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Honors in Honduras: Engaged Learning in Action

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BACKGROUND AND JUSTIFICATION

A significant challenge in honors education is providing experiences through which students deeply engage ideas and content so that both their analytical abilities and core beliefs and values are transformed. Frequently, honors students approach a course as a goal to achieve: they establish ambitious study plans, map out study strategies, form study groups, and keep track of whether they are hitting the highest academic marks. In the end, if they are truly “honors material,” they earn an impressive grade. However, honors students often are hesitant to embrace ambiguity and deal with conceptual challenges that need to be approached from multiple perspectives and without an absolute solution in mind. Moreover, they sometimes avoid courses, such as problem-based learning courses, that are not structured in a traditional manner. In fact, honors students can be so achievement-oriented, i.e., they want to earn a good grade, that they gravitate toward intellectually safe territory, resisting the very experiences that are most likely to enrich their knowledge and sharpen their analytical abilities. David Kolb (Kolb & Kolb), who developed a model of experiential learning in the early 1980s, would argue that this focus on concrete and well-defined areas of knowledge has the potential to limit the development of metacognitive skill. Instead, his model suggests that four elements—concrete experience, abstract conceptualization, reflective observation, and active experimentation—should be present to ensure that the student’s full learning capacity is achieved. Inspired in part by the work of David Kolb, NCHC has incorporated this kind of experiential learning into its Honors Semesters and City as Text™ experiences since the 1980s (Braid & Long).

With these challenges and ideas in mind, the College of Charleston Honors College has begun to diversify program offerings for honors students. Our goal is to move students beyond their “cherished ways of thinking” (West) to stimulate critical thinking and examination of core values. Drawing from the work of George Kuh and other leaders in AAC&U’s Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative, we have incorporated several high-impact educational practices into a more holistic approach to honors education. Community-based learning, collaborative assignments, and global learning were primary components in our pilot program during spring 2012. The program involved an

experientially-based course that included a travel component to Honduras. While there, the students executed a project plan that had been developed during the course.

The course itself arose out of an intentional approach to local community engagement that had begun in our honors programs during fall 2010. We realized that we had reached a point in our co-curricular offerings where we needed to infuse more deliberate skill acquisition and reflection into the community engagement we encouraged students to pursue. Although service and community-based learning had become frequent in the experience of our students, paralleling trends nationwide in undergraduate coursework, we were persuaded by Kuh's suggestion to use experiential learning as an explicit instructional strategy so that students would have ample opportunity to apply abstract concepts they encounter in class. With direct experience as the framing principle, we created a program for honors students at the College of Charleston that would deepen their understanding of a topic, i.e., community-based research, not typically taught in our curriculum. Most importantly, we engaged them in a dynamic and compelling application of their new knowledge in a global setting, with the goal of encouraging them to examine an issue and their relationship to it in a new light. Furthermore, although a four-semester language sequence is required of all students on our campus, we wanted to enhance the requirement through an immersion opportunity in which students would practice language skills outside of their coursework and would experience the importance of culture through the lens of a practical issue that needed resolution.

PROGRAM STRUCTURE AND LOGISTICS

The program was the result of a unique partnership between the College of Charleston Honors College and its Center for Civic Engagement. The two essential components of the program were a special topics course in community-based research and an Alternative Break experience in Honduras where we worked in partnership with a nonprofit organization that had a youth development program. Led by the Assistant Director of the Center for Civic Engagement and the then Associate Dean of the Honors College, the on-campus course took place during the 2012 spring semester, followed by a three-week Alternative Break in Honduras during May. In Honduras, the group worked with a nonprofit to develop and articulate long-term goals for its youth program and to create program evaluation tools, e.g., surveys and interviews. We selected the nonprofit LAMB, originally called the Latin American Missionary and Bible Institute, because it was founded by an alumna of the College of Charleston with whom the associate dean had an established relationship and had done previous work.

Rather than simply allowing students to register for the course, we required an application and individual interview. Our aim was to build a team of students empowered to work together and equipped to make a meaningful contribution to the focal project. Through the interview process, we explored

the motivation of the student to participate, presented potential challenges of the program, asked students how they might handle the challenges, and ascertained how the program experience might fit into the longer-term goals of the student. Another unique feature of the program was its focus on first- and second-year students through a course designed to satisfy a basic-level honors requirement. Although we did not exclude upperclassmen, we wanted to provide early-career students with the opportunity to engage intentionally with novel material not typical in an introductory level course and to use knowledge in a context where its application had significant impact in a real-world, global setting. We believed that this experience would not only contribute to their intellectual development but also inform their decisions about majors and long-term goals. Ultimately, we selected six freshmen and three sophomores. One of the sophomores, who had previous Alternative Break experience, was appointed to be the student leader for the trip portion of the program.

