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An American Honors Program in the Arab Gulf

BYRAD YYELLAND

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INTRODUCTION

The first Western honors program to be established in the Arab Gulf is offered in Doha, Qatar, on a small satellite campus of an American university. Doha is the capital city of Qatar, a sovereign Arab state physically located on a small peninsula bordering Saudi Arabia in the south and jutting into the Persian Gulf. With a population of only 1.7 million, roughly 11 % of whom are Qatar nationals (according to the 2010 Qatar Census), Qatar “ranks as the world’s richest country per capita,” due primarily to wise investment and control of “the third largest reserves of natural gas in the world” (Greenfield). Qatar’s ruling monarchy, the Al-Thani family, has strongly supported education and research in the nation by inviting top-ranked institutions from around the world to set up campuses in Qatar. One testament to the success of this initiative is that 70% of Qatar’s population had attained a secondary degree by 2010 (Statistics Authority and the Diplomatic Institute). Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) School of the Arts was the first external institution invited to Qatar due to its ranking as the #1 American public school of art and design. Virginia Commonwealth University Qatar (VCUQatar) became the first Western university to offer an undergraduate honors program in this part of the world.

The challenge and opportunity of creating an honors program in Qatar has been adapting the concept of academic excellence to this country’s unique national vision as well as to the family- and tribe-oriented culture of its citizens. While still in its infancy, the honors program is rapidly evolving, as demonstrated, for instance, in the 2012 graduation of the first male from this originally all-female program. Like Qatar itself, the VCUQatar Honors Program reflects a commitment to cultural history and tradition while at the same time promoting rapid progress in knowledge and technology.

BACKGROUND

VCUQatar is situated within Education City, a fourteen million square-meter campus in Doha, the capital city of Qatar. As of August 2012,

Education City also houses Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar, Georgetown University School of Foreign Service Qatar, HEC Paris in Qatar, Northwestern University in Qatar, Texas A&M University at Qatar, University College London Qatar, and Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar. Harvard Law School's Institute for Global Law and Policy will join in January 2013 (Qatar Foundation, "Qatar Foundation announces collaboration . . ."). Students within Education City are able to pursue their own individual curricula but also benefit from cross-registration at the other universities (VCUQatar).

In 1995, His Highness the Amir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani established Qatar Foundation (QF) as a non-profit organization to help the people of Qatar progress into the twenty-first century through education and research. His wife, Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, is chairperson of the organization. In 1997, Her Highness asked QF to invite VCU School of the Arts to set up a campus in Doha. The design field offers a viable business option for young women in Qatar, and it was believed that formal education in design would provide these young women with opportunities beyond mere employment. The goal was to provide young women in Qatar with the ability to "assume leadership roles in business industry, and contribute in the development of the world around them" ("Jamila Visit" 153). Richard Toscan, dean of the School of the Arts, travelled to Doha to meet with officials from the Qatar Foundation, and VCU was subsequently awarded the contract to establish a small school under the name Shaqab College of Design Arts (SCODA), which was the first Western institution to establish a presence in Qatar. SCODA opened classes in September 1998, offering Bachelor of Fine Arts degrees in fashion design, graphic design, and interior design.

In 2001, the Shaqab College of Design Arts became the VCU Qatar College of Design Arts, and then in 2002 it became an official branch campus of VCU.

The first VCU degrees were awarded to students who completed their course work in Qatar in June 2002 ("Year-long VCUQ festivities"). The Doha campus featured male and female staff, but the student population was female only until September 2007, when the first male students were accepted at the campus. VCUQatar serves Qatari students but also students from around the world, including Australia, Britain, Canada, Egypt, India, Jordan, Namibia, New Zealand, Oman, Pakistan, Philippines, Sudan, Syria, Turkey, and the United States. As of May 2012, VCUQatar has produced 363 graduates.

In 2004, Christina Lindholm, then dean of VCUQatar, entered into discussion with Timothy Hulsey, dean of the VCU Honors College, regarding the possibility of establishing an honors program on the Doha campus. The VCUQatar Honors Program was launched September 2005. The impetus for

creating the program lay in VCU's promise that students in Doha would have the same educational opportunities as students on the American campuses and this included an honors education. Lindhom explained,

. . . [The honors program] was meant as an encouragement for excellence and as a recognition of the students who were doing fantastic work. Several of the students were performing at standards equal to or better than the ones on main campus. They were a very motivated and dedicated group and deserved to have the honors designation on their diplomas.

