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Rethinking Honors Curriculum in Light of the AP/IB/Dual Enrollment Challenge: Innovation and Curricular Flexibility

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Annmarie Guzy’s lead article for this volume speaks of a familiar challenge in the Eastern Kentucky University Honors Program. The nearly universal and dramatic increase in the number of AP, IB, and/or Dual Enrollment credit hours among our incoming first-year honors students over the past two decades served as the primary impetus for a major curricular overhaul within our program in 2013. The result—what we call our new (post-2013) “Honors Flex” curriculum—was initially a source of considerable anxiety among many of our faculty as well as some of our students and alumni. In retrospect, however, we are able to see that our willingness to enact fundamental change at the heart of our honors program has opened up new creative possibilities for our students, faculty, and university community. While AP/IB/Dual Enrollment credit did, in fact, contribute to what Guzy terms a perceived “admissions crisis,” we have found that our response to the challenge provided an important opportunity to rethink and reimagine the nature of honors education on our campus.

Ours is a mid-sized honors program of approximately 500 students in the context of a public comprehensive university with a total enrollment of just over 17,000. Our fall 2015 class of incoming first-year honors program students was typical of recent trends in AP/IB/Dual Enrollment credit. This group of 112 students had an average ACT of 28.7 and average unweighted high school GPA of 3.91; 103 (92%) came to us with college credit earned during their high school years; 82% had at least some AP credit; 61% had at least some Dual Enrollment credit; and many had both AP and Dual Enrollment credit. Among these 103 students, the median of college credit hours earned before arriving on our campus was 20.8, and the mode was 21 credit hours, the equivalent of completing seven courses toward general education requirements before the first year, and one of those students came to us with 51 hours of college-level credit earned in high school. The most common subjects for credits brought in via AP exam among this group were English composition (61), American history (42), European history (30), biology (22), calculus (22), and psychology (22). The most common subjects for credits brought in via Dual Enrollment were English composition (25), college algebra (16) and introductory psychology (15).

By 2010, the growing wave of AP and Dual Enrollment credit among our newly admitted honors students presented a daunting challenge. From the foundation of the ECU Honors Program in 1988 until 2012, our honors curriculum centered on a lockstep sequence of innovative and challenging, team-taught, liberal arts honors seminars. Taking advantage of a series of NEH grants in the late 1980s and early 1990s, our founding generation of honors program core faculty, drawn from departments across our campus, thoughtfully developed a “General Education Replacement” honors curriculum that began with a classic small-enrollment Honors Rhetoric first-semester experience, team-taught by philosophy and literature faculty. This course was followed in semesters two and three by our required, team-taught Honors Humanities I and II and Honors Civilizations I and II sequences, built on common thematic linkages between the “Humanities” and “Civ.” courses that the students were taking simultaneously. All students then, in semester four, took an honors science seminar to fulfill a science general education requirement, followed in semester five or six by the interdisciplinary Honors Junior Elective. The curriculum culminated in a two-semester capstone honors thesis experience in the senior year.

As the number of prior college credit hours brought in by our first-year honors students grew, we faced considerable pressure from students to exempt them from elements of our general education honors course sequence

for which they already had AP/IB/Dual Enrollment credit. Feeling that our lockstep curricular requirements may have been leaving us at a competitive disadvantage in recruiting, in 2011–2012 our honors director convened a group of ten regularly contributing honors faculty from across the ECU College of Arts and Sciences, along with three advanced honors program students, to serve as a Curriculum Reform Committee.

The result of that committee's work was what we today call our "Honors Flex" curriculum, implemented for the first time in 2013 and now the standard curriculum for honors students in their first semester of college. From our old lockstep curriculum, the only elements that we have maintained are the required community- and skills-building Honors Rhetoric experience in semester one and the capstone two-semester Honors Thesis experience at the end. In between, students choose from a broad buffet of cross-listed, team-taught, interdisciplinary, topical honors seminars that they may use to fit into the General Education categories that they have not already fulfilled via AP, IB, or Dual Enrollment credit.