COURSE FOCUS AND CONTENT

The course had an interdisciplinary perspective, incorporating information and views from political science, psychology, and public administration. During the course, through a series of readings (see Appendix A) students learned methods of nonprofit program development, management, and evaluation, including how to structure logic models for grants and how to design valid assessment tools to measure program efficacy. More broadly, the students learned about the approach and impact of asset-based community development (Kretzmann & McKnight) and strategic planning and how to accomplish these in a global context. To achieve the appropriate cultural perspective, students explored U.S. and Latin American relations and Honduran political history. Because the focal project in Honduras was a youth program, students read background articles on adolescent identity development. They also read articles on the state of the educational system and the problem of youth gang violence in Honduras. The scope of the reading assignments ensured that students were broadly exposed to the knowledge and skill base necessary to serve in a “consultant role” with the nonprofit in Honduras.

The class met twice a week for two hours and forty-five minutes. Students received credit for a three-hour full-semester course, but the classes only met for the second half of the semester (a compressed course structure called “Express II” at the College of Charleston). The material was delivered in a seminar-style format. Students were assigned readings (articles and book chapters) for each class period, and class discussion focused on the core concepts in the readings. At the end of each class session, students were given a reflective writing prompt that guided them toward the integration of cross-disciplinary ideas encountered in the readings and in the discussion. Class discussion was led either by Twomey, who has a BA in history and Latin American studies and an MPA, or by Folds-Bennett, who has a PhD in developmental psychology. Both instructors had extensive experience in the local and global community as

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consultants. Two class periods included Skype conversations with the program directors of LAMB.

Assignments were team-based, analytical, and writing-intensive. In small groups, the students were assigned various nonprofit organizations and community-based youth programs (both national and international) to research. Each group prepared a presentation for the class and led discussion of the best practices of the organization with regard to program delivery and program evaluation. Their analysis of these organizations was guided by the content of their readings on nonprofit strategic planning, program evaluation, and logic modeling. In Honduras, the team's focus was on LAMB's Alonzo Movement (its youth development program), so some portion of the reading material for the class and a considerable portion of class discussion focused on gleaning as much information as possible about the Alonzo Movement through a thorough analysis of its website content and documents supplied by LAMB staff. For the culminating assignment (which replaced a final exam), the entire team of students prepared a project proposal focused on the Alonzo Movement. They were instructed to use the tools of strategic planning, logic modeling, and asset-based community development to prepare a comprehensive proposal that outlined the work the team would do in Honduras. Their information about the Alonzo Movement came from planning documents (many of these were in Spanish and had to be translated by members of the team fluent in Spanish) that the director of the Alonzo Movement had provided and from the content of the Skype interviews. The final proposal that students submitted was an impressive and sophisticated summary of the vision and mission of the organization, a logic model of the program that was being delivered, and an outline of the assessment methodology already being used by the Alonzo Movement staff. The students also included a planning timeline and project goals for our three weeks in Honduras so that we might start communicating with the Alonzo Movement staff about the collaborative work we would accomplish.

THE ALTERNATIVE BREAK EXPERIENCE

In addition to the work accomplished during the course, the team prepared for the global immersion portion of the program using the Alternative Break model. Alternative Break programs are community-service-based trips for students during college breaks, allowing students to engage deeply in a community and the social issue that their service project addresses. Through Alternative Break, students do not simply show up at a site to perform service but rather spend several months leading up to the trip preparing for the experience and reflecting on the impact they might have in the community where they work. At the College of Charleston, the mission for the Alternative Break program is to help students become active citizens by engaging them in meaningful community experiences, in education about local and global issues, and in structured reflection sessions. Student trip leaders attend a weekend-long leadership training session in which they learn best practices of developing community

partnerships, group development theories, conflict management, reflection facilitation, and strategies to educate their group members on the social issues, community partner, and location of their project.

Given the goals of the our honors college to move beyond traditional curricular approaches, a partnership with the Center for Civic Engagement, which runs the Alternative Break program, made sense. Once participants were selected through the Alternative Break application and interview process, the entire team met approximately ten times, outside of class meetings, over several months prior to departing. These meetings included team-building activities, planning for fundraising, language training, cultural education, and local service projects to prepare the students for their time in Honduras. Because Alternative Break programs are strictly substance-free, participants signed a contract agreeing to this restriction and discussed why this policy is important for group development, safety, and most importantly, building a strong community partnership.