The objective of this honors program has therefore been to provide an intellectually stimulating and fulfilling environment for those students with superior academic skills and drive. The objective is consistent with Sam Schuman's argument that, "First, and most obviously, honors programs cultivate outstanding students by enriching the instructional and co-curricular careers of students of exceptional promise and/or motivation" (13).

Lindhom and Hulsey collaboratively determined the nature and process of the VCUQatar Honors Program. They chose to incorporate honors components into existing courses rather than offer separate courses for honors students because the student population was too small to make honors-only sections viable. Once Hulsey approved the adjusted syllabi for the program, he traveled to Doha for the official launch of the honors program. The VCU Honors College continues to approve each section offering an honors component before these courses can be offered. The same goes for Independent Study contracts carrying honors credit. The first honors graduating class was in 2009, and as of May 2012, twenty students have graduated with academic honors. The first male honors student was in the 2012 cohort.

Since its inception, approximately one in seven VCUQatar students have participated in the honors program. A format for strong academic learning, the VCUQatar Honors Program is an active contributor to Qatar's national plan for the future.

QATAR NATIONAL VISION 2030

"In November 2008 His Highness Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, Heir Apparent, launched *Qatar National Vision 2030 (QNV 2030)*" (General Secretariat for Development Planning [2012] iii). The focus of this vision is to protect Qatar's traditional Islamic values while developing long-term goals for the country as it moves into the future. The goal is to transform Qatar's economy from carbon-based to knowledge-based and, in so doing provide substantive contributions to the nation of Qatar, the Arab Gulf region, and the world (General Secretariat for Development Planning [2012]). "The National

Vision aims at transforming Qatar into an advanced country by 2030, capable of sustaining its own development and providing for a high standard of living for all of its people and generations to come” (General Secretariat for Development Planning [2008] 2).

Qatar’s national vision rests on four pillars: human development, social development, economic development and environmental development (General Secretariat for Development Planning [2008]). Within the overarching parameters of this vision, the Qatar Foundation (QF) is responsible for growth in science and research, community development, and education (Qatar Foundation, “Qatar’s journey . . .”). QF’s vision for education is to focus on “bringing world-class education, work experience and career opportunities to Qatar’s young people” (“Qatar Foundation’s Three Pillars”). VCUQatar and its honors program are active contributors to this vision.

STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

In the first few years of the program, students were identified as possible honors participants by way of faculty recommendations and review of their grade point averages. Dean Lindholm recalled strong interest in the program from the beginning:

We then met with [potential students] to ask if they were interested, stressing that it would be additional work. Many were, but not all. I think there were about 18 in the first group. In the early years of VCU, we had a lot of high achieving students, hungry for the opportunity to ‘do something’. The oil wealth had hit Qatar in the 1970s and 80s and I think that they were excited by the intellectual challenge and the chance to prove themselves. Certificates and Honors are a very big deal in Qatar.

VCUQatar honors students continue to appreciate the medal they receive upon graduating with honors, the special recognition they receive at convocation, and the social cachet of graduating with honors.

The local culture is based upon strong family and tribal ties. Students are highly motivated to do well in order to honor the family and tribal name, and they abhor the thought of bringing shame in any way. These admirable characteristics provide strong motivation to do well enough to enter the honors program and succeed once admitted into the program. Loyalty to tribe and family led to a different outcome in one instance, however, when a qualifying student declined to join the honors program because a family member was not eligible. She did not want her relative to feel left out. Setting herself apart as an individual within this collectivist culture was not something this young woman was willing to do.

Initially, faculty took on the additional work of teaching honors curricula on a volunteer basis. Today, any faculty member might be assigned one or more sections with honors components as part of their standard teaching load. Students from all design majors, as well as the painting, printmaking, and art history programs, are able to enter the honors program if they meet the criteria. To be eligible, students must:

- have a minimum 3.5 Grade Point Average (GPA);
- submit a letter of endorsement from a VCUQatar faculty member; and
- complete the application and essay (available on the VCU Honors College website: <<http://www.honors.vcu.edu>>) and provide one printed copy to the coordinator of the VCUQatar Honors Program, Dr. Byrad Yyelland.

Students may apply for entry into the VCUQatar Honors Program during the second semester of their freshman year or the first semester of their sophomore year and must apply to both the VCUQatar Honors Program and the VCU Honors College.

