skills, preparing for the Pharmacy College Admission Test (PCAT), applying to pharmacy school, study skills, and advice on taking exams. Other peer leaders have designed a course handbook, created honors-relevant blogs, and planned themed event nights like “Don’t Gamble With Your Education.”

Peer leaders who have completed tutor training and then tutored for one year may enroll in the yearlong peer leadership practicum course. The practicum is designed to provide upper-class peer leaders the opportunity to support and mentor newly selected peer leaders. The practicum students prepare weekly lesson plans, hold office hours, facilitate discussions, and instruct the new peer leaders as they train to begin tutoring.

HONORS COLLEGE AMBASSADORS

The honors college has two ambassador positions: the Academic and Community Ambassador and the First-Year Ambassador. In these vital student leadership positions, the ambassadors are liaisons between the honors college and our various stakeholders; they attend crucial meetings, promote the honors student perspective, and often represent the honors college.

The Academic and Community Ambassador is responsible for leading the Honors Student Association; planning philanthropic, academic, and social opportunities for students; assisting with the coordination of new student orientation during the summer; and providing support at various recruiting events throughout the academic year.

The First-Year Ambassador's primary function is to assist incoming freshmen as they acclimate to the university and the honors college. The first-year ambassador places all the freshmen in their orientation courses and works with the co-mentors of these sections. The First-Year Ambassador is also responsible for planning overnight visitations, advising at new student orientations, helping organize the honors college annual retreat, and providing support at various recruiting events.

The ambassador positions are open to all upperclassmen in the honors college. Members apply, are interviewed by a committee of honors college faculty, and are selected based on grade point average, honors college involvement, leadership abilities, and communication skills.

HONORS COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL DELEGATES

High school delegates are honors college members who volunteer to return to their high school, and often other high schools near their hometowns, to share stories, experiences, and information related to the honors college. These students attend two one-hour training workshops and receive professional nametags, brochures, and other honors college program materials.

Current students are our best spokespersons because high school students relate well to them. Current research indicates that high school students prefer raw, unedited truth over flashy marketing; they would rather watch rough YouTube quality video than Final Cut Pro-edited footage (Eduventures). Many of these students are more likely to pay attention when one of their peers posts accolades on Facebook than when the dean visits and encourages them to apply. Our students can meet them where they are and be our best publicists.

HONORS HALL COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION

The Honors Hall Community Organization plans, implements, and evaluates activities in Honors Hall. Members of this group must enroll in a course designed to introduce students to the event-planning process. Students write proposals, generate budgets, critique the work of their peers, provide constructive criticism for revision, serve as a council to approve activities, implement the activities, and conduct the evaluation of activities.

Students in the Community Organization review activity proposals generated by various student organizations in Honors Hall. Student groups frequently suggest that the honors college sponsor functions for the honors membership; they submit proposals, including detailed budgets, and the Honors Hall Community Organization members then determine if the activities will appeal to honors college members, if the expenditure is one that will benefit enough students, and if the proposal should be funded. Each semester, the Honors Hall Community Organization has a budget and must work within the resources they are given.

THEORETICAL SUPPORT FOR PEER LEADERSHIP IN HONORS

The past two decades have seen a significant increase in peer-led programming in both academic and student services (Newton & Ender). Student leaders are taking on the responsibility to direct sex education programs, serve as mentors, manage team-learning programs, teach other students, and lead student government associations. Numerous learning theories—including theories of reasoned action, social learning, and participatory education—support peer-led models in post-secondary education and indicate the positive effects of peer-led learning (Bandura; Ajzen & Fishbein; Freire; Newton & Ender). Students often prefer to talk with peers who have similar recent experiences, views of current events, and interests. “That students feel more compatible with a peer educator who has similar learning styles and who approaches the world from a similar generational perspective is exemplified in the Beloit College Mindset List, a yearly publishing of the events that have occurred and affected the lives of a contemporary cohort of students (see <http://www.beloit.edu/mindset>)” (Newton & Ender 9).

RESOURCES

Peer leader programs can be modified and implemented at institutions of any size. At West Virginia University, we have honors college administrators whose time is partially dedicated to the instruction of honors courses, and one such administrator has a sizable portion of her responsibilities devoted to coordinating the peer education programs. Other institutions, depending on their budget, might elect to use graduate teaching assistants, adjunct faculty, and/or staff members to coordinate leadership programs. Some of our programs are

funded exclusively from honors college dollars while others include monies from residence life. Institutions of various sizes and composition will differ in how they support peer leader programs.

Despite variations in program models, successful peer leader programs should (1) have clearly defined academic goals and objectives, (2) have opportunities for students to act as social agents of change and engage in leadership, (3) have support from university administration, faculty, staff, students, and other members of the academic community, (4) have dedicated adult leadership, (5) have an educational process that occurs over time, (6) have student-led initiatives and activities, and (7) have opportunities for students to both reflect individually and be evaluated on their leadership abilities by adult coordinators (Tiven).

CONCLUSION

Peers wield a powerful influence on the development of each other's attitudes, behaviors, and values. "A strong peer leader program has the potential to create an environment where peers can maximize their abilities to create change and, by taking action, can have a measurable impact on school climate and peer relationships" (Tiven 25). Peer leader programs should be designed to provide honors college members with opportunities to serve as young leaders. Just as with developing creativity or any other skills, individuals need opportunities to hone their leadership abilities. As administrators and educators, we should serve as facilitators of knowledge, should lead without leading and allow our students to take the reins of their education.

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