Coupled with the class sessions, during which students acquired the conceptual knowledge and practical skills necessary to carry out our project plans, the Alternative Break meetings ensured that the students were prepared personally and as a team to benefit fully from the experience in Honduras. As part of the Alternative Break program, students wrote in a daily journal as a means of reflection and consolidation of the experience.

GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT

Once in Honduras, the team was introduced to the activities of the Alonzo Movement, a program that provides a safe environment, empowering opportunities, and a sense of community for youth in and around Flor del Campo, one of the most impoverished and gang-infested neighborhoods in Tegucigalpa. During the first week, every afternoon the team participated in the program, learning the details of how the program was structured, building relationships with the youth, and playing some vigorous games of soccer. Each morning and evening, team members worked together to develop evaluation tools (Appendix B) in order to examine the efficacy of the Alonzo Movement and the narrative perspectives of participants in the program. This work resulted in the development of an attitude and personal goals survey as well as an interview protocol used in one-on-one interviews with Alonzo Movement participants. Both of these instruments were translated into Spanish and were shared with Honduran project partners fluent in both Spanish and English to determine whether cultural translation was adequate.

The survey and interview protocol were pre-tested on one group of participants in the Alonzo Movement and immediately revealed both conceptual and translational flaws in the survey. This information necessitated a major revision of the survey, arguably one of the most formative and enlightening experiences the honors students had in the entire program. They had devoted a great amount of time and creative energy developing the original survey; therefore,

discovering that it did not adequately address the objectives of measuring participant attitudes about the effectiveness of the Alonzo Movement programming and the impact of the program on long-term educational and personal goals caused significant disappointment and some frustration for the students. They were able, though, in the revision process, which they accomplished in a seven-hour period, to learn more about survey development and the importance of engaging their own analytical skills than they would have if the survey had worked well the first time. One student reflected in her daily journal that, “although everyone got a bit irritated when we had to spend a lot of time debating the meaning behind the wording of certain questions, overall the group dynamics were not problematic, but instead proved to produce creative, useful and satisfying results.” In addition to the practical knowledge about survey development, the students experienced the reality of community-based research in such a way that, if any one of them decides to devote a career to working in the nonprofit sector, that person will be much better equipped for the challenges of such work.

When the students had completed their revision, they administered the surveys to 102 participants in the Alonzo Movement program. Once they had collected the surveys, the students learned how to code the data and create a dataset. Then, they divided into teams of two and entered the data into the database. This process taught the team about the tedious side of community-based research. Most importantly, they gained insight into the complexities of working in a community setting where both vision and detail are essential to the achievement of goals.

To culminate our work, the team researched grant opportunities appropriate for the Alonzo Movement. They began the process of understanding the distinction between foundation and government grants, and they learned about the grant-making process. In particular, they learned to determine whether particular opportunities match the mission of a fund-seeking organization and to be aware of the mission creep that results from pursuing funding not directly related to the organization’s mission. Although time did not permit the team to write an entire grant application, they produced a template for a letter of inquiry that could be adapted to various grant opportunities they had identified.

In addition, the team developed a narrative description of the program based on the transcripts of interviews with ten participants in the Alonzo Movement. Using this narrative, they produced a one-page flyer about the program for use in the solicitation of new partners and donors for the program. The flyer was designed to coordinate with the graphic standards used by LAMB and to dovetail with messaging about the Alonzo Movement that LAMB already had.

LONG-TERM VISION

One of the most compelling aspects of this project was that the work did not end when the Honduras portion of the experience was finished. The data the team collected were all entered into a database while we were still in

Honduras; however, the analysis and final evaluation report remained to be done after the travel was complete. Further, the team set a goal to collect more surveys six months after the first set was collected and then again at the year mark. Also, the team researched and identified several granting agencies that might be willing to support the work of the Alonzo Movement even though they did not have enough time to write the actual grant proposals.

The remaining work provided the opportunity for longer-term engagement for those students who chose to participate. As the journey to Honduras came to a conclusion, the group of students began asking if we could return to collect the next round of survey data. As a result, we decided to teach the course again in spring 2013. Due to scheduling conflicts, the Honduras portion of the trip has been scheduled during spring break. The students who participated in the first offering of the course have taken the roles of peer facilitators and trip leaders, and the new group of students continues to build on the work of their peers and to enjoy the power of an established global partnership. We believe that this experience has had such a broadening and deepening effect on our students' understanding that we plan to continue to develop the global partnership and to discover ways that our students can benefit from its strength.