THE PROGRAM

The honors curriculum has evolved over time. The program required 18 honors credits until 2012, but as of September 2012 that number has increased to 24. Eighteen of these credits are in Core Education Program (CORE) courses required for all students. The list below identifies the CORE honors courses, all of which are three-credit courses.

- UNIV 112 – Focused Inquiry II
- UNIV 200 – Writing and Rhetoric
- ENGL 215 – Textual Analysis
- ENGL 388 – Writing in the Workplace
- PHYS 107 – Wonders of Technology
- SOCY 100 – General Sociology

In addition to the 18 core credits, students are required to complete three credits in their major.

- Art History: Art Historical Methods
- Fashion Design: Business of Design
- Graphic Design: Business of Design
- Interior Design courses: Business of Design
- Painting and Printmaking: Concepts and Issues (2 credits rather than 3)

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Honors students may fulfill the remaining honors credits, to achieve a total of 24, in any combination of the following courses

- General Education courses
 - Art History Survey II
 - Honors-Only Topics (when offered)
 - Introduction to Contemporary Math
- Courses in the major
 - Senior Seminar (capstone)
 - Senior Studio (capstone)
 - Senior Design Studio II (capstone)

The program offers two additional ways for students to earn honors credit. First, students may work with a willing faculty member to develop an honors component in a course that does not already have an approved component. This is known as a non-honors-to-honors course contract. Students can earn a maximum of six credits with this option. Finally, students have the option of developing an Honors Independent Study and presenting it to a faculty member. Should the faculty member agree to work with the student in supervising and grading the work, and should the contract be approved by the VCUQatar Honors Program coordinator and the VCU Honors College, the student may earn a maximum of nine independent-study credits, thus potentially capitalizing on unique study opportunities that might develop external to the honors curriculum.

In order to graduate with honors, students must meet the following criteria:

- 24 honors credits
- 3.5 overall GPA (including every course *attempted*)
- 3.2 honors GPA (including every honors course *attempted*)
- Successful completion and submission of an honors dossier.

The dossier is a form of “capstone or thesis project (and is) one of the most pervasive characteristics of honors education” (Schuman 50).

While faculty members are automatically assigned to teach honors students if they are assigned honors-designated sections of honors-approved courses, some faculty members have expressed interest in teaching unique honors-only sections of established courses or courses developed specifically for honors students. These are two options we are in the process of developing and plan to initiate in the spring semester of 2013.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE CAMPUSES

VCUQatar is substantively different from the home campus in Richmond. “Virginia Commonwealth University is a comprehensive state-aided institution, comprised of 10 schools, one college, a 750-bed teaching/research hospital and a Level 1 Trauma Center, located in Richmond, Virginia and enrolling more than 31,000 students on two campuses” (VCU). VCUQatar, on the other hand, serves a student population of slightly more than 200 with about 50 faculty members. The VCU Honors College in Richmond, according to its website, serves approximately 1,000 students whereas the VCUQatar Honors Program features approximately 30 students each year. The VCU Honors College is led by a dean, senior associate dean, assistant dean, national scholarships director, director of student services, coordinator of business and educational services, and coordinator of academic affairs. Teaching faculty come from all areas of the Richmond campus on a per-course basis, and the Honors College buys their time from their home departments. In contrast, the VCUQatar program is led on a part-time basis by one coordinator and a volunteer faculty member. Neither receives additional remuneration for these efforts, but the coordinator has been given a one-course release for the past two years. The faculty member has not been granted a course reduction but is able to include working with honors as part of the service requirement of faculty positions. As is the case for most faculty at VCUQatar, the coordinator and faculty volunteer are employed with one-year contracts. VCUQatar does not have a tenure system.

I have served as coordinator of the VCUQatar Honors Program for three years. Even though I had no experience in honors administration, I was offered this role because I serve as Director of the Liberal Arts and Sciences Program and teach courses within that program at VCUQatar. Like most honors administrators, I thus serve in the dual capacity of “both faculty and administration” (Long 8). I have worked with a new faculty volunteer each of the three years I have served as coordinator. The first faculty volunteer was a graduate of the VCU honors program and was able to provide extensive first-hand knowledge during that first year. The two subsequent volunteers had no knowledge or experience with the honors program but were willing to help and to learn. Given our limited background in or knowledge about honors, we have relied heavily on the dean and staff of the VCU Honors College. We have also gathered additional information from online searches of other programs around the world, electronic journals, monographs published by the National Collegiate Honors Council, and workshops and networking at NCHC conferences.