Three examples of our most popular cross-listed Honors Interdisciplinary Seminars should demonstrate how the system functions in practice. We typically offer twelve sections of cross-listed seminars such as these each semester, with each section capped at an enrollment of 20:

- HON 308W (Humanities)/HON 310W (History): "Mummies, Museums and Buried Treasure: The Modern Discovery of the Ancient World." Team-taught by one faculty member from the Philosophy Department and one from the History Department and satisfies a General Education requirement in either Humanities or History.
- HON 304W (Math)/HON 307W (Art): "Beauty and the Beast: Art, Math, and a Shared Aesthetic." Team-taught by one faculty member from the Art Department and one from the Math Department and satisfies a General Education requirement either in Art or Math.
- HON 310W (History)/HON 312W (Social Sciences)/HON 320W (Diversity of Perspectives): "Poverty and Revolution in Latin America." Team-taught by one faculty member from the Economics Department and one from the History Department and satisfies a General Education requirement in Social Science, History, or Diversity of Perspectives

The interdisciplinary seminars at the heart of our "Honors Flex" curriculum earned high praise in a September 2015 external review of our program.

Our site visitors, both past presidents of the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC), noted the following in their report: “Most Honors programs and colleges have one or two interdisciplinary courses required in the curriculum; at ECU Honors, interdisciplinarity and team-teaching are true hallmarks. . . . This mode of honors education may not be unique to ECU, but if it is not, other examples are unknown to us.”

From the student’s point of view, the greatest advantage of this system is its adaptability to individual curricular needs. Students in the “Honors Flex” curriculum customarily take three interdisciplinary seminars during their time with us, using them as needed to cover General Education elements not already fulfilled by their AP/IB/Dual Enrollment coursework. This setup is attractive to our average incoming honors student, who enters with 21 hours of our required 30 hours of general education credit already completed. S/he can simply choose honors interdisciplinary seminars in the remaining general education areas, thus alleviating some of the recruiting challenges of our old lockstep curriculum. One trend that we did not foresee when we designed the curriculum is that the General Education requirements students are least likely to bring with them are Arts and Diversity of Perspectives; these, then, are the courses (HON 307W and HON 320W) that are by far our highest enrollers.

From a faculty point of view, the creative possibilities for pedagogical innovation within this system are both numerous and exciting. As stipulated in the NCHC’s “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program,” one of the most important reasons for having an honors program or college is the role that it plays as an incubator and laboratory for creative pedagogy, which in turn positively affects faculty approaches to instruction campus-wide. Our team-taught “Honors Flex” curriculum is playing an especially powerful role on our campus in releasing and focusing faculty energies in this way. The Flex curriculum also attracts honors course proposals from faculty in a far wider range of departments across campus than did our previous curriculum, which relied disproportionately on three specific departments (English, Philosophy, and History). The new curriculum is helping create a broader sense of faculty ownership of honors across our university.

From the administrative point of view, an unforeseen advantage of the new system is that it ameliorates, to some degree, common worries about the quality of the content students are receiving via AP/IB/Dual Enrollment credit. A student may arrive in our program having received an AP score sufficient to grant six hours of general education history credit, for example, without having done genuine college-level work in the AP history class (Guzy;

Mangan). The Arts or Diversity of Perspectives requirement within our honors program, however, may be cross-listed with an honors history seminar and team-taught by a history professor, thus exposing the student to historical inquiry at the college level. The student's honors experience thereby exceeds the spirit as well as the letter of the General Education requirements and does so within structures that explicitly foster interdisciplinary vision and meta-cognitive approaches to active learning.

For all of the benefits that have emerged from it, however, the move to our Flex curriculum has not proven a universal panacea. We are still uncertain what to do with a student who comes to us with fifty or more credit hours and all General Education requirements completed or a student who has completed an associate's degree in a high school "early college" program. Fortunately, we have had some students who have told us that although they did not necessarily need any honors courses to fulfill General Education requirements, they still chose to enroll in honors because of the exciting classes and the strength of our academic community. Nonetheless, we still may be losing some students who might otherwise have been inclined to choose ECU and our honors program.

We continue to seek effective means of becoming even more flexible in our curriculum and program requirements without sacrificing our sense of academic community. The evolving needs of students coming into our honors programs and colleges require creative and innovative solutions. Fortunately for all of us, innovation and creativity are areas in which honors programs and colleges have traditionally excelled.

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