BROADER APPLICATIONS: WHAT WORKED AND WHY

Although the success of this collaborative endeavor hinged on the relationships and expertise of the associated faculty and staff at the College of Charleston, the framing principles and pedagogical strategies can easily be adopted by other honors programs. The immersion component of the course can occur either with a local or a global nonprofit partner, making the model more transportable across different university settings. Below, we summarize what we believe are the aspects of the course that contributed the most to its success.

We focused on the development of analytical skills in a meaningful context. The students were exposed to novel and practical material that motivated them to engage intentionally and strategically with the issues that we encountered. Through this opportunity for active learning in such a dynamic environment, the students were able to integrate learning across disciplines and perspectives to produce a measurable outcome. By applying the abstract principles we encountered in class to a real problem in a nonprofit setting, the students were able to grasp more fully the meaning of concepts such as strategic planning, asset-based community development, and logic modeling. One student shared that she could not "separate the knowledge [she] obtained in class from [her] previous knowledge because [she] almost immediately started using the concepts [she] was learning."

The students learned more about program infrastructure development and program management than a student could ever learn in a traditional classroom setting. Rich discussions about the challenges of cultural and language barriers in working across international boundaries took place, particularly as we

executed our plan in Honduras. We discussed at length and then experienced directly the complexities of developing valid surveys and interview protocols that capture the essence of a multi-faceted program like the Alonzo Movement. One student remarked that she was “very excited to take back new knowledge of how nonprofits work.” She felt that the “way we partnered with LAMB allowed [her] to see how decisions are made, what strategic planning and logic models look like in real life, and how important surveys and other forms of evaluations are.” By all accounts, the students acquired foundational knowledge and developed essential skills that might be transferred across multiple local and global community settings.

We structured the experience so that deep cultural immersion and global learning would occur. While in Honduras, we worked every day, seven days a week, with individuals in the community we served. None of the participants in the Alonzo Movement spoke English, which necessitated constant translation by those members of our team who spoke Spanish fluently. Beyond the language experience, though, the cultural experience was remarkable. We worked alongside the Honduran leadership of LAMB and with the Alonzo Movement participants to experience fully the challenges that the residents of Flor del Campo face on a daily basis. Some of the unexpected moments of the trip had the greatest impact on our team. One Friday, the team walked in a peace march around the community of Flor del Campo that was in reaction to a recent gang-related murder of a local journalist. The march was a colorful and lively array of more than seven hundred children and adults wearing doves around their necks and boldly carrying signs with phrases such as “No más violencia.” One student observed, “It was beautiful to see the streets filled with people with so much hope and to see supportive citizens watching the procession. I remember one older woman framed by the doorway of her tiny house, waving a white handkerchief as the march passed her. So often, I take for granted my personal domestic peace, forgetting that it is something to be consciously valued.” Such deeply personal experiences nurtured a sense of the responsibilities of global citizenship that we hope will influence the attitudes and career paths of all the students who participated.

We set the bar high for what we expected the students to accomplish and how hard we expected them to work. Our intent was to create a transformational experience for our students that would teach them how grassroots community-development programs work and give them insight into the forces that shape change in communities. Therefore, it was essential to equip them fully to do the work and then empower them, i.e., by identifying them as a consultant team, to take ownership of the experience. They read primary source materials across multiple disciplines, developed proposals of the type that would be expected in a professional setting, and worked relentlessly for the three weeks we were in Honduras.

We built a strong team. Building the program on the student development principles typical of Alternative Break programming provided a solid foundation for a positive team environment. Starting with the selection interviews, we were

able to consider how each individual would contribute to the work of the whole. Before we left for Honduras, we gathered several times outside of our class meetings to create a vision and mission for our experience, to become better acquainted with the individual personalities and assets on the team, and to equip ourselves with the interpersonal and cultural tools necessary to have a successful team experience. Amazingly, we did not hear a single complaint about the workload, nor did we witness a single incident of interpersonal conflict throughout the experience. The students recognized with respect the strengths of each member of the team and endeavored to maintain a collaborative atmosphere that would contribute to achievement of the goals we set as a team. The success of our team building was evident in the reflection of one student who said, "Within our group, I began to see how different people's skills come together to produce a powerful team. It was important to me that we all came together with different personalities, majors and backgrounds."