CHALLENGES

One challenge we face at VCUQatar is a tightly restricted offering of electives in the art and design curricula, keeping the list of possible honors courses to a minimum and requiring inclusion of some art or design classes for honors credit. Another factor is the small size of VCUQatar; we do not have the large slate of courses offered at multiple times and days of the week that one would find on a larger university campus. A third challenge is that our faculty members have not received specialized training to teach honors-level material either in the classroom or in Independent Study contracts. Fourth, yearly variations in which courses offer honors credit cause confusion for faculty, administrators, and students; these variations are a consequence of the flexibility we have incorporated into our process of adding honors components to non-honors classes, a flexibility that was introduced in order to help accommodate student needs within our tightly restricted curricula. Retaining faculty who are experienced with the honors program is the fifth challenge because an international branch campus like VCUQatar with one-year contracts creates an intrinsically transient faculty population. Finally, we regularly face the challenge of students who refuse to be photographed. Some students on North American campuses might also refuse to be photographed but, in Qatar, Arabic custom prohibits women from being photographed, and the vast majority of VCUQatar students, and therefore honors students, are women. This cultural restriction has caused difficulties in our attempts to promote the honors program in local and international media.

SUCCESSSES

One of our successes is that students enter the honors program each year and have done so since the program was implemented. A second success is our high retention rate. Most honors students stay with the program through graduation.

Of our four graduating honors cohorts to date, one graduating group achieved a singular success. All VCU honors students, whether in the U.S. or Qatar, write and submit capstone dossiers as one requirement for graduation. These dossiers are graded in a double-blind process, and it is the norm that students receive a request for revision. All eight VCUQatar honors graduates of 2010 submitted dossiers that were accepted by the VCU Honors College with no suggested revisions—an outstanding accomplishment that reflects the caliber of students in our program, their diligent efforts, and the mentoring provided by faculty members, the instructors in the VCUQatar Writing Center, and the overall support staff of the Doha campus.

NEW INITIATIVES AND FUTURE PLANS

We have worked extensively with the VCU Honors College to develop a standardized honors curriculum, and we believe this curriculum will eliminate much of the confusion caused by shifting honors credits. This curriculum also emphasizes a liberal arts focus that has been one of the overriding goals of the VCU Honors College from its inception; this focus is particularly important in the design programs given the tight focus of their curricula on design courses alone.

Secondly, during the 2011–2012 academic year we worked closely with students in the program to develop an Honors Student Association with officer positions. Our goal is to see our honors association work collaboratively with the VCUQatar Student Association to enhance the profile of the honors community within the overall VCUQatar student population. We are actively encouraging honors student leaders to take the lead in arranging school-related activities and social events for honors students. These activities are supported by our third initiative: regular publication of the *VCUQatar Honors Student Newsletter* beginning in January 2013. We also hope to establish a blog for honors students at VCUQatar. The VCU Honors College already features a newsletter and blog, and we plan to contribute periodic supplements to contribute an active voice on the Richmond campus.

I am also working to provide honors-related training for faculty and administrators in VCUQatar. One option is to bring personnel from the VCU Honors College and the Center for Teaching Excellence on the home campus to provide training. An alternative is for them to develop a series of tutorials that we can watch online and discuss in training sessions. We have the technology to hold synchronous video conversations across the campuses, but planning a large meeting is problematic due to teaching schedules and time differences (seven or eight hours, depending on daylight savings time) between the campuses. Pre-taped tutorials running about twenty minutes can resolve this problem, enabling a group of faculty to watch the tape together, discuss it, and develop follow-up questions that can be addressed in future tutorials.

CONCLUSION

The VCUQatar Honors Program has grown from infancy to adulthood in a relatively short time and now features a standardized curriculum and thriving student participation. We fully expect to continue fine-tuning and improving the program as it unfolds and as new challenges and opportunities arise. One possibility under discussion at the moment is an honors-only course to be offered in tandem with other Education City universities and to provide honors credit regardless of where students are registered as long as they are

in a recognized honors program within their home university. Whether this class comes to fruition remains to be seen, but, regardless, we will continue to work collaboratively with the VCU Honors College, Qatar Foundation, and other institutions of Education City help achieve the goals laid out by Qatar National Vision 2030 and the VCU Honors College. The merger of these two cultures—with their very different histories, traditions, customs, needs, and expectations—has made the VCUQatar Honors Program a unique blend of Middle-Eastern and Western values in the service of our most promising students.

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