We incorporated multiple opportunities for reflection and evaluation of the impact of the program on the individual. We knew that the students would have a powerful experience and did not want to lose the opportunity to have them process both the intellectual and the personal meaning. Therefore, prior to our travel, we established an expectation that reflection would be an integral part of the experience, explaining that reflection is about processing the experience, examining it through others' perspectives, and exploring how the experience impacts personal identity and perspectives on local and global communities. Once in Honduras, we gathered the team every couple days to spend time together on intentional reflection sessions; topics included identity development, cultural exchange, and connections between pre-trip education and the in-country experience. We also provided a personal journal for each student with various reflective prompts and asked that the student submit the journal at the conclusion of our travel. In several ways, then, we created a safe space for students to share their fears, joys, challenges, and hopes.

We provided compelling mentoring opportunities. Not only did the participants in the course develop significant relationships with the two instructors, but they also learned a great deal from the student leader of the trip and from the community partners. These mentoring relationships extended beyond the intellectual content of the course to advice about majors, long-term applications in various fields of study, and the importance of community engagement in a democratic society.

We built the program on strong partnerships and placed our partnerships at the center of the experience. Although the College of Charleston Honors College and Center for Civic Engagement had never worked collaboratively on a travel course, we had worked together to create a service learning program required of all first-semester honors students. This program had given us the opportunity to discover the synergies that existed between our divisions and to establish positive working relationships. In addition to the strength of this partnership, one of the instructors had an established relationship with the LAMB Institute and had traveled to Tegucigalpa three times previously to work with

their program staff. These partnerships allowed us to move forward with the course and travel plans expeditiously and with confidence that the details would fall into place.

Most importantly, we demonstrated to our students repeatedly that the needs of our community partner should take precedence over the original learning objectives of the course. In other words, we provided an experience for our students that required patience and flexibility. We started the course with a fairly vague outline of the project that we would pursue with LAMB. This ambiguity initially created some discomfort for students because they wanted to know exactly what we hoped to achieve, but in the end they benefitted significantly from learning to listen carefully to the goals and needs of a community partner and to respond creatively by developing a project plan that reflected the assets and needs of the partner rather than some pre-determined course learning objectives.

Ultimately, we concluded that our experiential learning opportunity was successful because the strength of our partnerships allowed for mutual respect, intentionality, and flexibility. With the right partnerships and with application of the core principles we have described, we are confident that similar courses can be taught in a variety of disciplines and interdisciplinary areas as well as different university settings, allowing honors students to engage deeply in and actively explore new material through collaboration, community engagement, and global learning.

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APPENDIX A

COURSE READINGS

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APPENDIX B

ALONZO MOVEMENT SURVEY

Demographic Information

Name: _____

Birthday (day/month/year): _____

Do you live in Flor del Campo? Yes or No

Which of the following future plans are true for you? Choose all that apply.

- I want to finish high school. I want to attend a technical school.
 I want to be employed. I want to go to college.
 I want to enter the ministry. I want to serve as an Alonzo
Movement leader.
 I want to live in a different place. I want to live in the United States.

Reflection Questions:

Rate on the following scale:

Never true Sometimes Often Always true

- I am confident in my leadership skills.
 The Alonzo Movement has given me the opportunity to strengthen friendships.
 I feel independent and able to make changes in my life.
 I use the values I learn in the Alonzo Movement in my daily life.
 I believe that I have different opportunities or possibilities for my future.
 I consider the consequences before taking action or making decisions.
 Peace is possible in my community.
 I have good hygiene and live healthily.
 I have established plans to help me meet my goals for the future.
 I have a technical skill that I could use in a job.
 It is difficult to confide in the members of my Alonzo Movement group.
 I share what I'm learning at the Alonzo Movement with others in my life.
 I can contribute to peace in my community.
 I fight with others and use bad words.

I am proud of the decisions I make.

I believe I am a good friend.

Other Questions:

Which of the following are true for you?

I am in school. Grade: _____ Private or public? _____

I have worked. What type of work have you done? _____

I attend a church.

I am not in school. To what grade level did you stay in school? _____

If you're in school, how have your grades changed while you have been in the Alonzo Movement?

They've improved They've gotten worse They haven't changed

In which other organizations do you or your family participate? Choose all that apply.

Computer classes EDUCATODOS Microcredit program

El Cordero Evangelical group Catholic group

Sports Other youth group Aldea Global

Gang Alcoholics Anonymous

When did you join the Alonzo Movement? _____

With what frequency do you attend sessions?

Each week 2 or 3 times per month

I feel safe when I am at the Alonzo Movement. Yes or No

What is your favorite activity at the Alonzo Movement? CHOOSE ONE.

Lessons and reflection Art projects

Songs and games Lessons on faith

Movies Drama

Sports Community service and fundraising

Retreats Other: _____

If you could ask the North American groups for anything, what would it be?
